

A man and a woman with extensive tattoos are shown from the waist up. The man is on the left, shirtless, with his right arm raised. The woman is on the right, wearing a red bra. They are positioned over a background of US dollar bills, which are slightly blurred and dimly lit. The overall mood is sensual and edgy.

*Valley
of the
Kings*

M.E. Clayton

Valley of the Kings



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Published by M.E. Clayton

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Warning: This book contains sexual situations and other adult themes. Recommended for 18 years of age and over.

Table of Contents

[Author's Note](#)

[Contact Me](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1. Nero](#)

[2. Kasen](#)

[3. Nero](#)

[4. Kasen](#)

[5. Nero](#)

[6. Kasen](#)

[7. Nero](#)

[8. Kasen](#)

[9. Nero](#)

[10. Kasen](#)

[11. Nero](#)

[12. Kasen](#)

[13. Nero](#)

[14. Kasen](#)

[15. Nero](#)

[16. Kasen](#)

[17. Nero](#)

[18. Kasen](#)

[19. Nero](#)

[20. Kasen](#)

[21. Nero](#)

[22. Kasen](#)

[23. Nero](#)

[24. Kasen](#)

[25. Nero](#)

[26. Kasen](#)

[27. Nero](#)

[28. Kasen](#)

[29. Nero](#)

[30. Kasen](#)

[31. Nero](#)

[32. Kasen](#)

[33. Nero](#)

[34. Kasen](#)

[35. Nero](#)

[36. Kasen](#)

[37. Nero](#)

[38. Kasen](#)

[39. Nero](#)

[40. Kasen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Author's Note

Just a couple of things before I let you go and get your read on. While I am doing my best to work with better editing and proofreading software, all my books are solo, independent works. I write my books, proofread my books, edit my books, create the covers, etc. I have one beta who gives me feedback on my stories, but other than that, all my books are independent projects.

That being said, I apologize, in advance, for the typos, grammar inconsistencies, or any other mistakes I may make. Since writing is strictly a hobby for me, I haven't looked into commitments in regard to publishers, editors, etc. My hope is that my stories are enjoyable enough that a few mistakes, here and there, can be overlooked. However, if you're a stickler for grammar, my books are probably not for you.

Also, I am an avid reader-I mean an *AVID* reader. I love to read above any other hobby. However, the only downside to my reading obsession is when I fall in love with a series, but I have to wait for the additional books to come out. So, because I feel that disappointment down to my soul, when I started publishing my works, I vowed to publish all books in my series all at once. No waiting here...LOL. Now, the exception to that will be if enough readers request additional stories based off the standalone, such as in *Facing the Enemy*. At that point, if I decide to move forward with a requested series, I will make sure all additional books are available all at once. As much as this is a hobby for me, I am writing these books for all of you, as well as myself.

Thank you, for everything!

Contact Me

I really appreciate you reading my book and I would love to hear from you! Now, unfortunately, because I do have a full-time job and one part-time job, plus a family that I love spending time with, I'm not very active on social media. However, for the sites I do participate in, here are my social media coordinates:

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Dedication

For everyone that likes their alphas with a little blood on their hands.

Playlist

Start A War – Klergy & Valerie Broussard

Down – Simon ft. Trella

Dangerous Games – Klergy & BEGINNERS

Watch Me Burn – Michele Morrone

Monster – Beth Crowley

Tomorrow We Fight – Tommee Profitt

Feel It – Michele Morrone

Me and the Devil – Soap & Skin

Red – Beth Crowley

Hard for Me – Michele Morrone

Prologue

It didn't matter that my father was still alive; it didn't matter that he was still the face of the family. Everyone knew that our power came from the rivers of blood that *I* had created in the streets and still did. While our family had been comfortably established way before I had come into my teens, the past twenty years had turned us into something entirely different.

No one could compete with us now.

While there were families out there that were still powerful as hell, they still couldn't compete with our numbers, our money, our territory, or our level of ruthlessness. Where they were rich, we were wealthy. Where they were deadly, we were unforgiving. Where they were powerful, we were absolutely fearless. Where they were important, we were fucking royalty.

I also hadn't come into being the youngest Underboss ever by being fucking stupid. I was always one step ahead of our enemies and even my own family. While my father was brilliant, I was a fucking genius, and for twenty years, I'd been doing everything right, doing everything that would earn me the number one position in this family.

I'd done more than kill people. I'd done more than make millions. I'd done more to corrupt this city than anyone before me. If there was a politician, judge, police chief, or cop in this town that wasn't in my pocket, then I didn't know him. This entire city was bought and paid for, and I had the motherfucking receipt in my pocket.

Not the family.

Not my father.

Not my brother.

Me.

Staring out at the grounds of my estate, there was only one thing missing from everything that was already mine. There was only one thing that I needed to complete my ideal reign. No matter what anyone believed, no matter how many men bragged about their freedoms, no matter how independent a

man claimed to be, total power could not be achieved without the right woman at your side.

Women were unlike anything that men could ever aspire to be. Men would easily kill or die for the woman that they loved; it was simple like that. We were designed to protect, so that's how we proved our love. As long as our women were safe, then nothing else mattered.

That wasn't the case with women.

When a woman loved a man, there was no limit to the things that she would do for him. She would lie, cheat, steal, kill, die, or fight a war for him if that's what was needed of her. If a woman loved a man, then she was willing to sacrifice pieces of herself that would never heal if she felt like she had to. Women were willing to break themselves a million times over for a man, and more often than not, that man didn't deserve it.

Plus, if that wasn't amazing enough, what a woman did for her children was even more astounding. If you lived in a world as dangerous as mine, there was no comfort like knowing that your children were safe because a mother's love was incomparable to anything else on earth. A mother's love was the most dangerous thing that the wicked could encounter, and a lot of pedophiles and child abusers had the justice system to thank for still being alive.

So, no matter what'd been achieved over these past twenty years, there was still a piece of the puzzle missing, and it was a *big* piece. In fact, it was a good three-fourths of the puzzle. A woman could easily love a demon, and that's what I needed. I needed a woman that was strong enough to see past everything that my family was and did, seeing to the man that was at the heart of me.

Not just anyone could sit at the head of the table with me. Where most of the men in my line of work preferred to have the perfectly styled Mafia wife at their side, I didn't need a woman that knew how to contour her makeup to perfection. I didn't need a woman that could recognize last season's styles

from this season's wardrobe. I didn't need a woman that knew which fucking fork to use at the country club.

No.

I needed a woman that wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet through someone's skull if they posed a threat to her, me, or our children. I needed a woman that wouldn't shy away from the screams of torture coming from the basement. I needed a woman that could step in and take my place if I got hurt, or for that matter, killed.

Luckily for me, I already had the perfect woman in mind for such a role.

Chapter 1

Nero~

I watched the red-tinted water swirl down the drain, though nothing that I hadn't seen a million times already. After all, I hadn't become the youngest Underboss in family history by keeping my hands clean. I'd done it by practically bathing in the blood of our enemies, and I'd been doing it since before I even hit puberty. So, at thirty-two, another dead body wasn't that big of a deal.

Port Townsend was a fairly large city in the state of Maryland, and contrary to what people liked to believe, the Mafia was still very much alive and well on this side of the country. While there were other Mafia families out on the West Coast, most of the organized crime families stayed on this side of the Mississippi. Business was just better when there were powerful public servants that understood how things worked. Over past Nevada, people in political positions were still trying to make a difference, and no one needed that kind of fucking headache.

So, there were five families that ran Port Townsend, but the truth of the matter was deeper than that. We owned the entire state, truth be told. When you had damn near every politician in the state in your pocket, there wasn't much that you couldn't do, and lucky for us, our governing body was just as corrupt as the rest of them.

Now, like with most Mafia empires, the city's territories were divided amongst the families. Port Townsend was large enough to support five different legacies, and for the most part, we stayed out of each other's way, but not always. While the movies liked to glorify the violence side of our lives, at the heart of it all, we were a business, and profit usually won over temper.

The five Mafia families of Port Townsend were the Kotovs, the O'Briens, the Schulzes, the Milanos, and us, the Sartoris. We were a diverse group, but it wasn't lost on anyone how two of the families were Italian.

At one point in time, Tommaso Calvetti had also been a powerful player in the game, but bad deals and violent tempers had done his family in. Years ago, when he'd begun to see the writing on the wall, he and my father, Marco Sartori, had ironed out a deal for me to marry his only daughter, and I honestly hadn't cared one way or the other. However, unfortunately for her family, she'd gotten sick, dying at a young age. Once the mourning period had passed, he had joined with Renzo Milano, almost matching our numbers in strength.

Almost.

Luckily, we also outnumbered the Irish, Germans, and Russians in force. Marco Sartori was the head of the Sartori Crime Family, and he'd done nothing but expand our empire after my grandfather had handed down the reins. While all the families had long family ties, we could trace our lineage back hundreds of years, and our hold on this city was ironclad.

While my father was a calculating Mafia leader, my mother, Clarissa Sartori, was your typical pampered Mafia wife. I couldn't remember a time when she'd done anything more than cater to my father, raise his children, and spend his money. Always well put together, she didn't even mind his affairs as long as the woman in question wasn't a threat to the lifestyle to which she'd become accustomed.

I also had a younger brother, Elio, and while he was a dutiful son, loyal Capo, and violent little fuck, he was also spoiled, reckless, and unpredictable. At thirty, he'd never had to work hard for anything in his life, unlike me. From birth, my future had been mapped out to take over the family, and I'd been working all my life towards that goal, the Underboss position being handed to me earlier than anyone would have guessed or thought wise.

However, what people didn't know was that I ran the family more than my father did these days. For the past five years, I'd been involved with every decision regarding the family, and I called the shots for the most part. Sure, I still consulted with my father about certain things, but when it was all said and done, he mostly just stayed out of my way.

It was also a matter of safety. While a lot of people would argue that my father was a ruthless bastard, the man played no games when it came to his family. So, as long as Renzo Milano, Emil Schulz, Declan O'Brien, and Avgust Kotov thought that Marco Sartori was still calling the shots, then the focus wasn't on me, and I could make moves without any of them knowing the truth.

So, with everything going as planned, the only thing left was to get married, then work on building my own family dynasty. While my mother had chosen to give my father only two sons, I wanted four children to follow in my footsteps. I also didn't care whether they were all boys or all girls. I was cunning enough to make sure that my legacy lasted centuries beyond my death.

After Susanna Calveti had passed away and what was left of the Calveti family had merged with the Milanos, my father had been quick to hash out another arranged marriage to strengthen our numbers. As Renzo Milano had been denied sons, he and my father had arranged a marriage between me and Renzo's youngest daughter, Fia. The arrangement would benefit the Milanos more than it would us, but at the end of it all, we'd outnumber the Irish, Russians, and Germans significantly enough to keep them all in line. Though things were peaceful right now, that could change at any given moment, something that we were all very aware of. There was also the fact that the coastline fell within the Sartori territories, making our import and export business very fucking profitable.

Like most of the families, we dealt in drugs, guns, gambling, and prostitution, though we had plenty of legitimate businesses to launder our money the right way. However, since we controlled most of the coastline, that was where most of our business was conducted, and if anyone wanted to use our ports, we made them pay a high price for that privilege.

At any rate, I was to marry Fia Milano, ensuring our place in this city and the state, really. The others would have to be suicidal to bring war to our doorstep, something that I didn't necessarily mind. If we were to ever take over all the other

territories, then we could move forward with taking control of the entire East Coast, something that could easily be done if we wiped out the other families.

The only problem with Fia Milano was that she was just as spoiled as Elio, if not more. Raised to be a true Mafia princess, she had no ambition, knew nothing about accountability, and very little was required of her. She'd been brought up to look pretty, behave obediently, and produce children, but nothing much more than that. It was also obvious that Fia Milano was not her father's favorite. Though spoiled as they came, he had put no effort into rearing her. Fia was a product of Sonya Milano, and it was clear as day whenever you saw the two women together.

Yeah, no, it was easy to see that Renzo's favorite child was his eldest daughter, Kasen Milano. For whatever reason, he had given Kasen choices that he hadn't given Fia, and at thirty-two, Kasen was a successful criminal attorney, and she was so far removed from the family that she didn't even have a guard assigned to her. She lived a regular life with a regular profession, and everyone seemed just fine with it, something that I'd never understood. Nevertheless, Renzo had allowed this, and Fia was the one that had been groomed to fit into the life that she'd been raised in.

"It's done."

Drying my hands, I turned to look at my brother. Only one inch shorter than my six-foot-three, Elio had inherited our mother's features, making him the pretty one. Though we'd both inherited our father's brown hair and brown eyes, I had taken after Marco in just about everything else. I was every bit my father's son, and it was easy to mistake us for one another from afar.

"I want his head preserved for the next Capo meeting," I told him. "I want it to serve as the centerpiece at the meeting." Elio smirked. "I want everyone to see what happens when the only answer they have for me is 'I don't know'."

"There's plenty of room in Alaska," he replied easily.

Alaska was a warehouse that we owned, and we used it for almost all our kills. It used to be an old slaughterhouse, and it had come to us equipped with plenty of storage freezers for when we needed them. From the outside, it looked like a decrepit old building, but the inside was a state-of-the-art torture chamber.

“I also want to keep an eye on all of Romeo’s soldiers,” I added. “I’m still not convinced that this was an innocent mistake.”

“Sure thing.”

Greed was a real problem with a lot of people, and it was that same greed that had them believing that no one would miss a pound or two of cocaine when the shipment weight was in the thousands.

Well, they were wrong.

At the end of the day, I was a businessman, and all my books were straight, right down to the last penny. Nothing came up missing that I didn’t know about, and second chances weren’t anything that I ever handed out; not even if it was Christmas.

“Did everything go well with the other sample shipment last night?”

“Relax, Nero,” he chuckled. “You’re going to grow old before your time if you keep stressing out.”

“I’m not stressed out,” I informed him. “I’m still pissed off.”

Granted, even if I was stressed out, I’d never let him know it.

Chapter 2

Kasen~

It'd been a long day, but that was okay. I lived for the pressures of my job, and I was at my best when I was working. In fact, I worked so much that it could be argued that I didn't have much of a life outside of my office. Nevertheless, I was perfectly okay with that. I'd been given an opportunity that I shouldn't have, and I was very aware of that.

My father was Renzo Milano, and he was the Mafia Boss of the Milano Crime Family. I'd been born under his reign as head of the family, and I'd been learning about loyalty and vengeance during an age when other kids had been learning their colors and numbers. I was my father's firstborn, and he had raised me to be strong, independent, and loyal; all characteristics that I still practiced to this day. My father had encouraged me to use my voice, and I did so often.

My mother, Sonya Milano was a typical Mafia wife, and though she was smarter than most Mafia wives, she was still just a woman in that world. My mother knew her place, and she had raised my younger sister, Fia, to act just like her. They were both beautiful accessories to the powerful men that surrounded them, and good for them if that's what made them happy.

I, on the other hand, had been allowed to go to college and law school to become a criminal lawyer. I'd been nine-years-old when I'd told my father that I wanted to be a lawyer, and I'd been nine-years-old when he had promised me that I could grow up to become whatever I wanted. Of course, at the time, he'd been placating a fanciful child, never imagining that I would hold him to his word years later. The first and only time that my father had tried to talk me out of becoming a lawyer, I had challenged his honor, pointing out that a man's word was a man's word, no matter if he gave it to an adult or child.

Faced with setting the example for his firstborn or breaking his word, Papa had allowed me to go to college, deciding to groom Fia for whatever future business he might need her for.

With Fia being four years younger than me, it'd been easy to spoil her and treat her as if she were an only child. I'd already been headed to college by the time that she had entered high school, so I hadn't been around much to help her through those formidable years. While I still considered us close, we could have been closer without the four-year gap between us.

There was also the fact that we looked nothing alike. Fia had taken after Mom with her blonde hair, blue eyes, slim build, and doll-like face. My sister really was a beautiful girl, and it was something that she was very aware of. Fia knew how to bat her eyelashes like nobody's business, and my mother had made sure to teach her the art of manipulation. Though I loved my sister dearly, there was no denying that Fia was spoiled, flighty, and a bit self-absorbed. My parents were always rescuing her from one problem or another, so it was hard to treat her like an adult, even though she was already twenty-eight-years old.

As for me, I had taken after my father, though I did have some of my mother's facial features. I had black hair, hazel eyes, and where Fia was slim, I was what nice people called curvy, considering that I was only five-foot-three. Granted, I wasn't anywhere near overweight, but everyone knew that thin was always going to be in, no matter how many body-positive crusaders were out there.

However, my looks had never been an issue for me. From an early age, I'd been all about my brain and how I could use it to become successful without embedding myself fully into the Mafia. Now, while it might sound like I had something against the life that my family led, I didn't. I didn't live on moral high ground or anything like that. After all, it could be argued that I made my living off the subject of crime. Though I did my best to defend the innocent, I'd made countless deals with the prosecution for the guilty.

So, no, I didn't think that I was better than anyone else, or anything like that. My decision to distance myself from what my family did was because I'd wanted more out of life than what the Mafia could offer me. Since I'd been born a female, my choices would have been limited, and I'd wanted to be

more than just a man's accessory. I was smart, and I wanted that to count for something.

As for my love life, admittedly, I didn't have much of one. Though I was far from a virgin at my age, I also didn't have some steamy past of discarded lovers. I'd had a few flings, but not much more than that. I'd been so focused on my career that men and relationships had taken a backseat to hard work. While I'd had my fun in college, law school had been a different story. Determined not to end up a bargaining chip for the Mafia, I'd been all about graduating at the top of my class and becoming more valuable than what I'd seen of my mother. Now, while that might sound like an insult, it wasn't. If being a Mafia wife was what made my mother happy, then I was happy for her. I felt the same way about my sister. If she was happy marrying Nero Sartori, then good for her.

When I thought of the five Mafia families in Port Townsend, I thought about how my sister could do worse than Nero Sartori. While I wasn't into all that pure bloodlines nonsense, marrying Nero would ensure that my father could still be involved in Fia's life. If he had married her to the Irish, Germans, or Russians, there would have been no guarantee of that. Emil Schulz was the head of the Germans, and it was reputed that he was a bit of a sadist. Avgust Kotov was the head of the Russians, and it was said that he wasn't above hitting a woman to keep her in line. Declan O'Brien was the head of the Irishmen, and while it was said that he was the most decent out of the three, he'd still owe my father nothing if he'd been the one to marry Fia.

So, with our numbers decent enough to put the Italians in full control of the city and state, a marriage had been arranged between our two families, and I couldn't see the Sartoris keeping Fia from my mother and father, or me for that matter. Italians were big on family, and that was something hopeful.

Granted, that was if Fia didn't go and screw it all up. While my sister was under the impression that no one knew her secret, she was wrong. Fia wasn't as cunning as she liked to believe that she was, and though I'd found out by complete

accident, anyone that cared to pay attention could see the signs.

Two weeks ago, I had stopped by my parents just to visit. It wasn't often that I had free time to just hang out and do nothing, so when I did, I did my best to spend it with my family. It was nice because I didn't talk about work, and they didn't talk about family business, and it reminded me of a time before adulthood had sucked all the fun out of life.

Anyway, I'd been making my way through the house, looking for my parents or sister, when I ended up hearing a heated conversation going on in the library. The door had been cracked open a bit, so unsure if I should close it or not, I'd been about to turn away when that heated argument had turned into something way more inappropriate.

Even though I should have walked away from something that clearly hadn't been any of my business, I hadn't. Instead, I had walked over to shut the door, and that was the worst thing that I could have done. All it'd gotten me was a peek into the affair that my sister was having with her guard, Mano Barone, and it was something that I couldn't unknow, though I really, really, really wish that I didn't know. Fia knew that she was betrothed to Nero Sartori, and if there was any man on the planet that a woman shouldn't screw with, it was Nero Sartori. I'd also been wondering how long the affair had been going on. I mean, it really didn't matter in the scheme of things, but no matter how spoiled Fia was, she had to know that crossing a man like Nero Sartori was not wise.

“Do you ever go home?”

I looked up to see Marissa Venti standing in the doorway of my office. “Some days,” I quipped.

The Milton Legal Group had three senior partners, four junior partners, four paralegals, two secretaries that handled it all, and a receptionist. Though most of us were responsible for ourselves, Lilibeth and Dianna were worth their weight in gold. If this law office ran smoothly, it was because those two women knew their shit and were organized as hell.

“It’s crazy that you work this much but have no desire to make senior partner,” she said, shaking her head.

“I like the pressure when it’s by choice,” I explained. “Becoming a senior partner would turn this into a job, instead of something that I enjoy doing, and I’m not ready for that.”

“Well, don’t stay too late,” she replied sweetly. “It’s Friday, girl. Go have some damn fun.”

“Are you going to take your own advice?” I teased, knowing that she worked just as much as I did.

“Not at all,” she joked. “I’ve got court on Monday, so no fun for me this weekend.”

“Well, while I won’t be partying tonight, I think I will go visit my parents tomorrow,” I told her. “It’s been a while since I’ve spent time with them.”

“There you go,” she replied before giving me a final wave out the door.

Leaning back in my chair, I thought about my sister again. Tomorrow would be a good time to talk to her about what she was doing. If nothing else, she should stop the affair to spare Mano’s life. Even if Nero never found out, I knew that our father would lose his shit if he caught wind of what was going on. Everyone knew about the betrothal, so Mano couldn’t act like he wasn’t aware. Plus, even if Fia wasn’t engaged to Nero, Mano was her guard; he’d been assigned to protect her, not end up in bed with her.

Shaking my thoughts of my sister, I got back to work. While I didn’t have court on Monday, I still had a heavy workload that wasn’t going to complete itself. That was why I had an office at my condo that rivaled the one that I had here. Seriously, I had no life.

Chapter 3

Nero~

People liked to lecture that smoking was a bad habit, but I disagreed. If I was going to become dependent on anything, I'd rather it be a vice that couldn't ruin my life. Yeah, I could get cancer, but I could also get shot walking out of my front door. Cigarettes weren't going to land me in prison for drunk driving vehicular manslaughter. Cigarettes weren't going to have me sharing needles with a fellow heroin addict. Cigarettes weren't going to have me losing everything in front of a blackjack table. So, yeah, when it came to addictive vices, I was perfectly happy with a menthol to ease my stress.

“It's not going to be a bullet or enraged woman that ends up killing you one day,” Aurelio said. “It's going to be those damn cigarettes.”

Aurelio Provenza was my best friend, though he was officially my bodyguard. He'd been assigned to me when he'd been only twenty and I'd been eighteen. There'd been and still was an understanding amongst all the families that children were off-limits, so my father hadn't been too worried about my safety while I'd been a minor. However, on my eighteenth birthday, his gift to me had been Aurelio.

For almost fifteen years, Aurelio had stood by my side, and he was going to be my consigliere when the time came. In fact, truth be told, he acted as my consigliere now. Even though Aurelio was only two years older than I was, he'd been raised on the streets, my father taking him in when he'd been only fifteen. Aurelio had taken down five guys that had been trying to rob him, and when he had killed every last one, my father had serendipitously stumbled upon the scene, and the rest was history.

At thirty-four, Aurelio had dark brown hair, black eyes, and the women claimed that he was the Italian version of Zinedine Zidane; very unapproachable. Nevertheless, he was built like a warrior, and if death scared him, you'd never know it. He was also brilliant with any gun that you put in his hands,

smarter than most people gave him credit for, and was loyal as fuck.

That loyalty was the reason that I confided in him more than I did my own brother. Aurelio's hardened life made him a realist, something that I could appreciate. Aurelio's advice was always born out of logic, nothing more and nothing less. Elio, on the other hand, was known to throw a tantrum or two when he wasn't getting his way, something that I didn't have the time or patience for. Because Elio was untouchable, he thought that he could do whatever he wanted, and he often did.

I turned to see Aurelio shutting the door to my office. "Are you here to lecture me on the virtues of clean living?"

"I'm here to give you one last chance to change your mind," he replied evenly.

"Even if I wanted to, it's too late for that now," I reminded him. "However, let's be clear that I don't want to."

"You know shit like this never ends well, Nero."

"What's she going to do? Divorce me?"

"I'll say it again, I think that you're underestimating her," he said, something that he'd kept insisting on.

When I'd told Aurelio about my plans two years ago, that'd been the first thing that he'd said to me. He'd been quick to point out what would happen if the truth ever came out, but if it did, it'd be too late by then.

"I'm not," I assured him. "I know exactly what I'm getting myself into."

"She's a fucking criminal attorney, Nero," he reminded me needlessly. "She's not some docile piece of arm candy."

While I'd always known who Kasen Milano was, I hadn't ever interacted with her beyond some polite introductions when our fathers had arranged my marriage to her younger sister. Ready to honor my commitments, I hadn't given her much thought beyond how beautiful she was. However, both Milano daughters were beautiful, beautiful women being something that there was no shortage of in this lifestyle.

At any rate, it hadn't been until she'd been assigned to defend one of my men that I'd seen her in action in the courtroom. I'd been absolutely enthralled with her incredible intelligence, fiery disposition, and tenacity. Every pair of eyes had been on her every time that she'd spoken, and she had commanded that courtroom like it'd been her own personal playing field. While I had always believed her to be beautiful, that day in court, she'd been fucking stunning. I'd seen her through a new pair of eyes, and that's when I had begun to form my plan to have her at all costs. Renzo Milano had given her a choice to opt out of our lifestyle, and I'd had to find a way to reel her back in. I'd had to find a way to trap her with no chance of escaping.

Ever.

"If she ever finds out the truth, you're going to lose her," Aurelio remarked evenly.

"How is she going to ever find out?" I asked, finally finishing my cigarette. "Do you think Mano's going to tell her?" I shrugged. "Apart from me and you, he's the only other person that knows what I'm doing. Even if he didn't think that I'd kill him for speaking out of turn, he has to know that Renzo will."

Six months ago, I had called a meeting with Mano Barone, Fia's bodyguard. I had offered him five-million dollars to seduce and impregnate Fia Milano. Credit to him, he had insisted on a reason why, and when I'd told him, he'd seen the sense in why I would do such a thing, and he had readily agreed. One week ago, he had called me to tell me that Fia was pregnant and ready to run off into the night with him, something that wouldn't and couldn't happen. At least, not until I got what I wanted. I had no problems with Mano and Fia running off to live happily ever after together since I was never invested in Fia to begin with, but I couldn't have that until Kasen had my ring on her finger.

"While you know that I always have your back, I still think that you're underestimating her," he repeated. "This could still blow up in your face, Boss."

For the record, Aurelio only called me Boss to be facetious.

“I’ve faced worse,” I reminded him.

“What did you tell Marco?”

“I told him the truth,” I answered with a smirk on my face. “I called him earlier and told him that I’d just found out the terrible news, and that I was going to go over to confront my lovely fiancé.”

Aurelio snorted. “You’re going to burn in Hell, Sartori.”

“For a lot of things,” I agreed.

“What did he say?”

“At first, he was pissed,” I said as I walked over to the other side of the office to pour myself a drink. “He wanted to confront Renzo himself, but I talked him out of it.”

“Pour me one of those, will you?”

Normally, Aurelio didn’t speak so casually to me, but he had leave to do so when it was just the two of us. In front of anyone else, he exercised the utmost respect. However, no matter what everyone saw when they looked at us, Aurelio was my best friend, and there’s nothing that I wouldn’t do for him.

Handing him a glass of bourbon, I got back to the topic at hand. “I reminded him that it wouldn’t be a good look if my father fought my battles for me.”

Aurelio clinked the ice in his glass. “Does he know about Kasen?”

I eyed my friend. “I told him that I was going to insist that Renzo make it right.”

He just shook his head before taking a drink of his bourbon. There was an art to manipulation, and I was a fucking artist. Aurelio knew this, and even if Kasen ever did find out the truth, we both knew that I could handle it just like I handled everything else that went wrong.

“You just better hope that Mano doesn’t get greedy,” he said pointedly. “He’s already gone through the whole five-

million, Nero.”

My brows rose at that. “In six months?”

Aurelio nodded. “In six months.”

Granted, it wasn’t hard to spend five-million dollars in six months when you had expensive tastes, and I could easily see a guard getting a taste of the high life, then losing control. While our guards and soldiers were paid well, they weren’t paid millions every two weeks.

After taking a drink of my bourbon, I asked, “What did he spend it on?”

“To his credit, he did spend some of it on expensive jewelry for Fia. However, most of it went to the casinos,” he answered. “There were two ‘unexpected’ trips to Vegas recently.”

“And Renzo let him go?” While I didn’t doubt Aurelio’s account of the facts, I was still surprised to hear that Renzo had allowed Fia to go unguarded.

“When I visited with your dad last week, Mrs. Milano had been chatting up a storm, saying how Fia had been too sick to leave her bedroom a few weeks ago. My guess is that Mano must have fed Fia a story to help get him out of guarding her for his trip to Vegas.”

Finishing off my drink, I shrugged. “Well, if he’s stupid enough to try to blackmail me for some more money, he’ll just end up eating the end of my gun. I’m not worried.”

Aurelio finished his drink before asking, “What time are we leaving?”

“Six,” I answered. “I don’t want the priest out too late.”

My best friend smirked. “You’re a goddamn saint, Nero. Really.”

Chapter 4

Kasen~

Dinner was to be served at six, something that hadn't changed since moving out on my own. Though my father hadn't always been able to make it, that hadn't ever prevented my mother from serving dinner on time in this household.

Because I was a little bit early, I went in search of my sister before looking for my parents. I wanted to talk to Fia about what I'd seen, and I also wanted to find out what her plan was. If she was really in love with Mano, then that could pose a serious problem for both the families involved.

When I finally came upon her room, I knocked but not out of politeness, not really. I just really didn't want to walk in on something that I didn't need to see again. If Fia didn't have a problem getting it on with Mano in the damn library, then there was no telling what went on in her bedroom.

Knocking, I called for her. "Fia?"

"Come in," she called back.

I opened the door, then walked in to see my sister sitting at her vanity table, touching up her makeup, though she really didn't need to. Fia was always dressed and done up to perfection. Her blonde hair never had a hair out of place, and she knew how to apply her makeup to make the most of her blue eyes. She knew how to do that whole contouring thing, and good for her if it made her feel beautiful.

"Hey," I greeted as I leaned up against her dresser. "How have you been?"

Fia ignored me, touching up her makeup a bit more aggressively, and that was her answer. Even though we were four years apart, and I'd already been out of the house when she had entered high school, Fia didn't have much of a poker face. Having been spoiled all her life, her emotions showed in her face and her mannerisms.

"Want to talk about it?" I asked, even though I already knew that I was going to speak to her about what I saw. Our

mother was starting to talk about making wedding plans, so time was running out.

Placing her powder brush back in its spot, she turned to look at me, and I could see everything that she was doing and feeling on her face. She also looked defiant, and that wasn't good.

"I'm not marrying Nero Sartori," she announced. "I refuse to."

I let out a slow breath, choosing my words carefully. "Does this have anything to do with Mano?"

Her blue eyes widened. "What?"

I let out a disappointing sigh. "I know about you and Mano, Fia."

She started shaking her head. "What are you talking about? There's no way-"

"I saw you guys in the library, Fia," I finally told her. "The last time I visited, I heard you guys arguing, and then I saw..." I shrugged. "Well, you can guess what I saw."

Her eyes hardened, and I wasn't surprised. Fia always went on the defensive whenever she was in the wrong. "I love him."

"Fia-"

"I love him, and he loves me," she insisted. "We're...we're going to get married." She stood up from her chair, trying to dwarf me with the one inch that she had over me. In her heels, she was actually towering over me by five inches. "I don't care what Papa says."

"You should," I cautioned her. "He gave his word, and we both know how important his word is to him, Fia."

"You would know," she practically sneered, my career a perfect example of how important our father's word was to him.

I nibbled at my lower lip, doing my best not to take the bait. This wasn't about me, her, or her imagined sibling rivalry. This wasn't even about Papa, not really. This was

about Nero Sartori, and how he was the youngest Underboss in history, and he had come into that title honestly. He was deadly, merciless, and nothing was more important to him than business.

“Fia, you can’t really believe that Papa is going to be okay with you calling off the engagement, right?” I asked, imagining the worst. “He’s not going to let you break your word for another man.”

She lifted her chin, a sly grin appearing on her face. “He’ll have no choice when he finds out that I’m pregnant.”

I felt her words like a kick to the chest.

Pregnant.

“Have you lost your mind?” I hissed. “Jesus Christ, Fia.” I could feel myself actually scared for my sister. “How could you allow yourself to get pregnant?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’ve been with Mano for six months now,” she informed me, not sounding worried in the least.

I ran a hand through my dark hair. “How?” I finally asked. “How...after all these years, how did-”

“He knew that Mammi was going to start planning the wedding soon,” she huffed like the whole world was against her. “He said that he couldn’t just stand back and watch me marry another man without telling me how he’s felt about me all these years.”

While it was plausible because Mano had been assigned to Fia since she’d been twenty-one, it didn’t happen often. Soldiers and guards knew their place in this life, and it was rare that they’d risk their lives by stepping out of line. Mano Barone had to have known what pursuing Fia would mean for him. Even if Papa did spare his life, there was no way that Nero Sartori would.

“And you just...what, Fia?” I asked, trying to wrap my mind around the possible fallout. “You just *forgot* that you were betrothed to another man?”

“Nero Sartori doesn’t love me,” she shot back like the spoiled brat that she was.

“Of course, he doesn’t,” I snapped on a whisper, not wanting to raise my voice, lest my mother or father come running. “It’s an arranged marriage, and love is never part of the equation when it’s an arranged marriage.”

“Well, Mano loves me,” she repeated. “And love is worth taking a risk for.”

I wanted to call her out on her childish ideals, but since I’d never been in love before, I wasn’t exactly an expert on the subject. I’d never dated anyone long enough to fall in love with them, so maybe it really was worth the risk; I honestly didn’t know.

However, I did know enough to know that love didn’t always win. People weren’t guaranteed their fairytale endings, and this was one of those times. While Fia might be safe from harm, Mano wasn’t, and he was going to die for this betrayal. Yeah, the hearts in Fia’s eyes might be having her seeing things differently, but this was betrayal on *both* their parts. Papa had trusted Mano with his daughter, and Fia had been trusted to keep her word.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Mammi started talking about making an invitation list tomorrow, so...so, I’m going to announce our intentions tonight at dinner,” she informed me, her voice sounding a lot stronger than I wished it did.

“Fia, you need to think about this-”

“I’m pregnant, Kasen,” she bit out. “What’s there to think about? Do you think that Nero Sartori is willing to raise another man’s baby? Do you think that Mano is going to just stand back and let the woman that he loves marry someone else?” I opened my mouth to talk, but she quickly put her hand up to stop me. “Before you say anything, you should know that I refuse to have an abortion. I will not let them take my baby from me.”

Considering all the sins that were committed in this kind of lifestyle, I knew for a fact that my parents would never push for an abortion. Good Catholics or bad Catholics, we were still Catholics, and for whatever reason, abortion was a bigger sin than murder to these people.

“How about you...take some time to think-”

“You’re not listening to me,” she snapped. “They’re already going to start planning the wedding, Kasen. I’m not going to...I’m not going to be a part of that when I’m in love with Mano.” She looked at me like I was beneath her. “How could you think that I’d do something like that to him? My heart would be broken if I had to sit around and listen to him plan his wedding to someone else.”

“Fia, I’m not trying to upset you,” I told her, and I really wasn’t. Upsetting her hadn’t been my intention when I had decided to speak to her. “I just want you to *think* about what you’re doing.”

“Kasen, that’s all I do,” she replied. “All I do is think about the situation that I’m in.”

“Fia, you can’t...this is not going to end well,” I said quietly. “You have to know that.”

Before she could answer, someone was knocking on the door, and without an invitation, Mammi was walking into the room, dressed like she was hosting a dinner party, Fia taking after her in the most obvious ways.

“Oh, good,” she said breezily. “You’re both here.”

“Hi, Mammi,” I greeted, walking over to kiss her cheek. “You look wonderful.”

Opting not to return the compliment, she said, “Dinner is ready, so let’s not keep your father waiting.”

Fia pranced out of the room like a certified Mafia princess, and all I could do was follow her as our mother took up the rear, making sure that we really didn’t keep Papa waiting.

Chapter 5

Nero~

Knocking on the Milano's front door, I wasn't surprised that every guard on the premises had let us drive right onto the property. Considering that I was betrothed to Fia Milano, it was understandable, but it was still a stupid move. Renzo had no idea that I was here or why, and allies could become enemies in the blink of an eye these days.

Ringling the doorbell, I glanced over at Aurelio, and the fucker just smirked back at me. Though I wasn't worried about how this was going to play out, there was no guarantee that Mano Barone wouldn't start flapping his gums in a bid to try to save himself.

As soon as the door opened and Renzo's butler recognized who I was, he stepped back, allowing me inside, another stupid move.

"I need to speak with Renzo," I told him as soon as the man shut the door behind Aurelio. "It's important."

"Of course," he automatically replied before going to get his boss.

"I still would like to know how in the hell you knew that she'd be here tonight," Aurelio muttered under his breath.

"The same way that I know everything else about her," I answered.

"Stalking is illegal in all fifty states," he smirked.

"So is murder, racketeering, drugs, and prostitution," I reminded him.

"Prostitution is legal in Nevada," he pointed out. "And at the rate that California's going, I think everything will be legal there soon enough."

That got a grin out of me. "Thinking of moving to the West Coast?"

“Never,” he replied just as Renzo Milano was making his way towards us.

“Nero, Aurelio,” he greeted, knowing better than to treat my guard with anything less than respect. “This is unexpected.”

“I would never intrude upon you if it wasn’t important,” I assured him.

“Of course, of course,” he murmured. “Shall we head to my office?”

“I think that’d be best,” I answered. “However, this is something that I think is better discussed with your wife and daughters in attendance.”

Renzo’s chin came up, and I could see the suspicion written all over his face. He thought that I was here to break the betrothal, and while I was, it wasn’t for any reason that he could possibly fathom. Nevertheless, he would grant the audience because he had no choice.

“Of course,” he replied, his voice hardened.

We followed in silence as Renzo led us to his office, a room that I’d been invited into countless times before now. In fact, his office had been where the betrothal agreement had been constructed. I also made it a point to count how many guards were in residence at the moment in the event that things went south.

Once we entered the office, ever the host, Renzo asked, “Would either of you gentlemen like a drink?”

“Nothing for me, thanks,” Aurelio answered.

“I’m good,” I replied, making it clear that I wasn’t here for a social call.

Straightening, he said, “Well, you’ve caught us during dinner, so I’ll just go get my wife and daughter-”

“*Daughters,*” I stressed intentionally, cutting him off. “Both of them.”

Renzo's chin came up, and there was a fire in his eyes that confirmed all the rumors and assumptions about his firstborn. Kasen was his favorite, and if he was going to go to war for any member of his family, it'd be her. I couldn't even say if he'd go to war for his wife, honestly. However, it was clear that he did *not* like the mention of his other child.

"I don't see what for," he said, not bothering to ask me why I wanted her to join us. "Kasen is not involved in family business, something that most everyone knows."

"But she is still part of *your* family, is she not?"

"Well, of course," he bristled.

"Well, since the matter of why I'm here involves your family, I think that she should also be present," I told him. "In fact, Mano Barone and Ignacio Phillipe should also join us."

"And why are my wife's and daughter's guards required to be in attendance?"

"Come now, Renzo," I said, smoothing down the front of my suit jacket. "You and I both know that our personal guards know a lot more than we like to give them credit for."

He didn't say anything for a few seconds, but when he did finally speak, he said, "Ignacio is otherwise occupied at the moment. However, Mano is making his rounds on the grounds, so he can join us if you insist."

"Oh, I insist," I assured him.

When he walked out of his office, I glanced over at Aurelio. "I don't care if there ends up being a bloodbath in here. If anything pops off, you get Kasen out of here. I don't care what you have to do to accomplish that. Understood?"

Expectantly, Aurelio nodded. "Of course."

A minute or so later, all the Milanos were walking into Renzo's office, Mano Barone following behind the group. Honestly, I had no idea if he really cared for Fia or not, but I also didn't care one way or the other. Still, I did notice how he was making sure to stay close to her, guard or no guard.

Sonya Milano looked worried, but she knew better than to ask any questions. The perfect accessory to Renzo Milano, she knew her place, and it wasn't to question what the Sartori Underboss was doing, demanding their presence.

Fia looked annoyed, but she always looked that way. Nevertheless, if she felt annoyed now, things were about to become a lot more exciting for her in the next few minutes. Since she wasn't Renzo's favorite, I could not see this going well for her at all.

As for Kasen, she had the poker face of a professional. Those hazel eyes of hers were giving nothing away, and that flawless face of hers had a look of boredom to it. Even then, she still looked fucking stunning. Her black hair was piled high on her head, her face had minimal makeup on it, and her hour-glass figure was dressed in a simple white t-shirt, a pair of black jeans, and a matching pair of ankle boots were on her feet. Even as casual as her attire was, it still couldn't hide that fucking rack or those wide hips of hers. If anyone could make a fortune on a stripper pole, it was Kasen Milano.

When I'd first seen her in that courtroom, she'd been dressed in a white button-up blouse, a dark grey pencil skirt, and a pair of sensible black heels. Her long hair had been pulled back in a sleek ponytail, and by all accounts, she had looked professional and capable. Nevertheless, those curves of her had given her that sexy-secretary-on-her-knees look, and I was going to have the time of my fucking life once I got my hands on her. I was going to slut her out for every perverted fantasy that I'd ever had about her, and there was no way in hell that I was ever going to let her go.

As her hazel gaze-more green than brown-slid my way, I could actually feel my heart skip a beat inside my chest. Lots of people claimed that you couldn't possibly be in love with someone that you didn't know, but that was bullshit. Not only did I know more about Kasen Milano than I should-considering that we didn't run in the same circles-but I'd fallen in love that day in court. I had spent my entire afternoon falling in love with every word out of her mouth, every gesture that she'd made, and every breath that she'd taken that day. I

had fallen in love with whatever made her shine in the courtroom, and that's why we were here now. So, yeah, people that didn't believe in love at first sight could go fuck themselves.

Renzo walked over to his desk, standing in front of it like the powerplay that it was. "Well, we're all here," he said. "What's this about, Sartori?"

I reached back for the folder that Aurelio had carried into the house, and when it was in my hands, I gave it a little wave like an asshole. "This is about honor, Renzo," I stated, my voice controlled and even. "This is about honoring your word."

Renzo stood to his full height. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about what happens when someone doesn't honor their word."

His hazel eyes-the same ones as his daughter's-flared with indignation. "I have *never* broken my word," he spat. "How dare you come into my house and-"

"Not *your* word, Renzo," I clarified, cutting him off.

"Then what in the hell are you talking about?" he snapped, still offended.

I turned to look over at Fia. "Fia, would *you* like to explain to your father what I'm talking about?"

Her eyes widened, and she even paled a little bit. Whatever this girl had planned, she hadn't counted on me knowing anything. Knowing Fia Milano the way that I did, her plan had probably been to just run off in the middle of the night.

"What is he talking about, Fia," Renzo asked, his voice deadly calm.

"Yeah, Fia," I smirked. "What am I talking about?"

Chapter 6

Kasen~

I felt like I was on the verge of a heart attack. While I'd always known that this wasn't going to end well, I hadn't ever imagined that Nero Sartori might already know about Fia's affair with Mano. I had envisioned a scenario where Fia ended up running off in the middle of the night; not this.

Never this.

I watched my sister's eyes scanning the room like a cornered animal. It was one thing to feel brave and talk a good game from the safety of your bedroom, it was quite another thing to face off with Nero Sartori. I had no idea how he'd found out, but it was obvious that he knew, and I could only hope that Fia didn't suffer horribly for her misguided choices.

"I will not ask you again, Fia," Papa bit out, his face turning pink with irritation.

"I'm..." She straightened her back, and I almost closed my eyes and shook my head. I knew what that small, measured, exact movement meant. "I'm not going to marry Nero," she finally announced.

"The hell you're not," Papa snarled as Mammi let out a strangle cry.

"I'm in love with someone else," she went on, digging her own grave. "I'm in love with someone else, and we're getting married."

Papa's face was a dangerous red. "You dare to dishonor this family?"

"Papa-"

"Stay out of this!" he yelled at me, effectively stopping me from trying to save my sister.

"I am not dishonoring it," Fia lied. "I'm following my heart."

Papa took a couple of steps closer towards Fia. “You are *not* going to marry some-”

“I’m pregnant,” Fia blurted, and all I could do was close my eyes in resignation before opening them back up in time to see Papa’s fury explode inside the room.

“*What?!*” Papa thundered as Mammi started crying in despair.

“I’m pregnant,” Fia repeated. “So...see? You can’t keep me from-”

“Who is it?” Papa asked, a dangerous tilt in his voice. “Who is this man that you dared dishonor yourself with?”

I shook my head, praying that Fia had enough sense not to answer that question, but it was no use. Used to getting her way, Fia couldn’t see the danger in her actions, no matter how angry Papa was or how Mammi was openly sobbing now.

“Fia, don’t-”

“I’m in love with Mano,” she broadcasted, stepping over to him, taking one of his hands in hers, blind to anything but getting her way. “We’ve been together for six months now.”

Everything happened in slow motion as I watched Papa whip out his gun, aim it her way, then pull the trigger, splattering Mano’s brains all over the office wall and my sister’s face.

“*No!*” Fia screamed hysterically as she tried to catch him in her arms. “*No!*”

Not being able to stop myself, I raced over, then dropped next to my sister, trying to comfort her in any way that I could. When I glanced upward, Papa looked like he was on the verge of having a heart attack, his face red, his gun still smoking, but his hand as steady as ever.

“I trusted him with you!” Papa yelled down at her. “I trusted him to treat you with respect!”

“I hate you!” Fia cried out, cradling a dead Mano in her arms. “I hate you!”

“Oh, God,” Mammi sobbed, collapsing on the black leather couch in Papa’s office. She was pale and crying, and she looked so damn fragile that I had no idea if I should be comforting her instead.

“How could you do this to your family?” Papa seethed, stuffing his gun back inside his jacket. “How could you do this to us?”

“Mano, Mano, Mano...” Fia chanted, her sobs heart-wrenching. “Oh, God...Mano...I love you, I love you...”

“Fia-”

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed at me manically, causing me to lift my hands in mock surrender, doing whatever necessary to calm her down.

I stood up, not sure what to do next. Mano was dead, Fia was a mess on the floor, Mammi was sobbing uncontrollably on the couch, and Papa was pacing the room, his rage nowhere near spent. The only people that seemed at ease were Nero and his guard, Aurelio. They looked like detached audience members watching a tragic theater production playing out. Mano’s brain matter was literally decorating the room, and they seemed completely unfazed by it all.

When Papa stopped pacing, I watched him pull out his phone. “I need Genaro and Franco in here now,” he barked into the phone.

“No!” Fia cried again. “You are not taking him from me!”

“Shut up!” Papa roared. “Just shut up!”

“I’m not marrying Nero!” she kept on hysterically, and I could feel my stomach threatening to empty with all the surrounding chaos that was threatening our family.

“You will do what I tell you!” Papa spat down at her before turning to look over at Nero.

“I hate you!” Fia yelled again, but Papa was past caring about her anguish.

I stepped back when two of our guards, Genaro and Franco, stepped into the room, taking in the scene before them.

While they knew better than to ask any questions, Mano Barone was dead, and the news was going to spread among our guards like wildfire.

“Get him out of here,” Papa hissed. “But save the body.”

“No,” Fia choked out, her arms tightening around Mano’s corpse. “No.”

My hands came up to cover my mouth as I watched Genaro and Franco wrestle Mano’s body away from my sister, Mano’s blood soaking all of her clothes and floor. It was horrifying to see them hauling Mano’s dead body away, and it was sickening to see my sister howling tragically in the pool of his blood. It was so agonizing that my mother got off the couch, then dropped to the floor next to my sister to comfort her. A small part of me wondered if my mother had known about the affair because, while she seemed extremely upset, she didn’t seem surprised.

I dropped my hands as Papa turned to face Nero. “Nero, I assure you that I knew nothing of this,” he said, and it was the first time that I’d ever heard my father on the defensive.

“Luckily for you, I believe you, Renzo,” Nero replied. “However, your innocence regarding this situation doesn’t change the facts of the matter, does it?”

“I understand compensation will be required-”

“Renzo, you and I both know that I have more money than I will ever need,” Nero said, cutting my father off. “The last thing that I need is compensation for your daughter’s betrayal.”

Papa straightened, and no matter what, I couldn’t bring myself to believe that he might actually sacrifice Fia to make this right. For all her spoiled and self-centered ways, she was still his daughter. She was his youngest, and she was pregnant with his first grandchild. The Milanos were all about family, so that had to mean something positive for Fia.

“Then what is it that you’re suggesting?” Papa asked, his voice hardening.

“You promised me your daughter’s hand in marriage, Renzo,” Nero reminded him, that folder in his hand flapping a bit. “I have the betrothal agreement right here.”

Papa’s head reared back. “You...you still want to marry Fia?” he asked incredulously. “Knowing what she’s done? Knowing that she’s pregnant by another man?”

All the air in my lungs felt sucked out when Nero Sartori said, “Last that I checked, you had *two* daughters, Renzo.”

Papa started shaking his head while my entire body began to tremble with dread. I felt like oxygen was my enemy as I couldn’t catch a breath deep enough to make this nightmare go away. There was no way that Nero could mean what I...*oh, God.*

“No,” Papa finally said. “Kasen isn’t...she isn’t an option.” I let out a shaky breath as Papa did his best to save me, but even I wasn’t naïve enough to believe that he really could.

“You promised me and my father a union with our two families,” Nero repeated. “I have honored our side of the agreement, are you telling me that you are refusing to honor yours?”

“Renzo, please...”

My mother’s words were like a kick in the chest. She was more than willing to offer me up in order to save Fia, and that hurt a lot. Even though I knew that she felt closer to Fia than she did me, I was still her daughter, yet that didn’t matter to her right now. I was good enough payment for the devil if he left Fia alone.

I watched as Nero handed my father the envelope. “Though copies, everything is in there. Pictures of Fia and Mano, dating back six months ago. There’s also proof of her pregnancy and the rest of her medical records.”

“How did you get these?” Papa bit out, but Nero just pinned him with a stare.

“I have everything I need to prove Fia’s culpability, Renzo,” Nero told him. “All you have to do is give me Kasen to make it all go away.”

Chapter 7

Nero~

While I had expected some serious theatrics, I hadn't expected Renzo to blow Mano Barone's brains out in front of his entire family. However, unbeknownst to him, Renzo had just taken care of a loose end for me. Now that Mano was dead, there were only two other people on the planet that knew of what I'd done to make Kasen Milano mine, and neither one of us was going to say anything.

Doing his best to protect his favorite, Renzo said, "I gave my word to Kasen that she could have her own life away from the family business."

I cocked my head. "And from what I can see, you've kept it," I replied. "It's my understanding that she has a thriving career and doesn't even have a guard assigned to her."

"Forcing her to marry you breaks my word to her," he argued.

"Who said anything about *forcing* her to marry me?" I posed.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Kasen doesn't want any part of this life."

"And that's perfectly okay," I said, my voice practical and matter of fact. "Make no mistake, Renzo; I'm not here to force anyone to do anything. Kasen will have a choice just like Fia did."

To her credit, Kasen stepped forward, done being left out of the negotiations for her future. "Then the answer is no," she said. "If you're giving me a choice, then the answer is no."

Kasen looked me right in the eye when she delivered that gem, and it took everything that I had in me not to order everyone from the room, so that I could mount her like a fucking animal. She looked like she did that day in the courtroom, and I knew that my reign would be the most powerful one in history with her by my side. I'd never been so obsessed with another human being in all my life, and if she

knew the kind of hold that she had on me, she'd be too terrified to exist.

Turning away from her beautiful face, I looked back at her father. "Very well."

Renzo's chin came up because he knew better than to believe that it would be that easy. "Is it?"

My lips twitched in a grin that I usually reserved for my enemies. "I will search for a bride elsewhere. However, rest assured that my pursuits will be answered with honesty, Renzo." His eyes flared as he realized what I was saying. "When asked, I will let it be known that I am searching for a wife because the Milanos have failed to honor their word to us."

"Oh, God..." Sonya cried out, still holding a sobbing Fia in her arms.

"Your daughter's indiscretions will become public, and I will let it be known that you allowed the betrayal to go unanswered for." I cocked my head as Renzo's face turned red with anger. "After all, why should I allow people to believe that it was *my* family that hadn't kept their word?"

"You bastard," Renzo seethed, the writing on the wall.

"How long do you think it'll take for it to get back to O'Brien, Schulz, and Kotov that you no longer have the support of the Sartoris?" I went on, Sonya's cries getting louder. "While your numbers are decent, are they big enough to ward off the others if they decide to work together to split your territory?"

"Renzo!" Sonya cried out. "Do something!"

"And before you start to paint me as the villain in this movie, *I'm* not the one that started fucking my guard while I was promised to someone else," I reminded him.

To Renzo Milano's credit, he said, "If they come for us, then they come for us."

Looking at the older man, it was clear to see where Kasen got her backbone from. While he knew that he couldn't fend

off the others, that wasn't stopping him from doing everything necessary to save his favorite daughter. Where Sonya Milano was more than willing to serve Kasen up on a silver platter, Renzo was not, and it was hard not to admire the man.

"Wait," Kasen said, stepping closer to her father, and it was like the racing judge waving the checkered flag. "Just...wait."

Renzo turned towards his daughter. "No, *la mia ragazza preferita*-"

My favorite girl.

"Papa, just listen to me-"

"You are not going to sacrifice yourself for your sister's indiscretions, Kasen," Renzo told her.

"But you are?" she fired back. "You're willing to risk everything that we have-"

"I am not risking anything," he spat. "It was your sister that risked everything because of her selfish ways, not me."

"Then just kill me. My life is nothing without Mano anyway," Fia cried out dramatically, and I couldn't thank God enough for saving me from a life of being married to the woman.

"Shut up!" Renzo yelled at her. "In fact, get her the fuck out of here!"

"Renzo-"

"I said, get her the fuck out of here, Sonya!" he shouted at his wife. "If you can't, then I'll get someone to escort the both of you from this room!"

"I hate you," Fia seethed, but she still stood up with the help of her mother and left the room, leaving only me, Aurelio, Renzo, and Kasen.

Looking at her father, Kasen said, "All my life you've supported me and have allowed me to have a life that has made me happier than I could have ever imagined, Papa. I have accomplished everything that I wanted to, and I couldn't have done any of it if you hadn't been in my corner the whole

time.” She let out a shaky breath. “Don’t ask me to repay you by watching you lose everything that you’ve built all your life. Don’t ask that of me.”

“Kasen-”

“Not to mention that Fia’s pregnant whether we like it or not,” she went on. “Do you really want to see your enemies coming for your family, Papa? If that happens, we can only hope that they kill us quickly, and you know it.”

“I don’t think you know what you are saying, Kasen,” Renzo said, though you could hear the resignation in his voice.

“Oh, I know exactly what’s happening here,” she replied.

“Do you, *la mia ragazza preferita*?”

Not answering her father, Kasen turned to look at me. “I have only one condition before I agree to...to this.”

“A condition that I don’t have to grant,” I pointed out. “I’m not here to negotiate, *il mio cuore*.”

While I wasn’t sure if Kasen understood Italian, Renzo’s eyes flew my way when I called her *my heart*, and if the man only knew, he’d be walking out of here the victor. He’d know that I’d do anything to have her and call my bluff.

Those hazel eyes of hers were on fire with the amount of hate that she was feeling for me right now, but I wasn’t too bothered by it. After emotions cooled, they’d all see that Fia and Mano were to blame for all this. Sure, I had set the stage by offering Mano that five-million dollars, but no one had forced him or her to step on it; they’d done that all on their own.

“I just want to still be able to do my job,” she said, ignoring the truth of her situation.

“I can’t see the courts allowing your guard to accompany you into court, Kasen,” I replied pragmatically.

“Why would I need a guard?” she asked, genuinely looking confused.

“Did you think that you wouldn’t as the Sartori Underboss’ wife?”

Her chin came up at that, and I wondered just how far she could be pushed before she agreed with her father, willing to take on the Irish, Germans, and Russians, rather than marry me.

“Even if that’s the case, you know damn well that no one is going to open fire in a packed courthouse,” she replied stiffly.

Rather than alienate her when she was showing good faith, I said, “We can discuss that later.”

Kasen shook her head. “No,” she practically snapped. “I want your word *now*.”

If Aurelio and her father weren’t in the room with us, I’d grab her by the neck, bend her over the desk, then make her mine. While most men preferred meek women to make their lives easier, I wanted the spitfire in front of me, making my life difficult every fucking minute for the rest of my days.

“You have my word that you can continue working as a defense lawyer,” I told her. “However, a guard is non-negotiable. Nevertheless, we can discuss those details at a more opportune time.”

I watched her let out a heavy sigh, but if she thought that this was a victory for her, it wasn’t. She had no idea what being my wife was going to be like, and she was in for even more disappointment once she realized just how obsessed I was with her.

Turning back towards her father, she said, “Let me do this, Papa.”

“*La mia ragazza preferita*, I’d rather take on all the families in this state than let you do this,” he told her, and I believed him.

“And I’d rather do this than lose you, Mammi, and Fia to my own selfishness,” she replied, and if there’d ever been any doubt as to why Kasen Milano would make me the perfect wife, there wasn’t any now. “No matter what, you are my family, Papa; the only thing that I truly care about.”

Yeah, Kasen Milano was going to make me the perfect wife.

Chapter 8

Kasen~

While my voice sounded calm and reasonable, I was feeling anything but. With blood still staining my clothes, Fia's anguished cries rattling around in my head, and my mother's obvious favoritism, it was a miracle that I was still standing. While I'd known that Papa was going to be pissed at Fia's recklessness, I hadn't ever imagined that he'd shoot Mano in the head like that.

I was also curious as to how Nero Sartori had gotten all that private information on Fia. While it wouldn't be a surprise to know that he'd probably had her followed since the day of their betrothal, how did he know that she was pregnant?

Before I could give it any more thought, Nero said, "There's a priest waiting outside, ready to officiate the ceremony."

That had my stomach tripping over itself. "Wait, what?"

"What are you talking about?" Papa asked, stepping in front of me in a futile attempt to protect me from the man in front of us.

Nero's chocolate gaze slid my way, and it was hard not to acknowledge just how gorgeous he was. He was around six-foot-three with dark brown hair that looked as soft as silk with the way that it was trimmed short on the sides, but the top fell haphazardly in any direction. He also had a pair of whiskey-colored eyes that brought new meaning to the phrase bedroom eyes. His face was all sharp angles and prominent masculinity, and though he looked to be in his early thirties, the sharpness in his eyes and the way that he carried himself made him appear older.

He also had a body that probably worked out every morning. The expensive cut of his suit wasn't enough to disguise how ripped and in shape this man had to be. It was said that Nero Sartori was as deadly as they came, but it was also said that he was a bit bloodthirsty and like to fight and kill with his bare hands. It was rumored that beating someone to

death was his go-to choice in ending someone's life, and if that was true, then I imagined that he'd have to be in tip-top shape to make that happen.

There was no doubt in my mind that Nero Sartori would make one hell of a lover and husband for the right woman. However, I was not the right woman, and it was clear to see that Fia hadn't ever been, either. Nero would have chewed her up, then spit her out within days of their wedding.

"We're getting married tonight," he announced, and I had to press my hand to my stomach to settle it down.

"What do-"

"I will not be making the mistake of trusting your family a second time, Renzo," Nero said, cutting him off. "Do you really think that I'm going to give you time to formulate another alternative?" Nero looked between both me and my father. "The last thing that I'm going to do is give you time to ship your daughters off to wherever the fuck in a poor attempt to save your family."

Papa's back straightened. "A proper wedding is still-"

"You had your chance at a proper wedding," Nero replied icily as he raised that cursed folder up higher. "The license and certificates are all in here. They just need Kasen's signature, and then the priest can come in and perform the ceremony." Nero leveled my father with a glare. "A ceremony that will be attended by the four of us *only*."

Papa turned to look back at me. "You don't have to do this-"

"It's fine, Papa." I lied as I took his hands in mine. Nothing was ever going to be fine again, but now wasn't the time to be a coward. While I had a choice, I really didn't.

"Kasen-"

"Papa, it's fine," I insisted. "Honestly, what difference is a huge wedding going to make? What difference is more time going to matter?"

Papa looked back at Nero. "And what will we tell people?"

“That’s simple,” Nero said as he shrugged. “We’ll say that we let people believe that Fia was my intended in order to preserve Kasen’s safety. We’ll let it be known that we took the spotlight off Kasen, so that she could pursue her legal career without interference.”

I hated how his explanation would make sense to anyone that asked. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that this had been Nero’s plan all along. However, he couldn’t have known that Fia and Mano would start a secret affair. At the end of the day, Nero was innocent of any deception, and I hated that. I hated thinking of him as a victim when he was upending my life like this. With my father’s promise, I’d been given a chance to marry for love, and Nero Sartori had just taken that away from me.

“It seems as if you’ve thought of everything,” I snapped.

“Almost, *li mio cuore*,” Nero smirked as my hateful gaze washed over him.

“I think that’s enough,” Papa snapped, not appreciating the endearment, though I didn’t know what it meant. I wasn’t bilingual, so I could only imagine what he was calling me.

Not wanting to make this situation any worse than it already was, I snatched the folder from Nero’s hands, and I could hear Aurelio let out a low chuckle over my obvious disrespect. Now, while I was doing what I believed necessary to keep my family safe, that didn’t mean that I had to take Nero’s shit lying down. While I was sure that he hadn’t meant to, he had given me the perfect out to this marriage. I was used to working long hours, and I planned to exploit that fact to avoid this relationship. After all, Nero had given me his word that I could still work, and I was going to hold him to it.

Walking over to my father’s desk, I opened the folder, and not needing proof of Fia’s duplicity, I flipped through the pictures and medical records until I found the marriage license and certifications. Grabbing a pen off the desk, I signed my name, my heart threatening to stop with each flick of the pen. I was signing my life away, and Nero was refusing to give me any time to sort out my feelings about what I was doing.

Granted, at the end of it all, he *had* given me a choice in the matter, but all that had been was manipulation at its finest. Everyone had their price, and the safety of my family was mine.

After signing the papers, I turned to face the three men in the room. “Well, what are we waiting for?”

Nero slid a glance Aurelio’s way, and the guard quietly exited the room to go get the priest, but I noticed the smirk on his face as he left. Though it was said that Aurelio Provenza was Nero’s personal guard, it was obvious that they were way more than that. If not, then Aurelio wouldn’t be showing his emotions to his boss the way that he was.

“While I expect you at my home this evening, I understand that moving in will take more than a day,” Nero said, and my stomach tightened with my new reality. “So, after the ceremony, you will go home, pack a few things, then we will make arrangements to sell your condo and move you in permanently.”

“I’m not selling my condo,” I told him, refusing to let him take away all my outs.

“*Il mio cuore*, I am advising you to watch yourself,” he warned. “My patience has a limit.”

“Why do I need to sell my condo?” I stubbornly asked. “What harm is there in keeping it?”

Nero stepped to me, and I had to crane my neck back to maintain eye contact. “Before today, that condo was just where Kasen Milano lived,” he said, his voice hard. “After tonight, it will belong to Nero Sartori’s wife, making it no longer safe for you to live in.” Nero lifted his chin. “I will not allow you to hold onto a property that might lead my enemies to you.”

“That makes no sense,” I argued. “Who cares where I live when where I work is no secret?”

“Sell your fucking condo or we can revisit the discussion about your career, Kasen,” he threatened, and I knew that I was going to have to learn how to choose my battles wisely.

Before I could say anything more, Aurelio was walking back into the room with the priest, and the poor father looked like he might expire on the spot. He knew that this wasn't legit, and because I was a sucker, I didn't want to do anything to cause him any more discomfort over this bullshit.

"Are the bride and groom ready?" he asked hesitantly.

Brushing my way past Nero's large frame, I walked over to the man. "We are, Father."

His kind brown eyes studied me as he asked, "Are you sure you want to do this, child? Are you here of your own choice?"

"I am," I semi-lied. While I was here of my own choice, I didn't want to be here.

"Okay, child," he replied kindly. "Then let us begin."

Fifteen minutes later, I was married to Nero Sartori, an incredible platinum and diamond wedding set weighing heavily on my finger. While it wasn't anything that I would have chosen for myself because of the size of the diamonds, there was no denying that it was stunning. A beautiful reminder of my new prison and the warden overseeing everything in it.

Granted, what surprised me more was the matching ring that Nero had purchased for himself. For the sake of the priest, I had slid it on Nero's finger when I'd been instructed to, but I was sure that the look in my eyes had told Nero everything that my mouth couldn't.

After Aurelio had escorted the priest back to the car, Nero looked back over at me, saying, "I'll expect you at my home in an hour, Kasen. Don't make me come looking for you, *il mio cuore*."

If only I had enough guts to defy him.

Chapter 9

Nero~

I was pissed, but that was the nature of the business. After leaving Kasen and Renzo wishing me to hell, I'd gone home, expecting to consummate my marriage as soon as Kasen had been delivered to me. However, those plans had ended the second that my brother had called me with an emergency. Knowing that my guards would keep Kasen safe until I got home, I'd left directions with them before heading off to the club to see what the fuck Elio had gotten himself into.

Stepping out of the car, I ignored the line at the entrance to The Den. Our family owned many restaurants, clubs, bars, and adult establishments, and The Den was one of them. No matter what anyone thought, business went a lot smoother when there was pussy nearby. Men were simple when it came to that kind of shit, and women were just beating themselves up trying to understand why.

The Den was one of our adult establishments, though it was disguised as a club. When you walked in, it looked like every other dance club in the city. There was a bar that lined the left side of the room, the restrooms just a few feet beyond the end of the bar. The dance floor was spacious enough to accommodate plenty of people, and the only seats were booths that lined the walls like a huge letter L. There was a platform for the DJ, and on either side of the platform were two smaller stages with cages, a stripper pole in the center of each one.

Now, just beyond the left cage was a camouflaged door that led to the second part of the club. The second room was split into two parts: the left side another bar, the right side a strip club. The room also had a balcony with three separate VIP rooms, all glass walls and high ceilings. Behind the bar was a small kitchenette that we used to cater to our more important guests. There was also a private backdoor for discretion.

While the room wasn't exactly a secret, we only used it for business meetings and special guests. The glass in the VIP

rooms was bulletproof and there were more guards in the back room than in the entire club put together. It was the perfect place to feel safe and comfortable doing whatever vice you were into, and this wasn't the only place that we had like this. In total, we had five clubs and/or restaurants with the same kind of setup, and it really was an invitation-only kind of thing.

Ignoring everything that was going on around me, I used my key to get into the back room, and I wasn't surprised to see that things were already reaching levels of depravity. After all, it was a Saturday night, and all anyone had to do was confess in the morning, everything forgiven and forgotten until the next weekend.

Glancing up, I saw a few of our men in the first VIP room, but no Elio.

"Maybe he's in the office," Aurelio suggested.

Every one of our businesses had small or large offices in the back, depending on which business it was. The office to this club was a small room off behind the stripper stage. In all actuality, it really was just the size of a large closet and not a lot of paperwork was kept or conducted here.

Before I could comment, Elio was walking out from where the restrooms were located, a hot redhead following behind him, the woman doing her best to fix her lipstick. Elio had called me down here for an emergency, but he still had time to get his dick sucked? If he had me down here for some bullshit, then I was going to fuck him up.

When Elio finally spotted us, he quickly made his way over, and I didn't appreciate the look on his face. "Well, if it isn't the groom," he drawled out, a smirk on his face.

I straightened my back as I looked at him. "Pardon me?"

"Did you really think that Marco wasn't going to tell me that you were getting married today?" he asked, and I inwardly cursed. It hadn't occurred to me to tell my father to keep his mouth shut until I sought fit to announce my marriage to Kasen.

“My marriage is none of your business, Elio,” I reminded him. “I’m here to discuss whatever this emergency is.”

Ignoring me, he asked, “How could you not tell me that you were getting married?”

“Because I don’t answer to you, little brother,” I reminded him. “Be careful, Elio.”

“Is it true?” he asked, using his leverage as my brother to keep pushing. “Did you really marry Kasen Milano?”

Fuck, how much did Marco tell him?

“What difference does it make?” I snapped. “This doesn’t concern you, Elio.”

“It makes a difference because you’re my brother,” he snapped back. “I care, alright?”

He was lying. Elio was too spoiled to care about anything that didn’t include money, murder, or pussy. If he was upset, it was because he’d been left out of the loop and that’s it. At the end of the day, I could marry the Tooth Fairy and Elio wouldn’t care. This was just Elio being his usual spoiled self.

Straightening, I said, “We can discuss tonight later. Tell me what the fuck was such an emergency that you called me out here.”

“Follow me,” he instructed, and I just let out a heavy sigh as Aurelio and I followed Elio to the second-floor landing. The other two VIP rooms weren’t occupied, but that didn’t mean anything. The rooms were attached to one another by dual connecting doors, making it possible to host one huge party throughout all three rooms.

As soon as we entered the room and Aurelio shut the door behind us, there were shouts of congratulations, along with fucking confetti being thrown everywhere.

I was fucking livid.

“What in the fuck is this?”

Elio grinned. “It’s your bachelor party, big brother,” he said, throwing his arms out to his sides, my eyes taking in the

entire room. Had I been paying closer attention, then I would have noticed all the extras from downstairs.

“Are you fucking serious?” I hissed, infuriated that Elio would pull a stunt like this. Especially, since he was only entertaining this shit as payback for not being told about tonight.

“Awe, c’mon, man,” he drawled out like a fucking child. “You didn’t honestly think that I’d let my only brother tie the knot without a bachelor party, did you?”

“Seeing as how I’m already married, your timing is a bit off, don’t you think?” I bit out.

Elio just laughed. “Like that ring on your finger matters.”

That was the thing about the Mafia lifestyle; cheating was acceptable. In fact, the only Commandment that seemed to be honored was not having any God before The Lord. All the other nine Commandments were broken on a daily basis, infidelity being the least of what tarnished our souls. However, like most Catholics, as long as we confessed our sins on Sunday, then we could go on continuing to be the horrible people that we really were.

Nevertheless, contrary to how I’d been raised or what I’d seen growing up, I had no plans on being unfaithful to my wife. Unless she refused me for the duration of our marriage-*which was for life*-there was no way in hell that I was going to cheat on her. While everyone else might think that my marriage was a business arrangement, I knew better. I hadn’t planned and schemed for two years just to cheat on the only woman that I’d ever come close to loving.

I stepped towards my brother, ignoring everyone else in the room. “I’m only going to tell you this once more, Elio, so if I were you, I’d listen carefully,” I said, low enough for only him to hear me. “My marriage is none of your business.”

Elio’s brown eyes flared with annoyance. “Everything you do is my business,” he shot back. “If anything happens to you, then all this shit falls on me, big brother. So, yeah, I need to

know if you're new bride is a good girl or a black fucking widow."

Before I could wrap my hands around his throat, a body was bouncing off my side, and when I turned, I saw one of our dancers plastered to my side.

"I ordered her especially for you, Nero," Elio snickered.

I recognized her as one of our top showgirls, and there were many good reasons why she was in high demand. Tall, blonde, perfect tits, small waist, wide hips, and long legs, Chastity was the fantasy that every middle-aged man dreamed of when his wife no longer had the time nor the energy to be his own personal porn star.

"Hi, Nero," she said coyly. "I heard congratulations are in order."

Doing my best not to take my anger out on anyone that wasn't my brother, I said, "Chastity, I need you to step back a bit."

Her blood-red lips formed a pout. "If I do that, then how am I supposed to give you your present?"

"Chastity--"

Her left hand began sliding to the front of my pants, and when she grabbed a handful of my dick, my hand shot downward, gripping her wrist, squeezing painfully enough to make her wince.

"Somehow, I actually believe that I'm at the *right* party."

Fury ignited deep in my chest at the sound of my wife's voice, and it only took one look at Elio's face to see that he had set me up.

Chapter 10

Kasen~

The second that I'd shown up at Nero's house, I'd been greeted by one of his guards, informing me of the change in plans. According to the guard that hadn't even bothered telling me his name, a small celebration had been arranged for the newly-married couple, and I'd been expected to show my face and sell the bullshit about having always been Nero's betrothed. However, the real reason for my appearance was clear as I watched the beautiful blonde draped all over the man that I'd just married a few hours ago.

When the guard had driven me to The Den, I'd had my suspicions. After all, even if I didn't have much of a life, I'd been raised around all this. I'd seen more than I'd ever wanted to know about the Mafia before I'd gone off to college to pursue my dream in law. So, I'd always known who the Sartoris were and little bits and pieces of their regime. They owned restaurants, clubs, and bars all over this city, and it wasn't because they were legitimate businessmen. The Den was famous for what happened in the back rooms, and even if I hadn't grown up in this life, I was a criminal attorney, and this place had been mentioned too many times to count during my career.

Nevertheless, when the guard had begun escorting me towards the private entrance to the back, those suspicions had grown, knowing that nothing good could come out of having a 'small celebration' at this club. If I hadn't still been reeling from everything that'd happened, I would have had enough sense to realize that a real party would have taken place at my parents' house or at Mr. Sartori's place.

Not here.

See, that was another thing about this wretched lifestyle; the men were never faithful. It was an unspoken acceptance, and as long as the wives were treated with respect and had full access to all the necessary bank accounts, they didn't bat an eye at their husbands' infidelities. For as long as I could

remember, my father had mistresses, and my mother didn't care.

However, this wasn't that.

No, this was something different.

Respect was a big thing with the Mafia, and while the men might fuck anything with two spreadable legs, they never flaunted it in front of their wives. They never disrespected the women that carried their last names and bared their children. While the adultery was rampant and everywhere, they still managed to uphold a respectable amount of discretion.

A quick glance around the room told me that Nero had ordered me here to humiliate me in front of his family and men, reminding me that I was nothing but a consolation prize. In front of everyone, he had another woman draped all over him, and I wasn't even sure if I could be mad about that. Fia had betrayed and embarrassed him, so all that the Sartori Underboss was doing was getting even, and who could fault him? He was now married to someone that he'd had no desire to marry, and I was pretty sure that the rest of my life was going to be riddled with moments just like this one. If random women came and went from the house, I wouldn't be surprised. Nero Sartori wasn't the type of man to let Fia's slight go unpunished. Yeah, Papa might have killed Mano, but Nero still hadn't gotten his revenge. Sure, he had managed to make sure that the betrothal contract remained intact, but he hadn't sated his anger.

Until now.

"Well, if it isn't the beautiful bride," Elio Sartori said, a huge grin spread across his face.

"Elio," I acknowledged, and it was so easy to see that the two brothers were related when they were standing next to each other like this. Only two years apart, Nero looked a lot older than Elio, but that could just be from the way that Nero carried himself. Elio Sartori was rumored to be a spoiled brat, making me think of my sister.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked as a stunning redhead saddled up next to him, her hands all over his chest. “After all, this party is for you.”

I glanced around the room, and I saw a couple of the Sartori men smirk, confirming the reason that I was here. In any other capacity, they would have dislodged the women on their laps, stood up, showing me the proper level of respect as an Underboss’ wife. Instead, they were still sitting, drinks in their hands, the women still on their laps, one woman not even bothering to cover up her chest. I was being dismissed by every person in the room, and the man that I was married to wasn’t uttering a single fucking word about it.

When the sound of a zipper reverberated throughout the room, that was my cue to leave. While already humiliated by Nero’s need to spend our wedding night with other women, that still didn’t mean that I had to walk out of here with my head hung low.

I’d done nothing wrong.

Nero finally stepped away from the blonde as the redhead removed her top to give Elio a better view of what she had to offer him, and I found that I couldn’t even be mad at any of the women in here. In fact, I felt an unfortunate kinship with them.

No matter what women wanted to tell themselves, we all had a price. We all went after men with the hopes of something in return, and that was just fact. Even if that hope was just his love, we still gave ourselves with the expectation that we’d get something back for our troubles. These women gave their bodies to these men in exchange for money, job security, stability, whatever. I had given Nero Sartori my future in exchange for the safety of my family. The woman living in the suburbs with her two-point-three kids and Labrador had given her life to her husband in exchange for his love, and I hoped that he really did love her back. Nevertheless, at the end of it all, we all prostituted ourselves in exchange for something in return, and some of us were lucky enough for it to be love, and some of us were pragmatic enough for it to be money. Glancing around the room, I had

nothing against any of the women here. In fact, I wished them all the best of luck, even the blonde that'd been all over Nero.

Looking back at Elio, I said, "While I appreciate the gesture, it's been a long day, Elio. I think I'll forego the festivities and let you men to it."

Something flashed in Elio's chocolate gaze, but he quickly masked it. "Are you sure?" he asked, his voice light and easy, belying the look in his eye. "We made sure to get only the best champagne to celebrate with."

The slurping sounds of a very aggressive blowjob sounded in the room, and while I wasn't a prude, everything going on in this place was to feed my humiliation, not for pleasure or entertainment. A guard, soldier, Capo, whatever was getting his dick sucked out in the open as Elio and I tried to conduct a conversation, and the ring on my finger started to feel a lot heavier than it'd had just a few minutes ago.

"Yeah, suck that dick, you dirty bitch," the lucky man hissed, and that must have been the cue for everyone else in the room to not give a fuck that I was here. No sooner after praising her, the redhead was sliding her hand over Elio's crotch, which must be their go-to moves since the blonde had been doing the same to Nero.

With those piercing brown eyes of his, Nero finally addressed me. "I think it's best if you leave."

"I think you're right," I agreed evenly, proud that my voice was steady.

"Silvio can take you back-"

"I can make my own way back," I said, interrupting him. "I wouldn't want Silvio to have to miss out on all the festivities."

"You don't give the orders here, *il mio cuore*," he stated, sliding his hands into his pockets, his jaw ticking violently.

"I wasn't giving any orders," I pointed out. "I was simply informing you that I can make my own way back."

“Not anymore,” he said, that tick still playing on his jaw. “Silvio will escort you back home, and you’ll wait for me there until I arrive.”

This sonofabitch.

“Of course, Mr. Sartori,” I replied, my tone daring him to keep it up.

Nero’s chin lifted, anger flaring in those russet orbs of his. “Watch yourself, *il mio cuore.*”

Not bothering to stick around for the actual fucking portion of the evening, I turned, walking out of the room, Silvio hot on my heels. However, when we entered the dance club area of The Den, the place was packed enough for me to make an escape plan.

Turning towards Silvio, I said, “I need to use the restroom.”

Nodding, he followed me, guarding the door like I knew that he would. However, luck was on my side tonight when I found a group of drunk women all carrying on, touching up their makeup and adjusting their clothing.

“Excuse me?” All five women looked my way. “My ex just showed up, and I think he’s following me. Can you...would you be willing to help get me out of here?”

The sweet-looking brunette reached out and rubbed her hand up and down my arm soothingly. “Of course, we will,” she said, all of her friends nodding behind her.

One shirt change later, I was in the middle of a drunken group of women, stumbling, laughing and walking right past Silvio, the poor sonofabitch none the wiser.

Thirty minutes later, I was unlocking the door to my office, needing some damn peace and quiet.

Chapter 11

Nero~

Rage was a funny thing, something that I could have sworn that I'd made peace with years ago. However, the look on Kasen's face as she took in everything that was happening in the room had ignited a different level of rage that I'd never experienced before. Elio had crossed so many lines tonight, and I'd had no choice but to remain silent as everyone disrespected my wife. I was the Sartori Underboss, and no matter that Kasen controlled more than she could possibly imagine, I'd known better than to show any weakness to anyone in the room, including Kasen.

However, my wife was no longer here, so that changed everything.

“Aurelio?”

“Yes?”

“Escort these women out of the room, then clear the bottom floor,” I instructed, my voice brooking no room for argument.

“Let's go, ladies,” Aurelio announced, and his command was met with sighs and pouts, and that only pissed me off more. Nevertheless, they all obeyed meekly.

As Chastity went to follow the rest of the girls, I called her name, stopping her. When she looked back up at me, she had the smuggest grin on her lips, and I couldn't remember if I'd ever felt this disgusted by a woman before.

Leaning down, I said, “If you ever touch me again, I will end you. Understood?”

Her eyes widened fearfully, but she quickly nodded, racing to follow the other girls out of the room. Even if I weren't married, no one got to touch me without my permission. No doubt her careless actions had come from my brother's instructions, and that was something that I was going to take care of immediately.

“Was that really necessary?”

I didn't say anything as I walked over to the bar, making myself a drink, anything to try and calm the fury swimming in my veins. Even at my deadliest, I couldn't ever remember feeling this level of anger before. What had been done to Kasen in this room was unforgiveable, and I'd had no choice but to stand back and let it play out because Elio was my brother.

However, as soon as Aurelio re-entered the room, the entire place empty, save for those of us that were still here, I finished my drink before pulling my gun out and gunning down every one of Elio's soldiers in the room. Luckily for me, the entire back room was soundproof, so the gunfire wasn't going to be an issue for me or any of the partygoers in the other section of the club.

“Nero, what the fuck?!” Elio roared as his men dropped all over the place, six men done for because my brother had chosen to test me.

Handing my gun over to Aurelio's outstretched hand, I turned, my fist already crashing into my brother's face, and not for the first time in our lives. It also wasn't going to be the last, something that I'd made peace with years ago.

Flying back, Elio hit the back of the couch, his hand already cupping the side of his face, blood coating his palm, and he was lucky that I was leaving it at only one punch to his fucking face. If he weren't my only brother, he'd be dead right now. Hell, if Marco wasn't still in the picture, Elio would be dead right now. Now, while I loved my brother, there was still no way in hell that I was going to let him jeopardize everything that I'd worked for, and I had worked *very* fucking hard for Kasen Milano.

Grabbing Elio by his neck, I pinned him against the couch, his eyes wide with hate, fear, and confusion. While that would touch most people, especially since he was my baby brother, it did nothing to erase the look on my wife's face when she walked in to see another woman grabbing my dick.

“If you ever disrespect my wife or pull a stunt like this again, I will end you, Elio,” I swore viciously down at him. “If you think that you’re safe from my wrath because you’re my brother, you are wrong.” His eyes lost that fear and confusion, and now all that looked back at me was hate.

“It was just a joke,” he spat.

“At my wife’s expense,” I pointed out. “Something that will *never* go unpunished.”

When I let go of his neck, Elio straightened, a sneer on his face. “All this for a woman that you were forced to marry?” His brown gaze raked me up and down. “Since when do you care so much?”

“Since the woman that I married is no longer *Fia* Milano,” I spat at him. “You’re also mistaken in assuming that I was forced to marry Kasen. It was the other way around, Elio, So the next time that you want to test me, make sure that you have your facts straight.”

Elio lifted his chin. “I wonder what Marco will think about this?”

“What makes you think that I give a fuck what Marco thinks about what happened here?” I challenged. “Regardless, you and I both know that he doesn’t run this family alone anymore.” I leveled my brother with a singular expression. “Keep letting your immature bullshit drive your life, and you’re going to find yourself in some serious trouble one day, Elio.”

“All this for a woman?” he scoffed, spitting blood on the floor, still not taking any accountability.

“*My wife*,” I stressed. “She’s my *wife*, you sonofabitch. I advise you not to ever lose sight of that fact again, little brother. That woman has more power over the family than you think.”

His eyes widened in shock. “*What?*”

“She is my wife without a fucking prenup, Elio,” I pointed out. “And not only does she have access and is entitled to

everything that I have by law, but she also holds my life in her fucking hands.”

Anger and surprise quickly gave way to confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“If I were to ever land on life support for whatever reason, who do you think will be called upon to make the decision to pull the plug on my life or not?” I informed him, letting that bit of reality sink in. “Legally and religiously, Kasen Sartori is the most important person in my life, you fucking brat. She controls my entire life if anything ever renders me incompetent.” I stepped closer to him. “Not you, not Marco, not Clarissa, not The Family, not anyone that isn’t my fucking wife.”

That bit of news had his shoulders deflating a bit. “Nero-”

“She’s also got a fucking law degree, Elio,” I reminded him. “She’s not some groomed Mafia wife that’s too stupid to care where the money is all coming from. She practices *criminal* law, and if you think that she hasn’t learned a thing or two over the course of her career, then you’re wrong. You’re also forgetting that she was raised by Renzo Milano. While he might not be as powerful as we are, he’s been powerful and cunning enough to keep the Irish, Germans, and Russians in check *without* our help.”

As expected, his eyes narrowed. “Everything that I would have known had you included me in the decision to marry the woman,” he snapped.

“I don’t answer to you!” I roared, fed the fuck up with my brother’s fragile ego. “You’re not included in most of the decisions that I make about my life and this family because I don’t fucking answer to you, Elio!”

“I’m your brother!” he yelled back, the makings of a real tantrum on the horizon.

“Then start fucking acting like it!” I shook my head, rage still driving me in a way that was dangerous. “You’re thirty-years-old, Elio. You haven’t been a child for over a decade, so

start acting like a fucking Sartori, instead of some spoiled little shit.”

“You should have told me,” he insisted, his pride still pricked that I hadn’t shared my marriage plans with him. “Like you said, I’m a Sartori. I should have known without having to hear it from Marco after the fact.”

Before I could say anything to that, Silvio was walking into the room, another thing that had me pissed off. Only a few people had keys to the back rooms of the club, so Silvio could only have a key because Elio had given him one to help set me up.

“Mr. Sartori, sir?”

“What, Silvio?”

He looked pale and nervous. “Mrs. Sartori is...she slipped away from me.”

Dread laced my anger. “Excuse me?”

Silvio’s eyes darted Elio’s way, no doubt praying that my brother could save him. However, all he had to do was notice all the dead bodies in the room to see that Elio wasn’t capable of saving anybody.

“She asked to visit the restrooms, then...slipped out somehow,” he repeated.

I pulled my phone out, then dialed my wife. Like every other faction of her life that I’d invaded, I’d gotten her cellphone number the day that I’d seen her in court. After stalking her for two years, there wasn’t much about Kasen that I didn’t know.

It immediately went to voice mail.

I turned back to look at my brother. “If my wife isn’t presented to me within an hour, I will burn this entire fucking city to the ground, Elio.”

Finally realizing how serious I was, he gestured at Silvio, then both men were gone before I could shoot them both.

“They’ll find her,” Aurelio said, trying his best to calm me.

“They’d fucking better.”

Chapter 12

Kasen~

While there were so many things wrong with moving in with Nero, the confidentiality of my job was my biggest concern at the moment. Even though I had a trust fund through my parents, my condo, my car, and all my other expenses were financed through my paycheck as a defense lawyer. All these years later, my trust fund was still untouched, something that I was really proud of.

At any rate, my job had afforded me a condo in a safe and upscale neighborhood, and though considered luxurious by most people's standards, it really wasn't. It had an open-floor plan, floor-to-ceiling windows, a small sitting balcony, a washroom, state-of-the-art kitchen, large sitting room, two and a half baths, and three bedrooms. Now, while most people would kill for the master-bedroom in my condo, it was the bedroom that I had converted to an office that was my pride and joy.

Working as many hours as I did, working from home had been a comfortable thing to be able to do. While most of my files were stored and locked safely away in my work office, my current cases traveled back and forth from work to home a lot. Living alone had afforded me the ability to keep everything confidential, but even then, I'd made it a habit to always lock up my home office whenever I wasn't in it. So, while I often worked ten-to-twelve-hour days, some of those hours were spent at home, making it not as bad as it sounded.

However, now that I was expected to live with Nero, a home office was no longer going to be a luxury that I could afford. With no guarantee of privacy, there was no way that I was going to be able to take my work home with me, leaving me stuck at the office during all hours of the night. Granted, considering my desire to avoid Nero Sartori at all costs, that wasn't a complaint. I was just going to have to invest in a more comfortable chair.

Setting up my shredder, I figured that I might as well rearrange my office to make room for all the paperwork and stuff that I was going to have to house here from now on. Luckily, I wasn't a packrat, so this was more about getting better organized than anything else. I also had enough money to rearrange my office if I needed to. While we were allotted small expense accounts, new furniture was not on the list of approved purchases. The Milton Legal Group might be raking in the dough, but you had to be at the top of the ladder to spend the firm's money as if it were your own.

Their spending budget aside, The Milton Legal Group was a great firm to work for. The building was five stories high and classy, though nothing super fancy. The first floor housed the lobby, reception area, a set of restrooms, and a very small conference room that I still hadn't ever seen anyone use. The second floor housed our paralegals, another set of restrooms, two mid-size conference rooms, and a small breakroom. The third floor housed the junior partners, one large conference room, another set of restrooms, a storage room, and another small break room. The fourth floor housed a decent-sized legal library, four large conference rooms, and another set of restrooms. The fifth floor housed the three senior partners, their secretaries, Lilibeth and Dianna, a large conference room, another legal library, and a coffee bar that was way fancier than our little break room. As for restrooms, each office came with its own private lavatory, so there wasn't a need for communal restrooms on the top floor. Even the secretaries had their own private restrooms, and how wasn't that everything?

I also couldn't complain about the size of my office. This building had been built and designed to ensure that clients felt confident handing over thousands of dollars to us for their defense, and image was everything when you were asking someone to trust you with their money and freedom. Though I wasn't one of the fortunate ones that had a window in their office, there were worse things in the world.

Yeah, like marrying a Mafia Underboss who fucked other women on his wedding night.

Shaking my head, I knew that Nero's careless disregard for me was something that I was going to have to get over. I mean, while it stung to be disrespected, this wasn't exactly a love match, so it wasn't like I was walking around here with a broken heart or anything ridiculous like that. I also couldn't decide if he was wrong or not yet. Yeah, I didn't deserve to be treated like shit, but should I have really expected anything more?

Now, while it'd be nice to have a husband that was faithful, my biggest concern was the safety of my health. I had no idea if Nero practiced safe sex or not, and I knew that I'd be expected to give him children at some point or another in our marriage, suggesting unprotected sex between the two of us. I'd never had sex without a condom before because my health wasn't anything that I'd ever taken for granted, but not everyone felt the same way that I did. Lots of people rolled the dice, and I couldn't see any of the girls at the club insisting on condoms if it earned them less money.

Plus, I also wasn't naïve enough to believe that all those women were willing. Members of the Mafia weren't cut from a moral fabric, so I knew that sexual assault in those 'business meetings' was probably more common than I wanted to think about.

So, yeah, if Nero was keeping himself occupied with the women that worked for him, then I should probably consider that a blessing in disguise. Though sad and pathetic, I was going to be just another vapid Mafia wife, and I wasn't even sure if I was upset over it right now. Granted, the image of Nero and that blonde was still fresh in my mind, so that could be some of it, but still.

There was also the depressing notion of realizing that consensual, satisfying, passionate sex might not be in my future any longer. While I wasn't out having sex every other weekend because of the demands of my job, that didn't mean that I didn't have a few memorable flings under my belt over these past few years. I was a healthy woman with healthy sexual appetites, and I enjoyed sex just like everyone else. Having lost my virginity in college, it hadn't taken long to

realize what all the fuss had been about. With a partner that knew what he was doing, nothing felt better than sex.

Glancing at my watch, I couldn't put it off any longer. I had a lot of work ahead of me, and only one night to get the work done. I wasn't stupid enough to believe that I'd be able to get away with something like this a second time, and if Nero didn't inject a tracking chip on me after this, I'd be surprised. Even if he held no affection for me, I was still the Sartori Underboss' wife, and he'd take it personally if his enemies ever got ahold of me. Sure, he and his family could disrespect me all day, his enemies not so much.

Not knowing if Nero had anyone on his payroll that could track phones, I was leery about turning my phone back on, but I knew that I was going to check it, if even for only a minute or two. I was a defense attorney, and I had clients that needed to get in touch with me whenever they needed to. I'd lost count of how many times I'd gotten a call in the middle of the night because of an arrest. Even though it was late, I still needed to check my messages, and I needed to respond if any were important.

Letting out a steady breath, I turned on my phone, and those little icons lit up like Christmas. Most of them were from an Unknown number, but I didn't need a degree in rocket science to guess who those were from. Ignoring those, I went through my phone quickly, and when I saw nothing arrest related, I quickly turned my phone back off.

I had to smirk when I realized how lucky I was not to have a window in my office now. If Nero or his guys were looking for me, the light from my office would've been visible enough to tip them off that I was here. While the building had a top-notch security system because of the confidential nature of our jobs, there was no nighttime guard to keep an eye out on things. Hell, there wasn't even a daytime guard to make sure that no one came in here and shot up the place. So, while the front doors were securely locked at night, the back entrance was accessible to all employees through our keycards. The senior partners didn't care about us working after-hours, and between the cameras and digital keycard logs, if anyone was

here doing shady shit late at night, it wouldn't be long before they got caught.

Five hours later, I never thought that I'd be so grateful for an industrial paper shredder. While I had believed myself not to be a packrat, it was obvious that I needed to spring clean my office more than once every three years.

Luckily for me, everyone here was good about keeping their records organized, so when I'd gone to store some of my older case files in the storage room, there was plenty of space in my section of the room. For organizational purposes, we were all assigned our own section of the storage closets, racks assigned to each junior partner. We stored our paper records for ten years, though our electronic records were stored indefinitely. Once a year, we all pulled our expired boxes and got them ready for a shredding company to come out and take care of them.

Glancing at my watch again, it was already past midnight, and while I normally didn't eat this late at night, I still had a couple of hours to go before I was done in my office, enough room made for the client records that I had at home. So, hitting the breakroom, I grabbed another water, but also a couple of protein bars. While I was hungry, my stomach would hate me if I stuffed myself with junk this late at night.

Once I got back to my office, I was tempted to turn my phone back on. Unless Nero told my parents that I was missing, there was no need to believe that they were worried about me. Even before marrying Nero Sartori, I worked so many hours that my parents were used to not hearing from me for a few days. Any calls from my clients were my only concern, and I didn't like the idea of not being available if any one of them needed me.

However, I also didn't know how long before Nero would get tired of looking for me.

Chapter 13

Nero~

It was past midnight, and I was sitting in Kasen's condo, more fucking furious than I could ever remember feeling in my entire fucking life. If she were missing, I'd be feeling concerned, not angry as fuck. However, she wasn't missing. Kasen had intentionally slipped away from Silvio, and I had no doubt that she was hiding out somewhere, only I had no fucking idea where she could be hiding.

When I'd left the club, Aurelio had stayed behind to clean up the mess, and I had immediately driven to Kasen's condo. With her car in its designated parking spot, I'd been hopeful. Even though she'd been escorted to the club by Silvio, I didn't see Kasen as the type of woman to pay for rides all over the city when she had her own vehicle.

However, when she hadn't answered the door after fifteen minutes of knocking and threatening to break the door down, I had picked the lock, because all of us had our own talents. After searching every fucking room to find that she really hadn't been home, I'd gone to her parents' house, ready to start a war if they didn't produce my wife. Nevertheless, with the permission to search the entire grounds, it'd been obvious that Kasen hadn't run to her parents for help. Needless to say, Renzo hadn't been happy to hear that his daughter had run off, but in our world, I had final say over Kasen now, something that he'd had no choice but to reluctantly acknowledge.

At any rate, when I'd left her parents' house emptyhanded, that's when I'd really begun to see the world through a haze of red. I had stalked Kasen long enough to know that she didn't have any real friends, so I couldn't think of anyone that she would have gone to for help. Plus, even if she did have a close friend or two, Kasen had a conscience; I couldn't see her leading the Mafia to their doorstep.

I'd also had to call Morocco Carrisi, our top computer hacker, to find out if Kasen had checked into any hotels. When he couldn't find her registered anywhere, I'd had him try to

locate her by using her phone, but with the device off, it'd been no use, and I'd just gotten more pissed. However, I'd really been about to lose it when Marco had called me, asking me how in the fuck I could have lost my wife on our wedding night. No doubt Elio had gone crying to him, hoping for protection, but I was past all that. My brother was a spoiled shit, and that wasn't going to change as long as Marco still had a say in things.

So, after telling Marco everything that had happened, I had finished our conversation with a warning about his youngest son. Marco had allowed Clarissa to raise Elio to be an entitled asshole, and I'd been quick to remind Marco of who was going to take over once he was done. While my father didn't like being threatened, he was also used to living a certain lifestyle, and it was one that Elio would never be able to keep up for him if the worst were to happen to me.

After that fucked-up conversation, I'd gone to her work, but with the building as dark as it'd been, I'd had no choice but to return to her condo and wait it out. Had it been a weekday, then she would have been home already, knowing that she had to work in the morning. However, since it was only Saturday, she had all of Sunday where she could remain missing.

Unfortunately for Kasen, the wait at her condo had given me plenty of time to go through her shit, looking for anything that might help me locate her. I had sifted through every drawer, cupboard, and closet in the house. I had even picked the lock to her office, going through that fucking room with a fine-tooth comb. While I hadn't invaded the privacy of her clients, I'd gone through everything that had looked personal, and I'd found nothing because all the woman did was fucking work.

Now, while her bedroom had some personal touches, the rest of her condo was decorated like it'd been staged for a showing, which worked out just fine for me. The less that she was attached to, the less that we'd have to move into my house. It was going to be easy to leave everything behind, and I could see us only having to move her bedroom. Though her

bed could stay, everything and anything that was personal to her resided in that room.

Luckily for me, to help kill time, I'd been able to get Morocco to hack into her laptop, and I'd gone through that, too. While I'd also done the courtesy of leaving her work files alone, I had gone through everything else. Yeah, all of it had been an incredible invasion of privacy, but I didn't feel bad about it. If she hadn't defied me, then her shit would have gone untouched.

Not all wasted time, I'd found out what kind of music she liked, what movies she preferred, and stuff like that. I'd also been fortunate to find out what kind of porn she watched, and it'd been a pleasant surprise to find out that my wife wasn't a prude. While she'd been good about clearing her search history, Morocco had taught me a thing or two over the years, and from the sites that I had visited, it appeared as if Kasen liked to be manhandled *and* didn't object to anal sex.

Once the search of her condo hadn't given me any clues as to where she could be, I'd made myself comfortable on her couch, turning on the television and killing time until I could figure out what to do.

That'd been two hours ago.

When my phone rang, I muted the television, not really interested in what was on anyway, then answered when I saw Aurelio's name flashing across the screen.

"Did you find her?"

"No," he answered, no nonsense. "We've looked everywhere."

"And Silvio?"

"He's in Alaska," he answered. "Elio's also going off about how you're killing off all his men."

"He should be more concerned with himself than his soldiers," I replied. "If anything happens to my wife, even Marco won't be able to save Elio."

“The good news is that no one outside the family knows that you married her yet,” he pointed out. “She’s safe as long as no one knows who she is now and that she’s unprotected.”

That didn’t make me feel any better. “Where in the fuck can she be?”

“We can try breaking into the Milton offices,” he suggested. “They’ve got a security system, but I’m sure that it’s not anything that Morocco can’t handle.”

“Or she could be on a plane to Australia,” I huffed, not finding this shit funny at all.

“What do you want to do, Nero?”

“Have Morocco hack into the security system at Milton,” I told him. “Have him review all footage from tonight to see if she’s in the building.”

“Sure thing.”

After hanging up, it made sense that she’d be hiding out there if anywhere. She’d feel safe knowing that they had a security system, and since she was a workaholic, she could actually kill two birds with one stone. When I had invaded her privacy, I’d see that she had court next week, so why not use this time to get better prepared?

An hour later, my phone was ringing, and it was Morocco. I could feel my heart skip a beat because there’d only be one reason why he’d be calling me. If he hadn’t found something, then it’d be Aurelio calling me back with the news.

“What do you have?” I asked in lieu of a greeting.

“She’s at work,” he answered, and I could feel my chest loosening with the information. “While there aren’t any cameras in the offices to see what she’s actually doing, there are plenty at the entrances, in the hallways, and in the parking garage. She was captured using the backdoor with her keycard, and she’s been there all night.”

“Is she there alone?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “There’s been no other movement.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Sure, Mr. Sartori,” he replied dutifully before hanging up.

Calling Aurelio, he answered on the first ring. “You found her?”

“She’s at the Milton offices,” I informed him.

“Do you want me to go get her?”

“No.” Now, while I was used to keeping odd hours, I was exhausted as fuck and didn’t trust myself to be in the right frame of mind to deal with her. “Have someone sit outside the building, then follow her when she finally leaves. I want them to sit on her until I meet up with her.”

“She’s your wife, Nero,” he remarked needlessly. “I can’t just assign anyone to her.”

He was right, of course. As my wife, she needed the best, and I’d assign her Aurelio if I thought that he could be unbiased about who she was and how I felt about her. I needed a guard that was going to guard her; nothing more, nothing less.

“Rafael Luciano,” I named. He was my best man, second to Aurelio, and he was in charge of all the house guards. He knew his security, and he was lethal with any weapon that you put in his hands. He would treat Kasen like a job, and Rafael Luciano did all of his jobs well.”

“I’ll let him know,” he replied.

“We’ll have a meeting tonight to discuss the change in the house guards.”

“I’ll let your father and brother know,” he said, a slight smirk in his voice.

Right now, I couldn’t care less about my father or my brother.

Chapter 14

Kasen~

“Babe?”

I felt a warm hand on my ankle, and though the voice sounded faint, it was still loud enough to pull me from my sleep. Opening my eyes, I quickly remembered where I was. While I had a very comfortable and very expensive chair in my office, it hadn't been designed to sleep all night in.

Lowering my legs and straightening my back, I looked up to see Ryan Buckner grinning down at me. “What time is it?” I asked as I stretched my neck and back.

“It's almost ten in the morning.”

My eyes widened at that. “Jesus Christ.”

“What are you doing here, babe?”

I shook my head, still doing my best to wake up. “I...uhm, I needed to...” I covered my mouth as I let out a yawn. “I needed to spring clean to make room for some files.” My brows furrowed as my eyes began to adjust to the light. “What are you doing here on a Sunday?”

“I have court in the morning,” he explained. “I came by to prep a bit.”

I nodded because Ryan wouldn't be the first person in this office to work a Sunday in preparation for court on Monday. I'd done it countless times myself. I also knew Ryan to be one hell of a lawyer, so that was another reason why I wasn't surprised to see him here.

“That'll do it,” I joked, my body aching all over the place.

“Here,” he said as he placed an insulated to-go cup on my desk. “This is for you.”

“It is?” I asked, even though I wasn't letting manners stop me from reaching for it.

“I already had my fair share this morning,” he grinned. “When I saw that you were here, I ran down to Aubrey's to get

you your favorite.” Aubrey’s was a little café on the corner that we made rich every week.

“God bless you,” I sighed before taking my first sip of perfection.

“Just like you like it,” he said, tossing me a playful wink.

Close to about two years ago, Ryan and I had engaged in a brief fling, something to take the edge off our stressful jobs. At six-foot-one, Ryan Buckner had light brown hair, dark blue eyes, and kept in shape. He was a good-looking guy, and he knew it, though he wasn’t obnoxious about it. Ryan was easy to like, and he also knew his way around the bedroom.

Nevertheless, three months later, I had discovered just how casual Ryan had been treating our fling, and while we hadn’t committed to anything, finding out that he’d been juggling three different women at the same time had turned me off. Though I understood the concept of casual dating, I still took my health seriously enough to be turned off by a guy that dated *that* casually.

Luckily, Ryan had been a good sport about it, taking the time to understand my point of view. We had managed to part ways as good friends and coworkers, and I was thankful for that. I didn’t have many friends, so it was nice to know that Ryan was always willing to lend a helping hand if needed.

Before I could give any more thought to my past with Ryan, his voice bounced off the walls of my office. “Is that a *wedding* ring?”

I lifted my hand and looked at my finger absently. I’d been tempted to throw it in the gutter after seeing Nero with that blonde last night, but why provoke Nero Sartori when I didn’t need to? Though I had my pride, starting a war with a Mafia Underboss when I couldn’t possibly win was stupid. Besides, my disappearing act aside, I wasn’t too keen on doing anything that would make him put an end to my career. I could see Nero making it so that no one ever hired me again.

“Yeah,” I answered tiredly before taking another sip of my coffee.

“I...I didn’t even know you were dating anyone,” he stammered, and he looked a bit upset by the news. Granted, there was no way that he could be jealous, but we were close enough that I could see why he’d feel bothered by not knowing.

“It’s not like that,” I told him as I leaned back in my seat.

Ryan sat down in one of the empty chairs in front of my desk. “Then what’s it like?”

“It’s...an arranged marriage,” I answered, not sure how to explain it without being *too* honest.

“An arranged marriage?” he echoed skeptically. “Like...in the Victorian Era?”

That got a smirk out of me. “It’s not as archaic as it sounds. There are lots of people that marry to strengthen dynasties or for more wealth.” I shrugged. “How many country club marriages do you think were born out of love?”

“Does this have something to do with you being a Milano?”

Though I led a separate life from that of my family, it was still well-known that my father was Renzo Milano, and whispers followed him around just like they did anyone else involved with the Mob. It wasn’t anything that I had ever confirmed or denied to anyone. I knew that if I wanted to keep this job, I’d also have to keep my mouth shut, though that hadn’t ever been a problem. Even though my life had taken another direction, I’d still been raised in the Mafia, and I still knew the rules just like everyone else.

While a part of me wanted to lie to him because I *did* understand the rules of being in the Mafia, I also knew that the news was going to spread like wildfire soon enough. I also knew that Nero was going to appoint me a guard, no matter what he’d said back at the house, and only the truth was going to be able to explain why an armed bodyguard was following me around suddenly.

“Possibly,” I hedged.

His blue eyes just stared at me, trying to get a grasp on how arranged marriages were still a thing. Ryan lived a life where he was allowed to marry the woman that he was in love with. He lived a life that gave him permission to date around until he found the right woman for him. He didn't have a selfish, spoiled, and immature sister that thought of only her wants and had no concept of accountability.

Finally, he asked, "Are you okay? I mean...are you happy about it?"

I took another sip of my coffee, biding some time to find a way to explain what I was feeling. "Honestly, I don't see it impacting my life much."

Ryan's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "You don't see *marriage* impacting your life?"

"Ryan, I'm still going to work here," I told him. "With all the hours that I work, I seriously doubt that I'm even going to see him that much."

"That sounds...it sounds sad, actually," he mumbled, and that got a laugh out of me.

"Honestly, it sounds a lot better than hanging out with a guy that I have to pretend to love in front of a bunch of people that I don't care to know."

His lips twitched at that. "That's a fair point."

"It's not that big of a deal, Ryan," I semi-lied. "With as much as I work, it wasn't like I was going to have time to start dating seriously enough to find the man of my dreams anyway." I shrugged. "This takes the mess out of all the hits-and-misses of dating."

"Is it a...*real* marriage?"

I grinned. "Is that your way of asking me if I have an open marriage?"

Ryan grinned back. "Do you?"

My mind automatically went back to last night when Nero had chosen to spend our wedding night with another woman. He had ordered me to show up at his house, only to have me

escorted to the club, making sure that I'd see him with that blonde draped all over him. There was no doubt in my mind that Nero planned on having an open marriage, though I had no idea if I was going to be afforded that same luxury. At least, not in the beginning of our marriage. He was going to need heirs eventually, and I knew that he'd want to make sure that they were of Sartori blood. However, anything could happen after I gave him his children. In fact, I could see us living separate lives once he'd been secured his legacy.

"I'm not sure," I answered him honestly.

His brows rose. "And you're okay with...with the extracurricular activities?" It was a valid question since I had ended things between us because of *his* extracurricular activities.

"I'm not sure I have a choice," I sighed, feeling all of last night heavily on my shoulders. "Divorce isn't an option, so all I can do is protect myself the best that I can." I shrugged again. "I mean, as far as I know, divorce isn't an option, but anything is possible, right?"

His brows furrowed in concern. "I just...I'd like for you to be happy, Kasen," he said. "You're a good woman, and...it's a shame that I'm stupid."

I could feel my face soften. "C'mon, Ryan," I said softly. "We're good just the way we are."

Changing the subject, he asked, "Well, do you need any extra help in here?"

Knowing that I couldn't run from my problems forever, I said, "Nah, I'm going to head home. I need to shower, brush my teeth, then start packing up my office. Now that I finally have the room in here, I need to keep work at work."

"I get it," he replied, also understanding how important confidentiality was in our line of work.

"Thanks for the coffee," I said, smiling over at him.

"Anytime, babe."

I winced, thinking that now would probably be a good time to put an end to the babe calling.

Chapter 15

Nero~

As soon as I heard the door opening, I walked out of the kitchen, then leaned up against the back of the couch. Rafael had called me immediately upon spotting Kasen leaving the Milton offices, a cab having been her chosen method of transportation. Since I had stayed at my condo in town last night, rather than my house on the edge of town, I'd gotten here a few minutes before Kasen had walked through the door, and the timing had been perfect if you asked me.

The second that she noticed me, she stopped, though she had the presence of mind to shut the door behind her. To her credit, she didn't look scared or nervous. In fact, she looked tired, annoyed, and defiant.

"Last night will never happen again," I told her, eyeing her like I would an enemy. "From this day forward, you will have a guard with you at all times, and if you even think to try and slip away from him again, I will rob you of everything that you hold dear, starting with your career." Her chin lifted a fraction. "If you think that I won't tie you to our bed and only let you free to shower, then you're wrong." I cocked my head at her. "Are we clear?"

"Crystal," she bit out.

"You will also pack up whatever you need or want from this place, and make sure to be thorough since you will not be coming back here after today," I went on. "I will be selling this place as soon as possible for the little stunt you pulled last night, and before you think to argue with me, be lucky that I'm not beating the fuck out of you for what you did, *il mio cuore*."

Her entire frame straightened dangerously, and while I would never put my hands on her in anger, she couldn't know that. If Kasen had any inkling of the power that she held over me, she'd have me on my knees while she kicked me in the teeth.

"Is there anything else?"

“My people will be here at noon to start moving you,” I answered. “So, I suggest you start packing before I drag you out of here with only the clothes on your back.”

Kasen eyed me with enough disdain to level a lesser man. “Is that all?”

I lifted my chin as I slid my hands inside my suit pockets. “We can finish this discussion tonight, after we’ve moved you in.”

She arched a dark brow. “Because there’s more to discuss?”

“Fine,” I clipped out. “Along with your condo, I’ll also be selling your car.”

“What for?” she asked, finally showing some emotion.

“For one, your car isn’t bulletproof,” I explained. “For two, now that Rafael will be escorting you wherever you need to go, he’ll also be driving you.”

“I can’t have some armed man hanging out where I work,” she said, her irritation showing. “I also can’t have him following me into court. We talked about this-”

“Then you should have thought about that before that shit you pulled last night,” I snapped.

“How in the hell am I supposed to explain an armed guard following me around?” she snapped back. “He will not be allowed in the courtroom, no matter what I say, and you know it.”

“You’ll be surprised at what people will allow when they hear the last name Sartori,” I pointed out. “Plus, it’ll be no less than what people will expect once it comes out who you are.”

“Why does anyone need to know that I married you?” she challenged. “I sure as hell don’t plan on advertising it.” My back straightened at that. “Plus, since I have no plans on changing my last name, no one needs to know that-”

I had my hand wrapped around her throat before she knew it. Squeezing as her hands came up to twist around my wrist, I said, “Let’s get something straight between us, *il mio cuore*.

After last night, the first and most important thing that you are in this life is my *wife*. You are Kasen Sartori, and you will be known as such, both personally and professionally.” My brown eyes locked with her hazel ones. “Are we clear? Because if we’re not, I can fix that.”

Her lip curled in a snarl, and fuck if she wasn’t the most beautiful thing that I’d ever seen. “Exactly *how* would you fix that?”

I pulled her closer by her neck. “I will strap you down, force enough drugs down your throat to make you pass out, then tattoo our last name on your fucking neck,” I snarled back. “After that, I’ll tattoo my first name across your right hand, then our last name across your left hand. Lastly, I’ll tattoo my entire fucking name across your pussy, and you’ll be lucky if I don’t brand it on your fucking face.”

“You’re a bastard,” she hissed.

“Unfortunately for you, I know exactly who my father is,” I smirked down at her before releasing her neck.

Most women would have rubbed their necks, feigned hurt and discomfort for sympathy points, but not my wife. Kasen stared at me like she wanted to reach into my jacket, pull my gun out, then kill me with it. If she thought that she could get away, I was positive that she’d do it.

“May I go pack now, Mr. Sartori? Or do you have more decrees that you’d like to announce?” she asked, her voice cold and condescending at the same time.

My fingertips gripped her chin. “*Il mio cuore*, I’d be very careful if I were you. I am doing my best to give you some consideration, seeing as how you may still be feeling blindsided by all of this. However, if you think that I’ll continue to allow you to disrespect me, you’re wrong.”

Kasen jerked her chin out of my hold. “May I go pack now?” she repeated.

Lifting my chin, I stepped back, giving her some room. “There are boxes in your bedroom already, and the others will be here momentarily to help you.”

Three hours later, we had everything that Kasen wanted to take with her packed and moved to the house, the boxes from her home office waiting to be moved to her workplace. After introducing Kasen to Rafael, she had explained to him that she'd be getting up early in the morning to move her work boxes before she started her workday, so he could either meet her at five or not. While she hadn't been rude about it, she'd made her feelings about him clear. Of course, Rafael had agreed to meet her at five, but he and I still needed to have a talk about the best way to protect my wife. While I had to agree that she was relatively safe in the courthouse, she still needed to be escorted to and from her court appearances. As for her hours spent at Milton, I was positive that I could convince the senior partners that additional security might be in their best interest.

Walking into the bedroom that I would now share with my wife, I noticed that everything looked the same as before. If it wasn't for her clothes in the closet and her toiletries in the bathroom, you'd never know that a woman lived here.

“Where's everything else?”

“What are you talking about?” Kasen asked as she finished hanging up the last of her suits.

“The pictures of your family that you had in your office,” I elaborated. “The personal stuff that you packed.”

Those unafraid hazel eyes peered over at me. “Anything personal is packed in the boxes for my office at work,” she replied. “I have a lot of extra room in there after cleaning it out last night.”

“So, instead of this being your home, your plan is just to sleep here? Is that right?” I asked, walking further into the room.

“What do you care?” she posed. “You got what you wanted. My father and his empire belong to you now. We're all one, big, happy family with you in charge of it all. What do you care if I hang my favorite painting up in your house or not? What do you care where I put the pictures of me and my

family?” Before I could say anything to that, she added, “Plus, I probably should have decorated my office ages ago.”

There was so much that I wanted to tell her. I wanted to confess all my sins, letting her know all the lengths that I’d gone to in order to have her. After seeing her that day in court, for the first time in all my life, I had sought a way to break my word. I had fallen in love with the wrong sister, and I’d done everything that I could to fix it. I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but she’d probably spit in my face if I did. Kasen hated me right now, and I wasn’t sure if she wouldn’t always hate me.

“Il mio cuore-”

“Quit calling me that,” she snapped. “I don’t know what it means, and if you’re going to insult me, then be a man and do it to my face in English.”

“It’s not an insult,” I told her, voicing my words carefully.

“My name is Kasen,” she stated firmly, ignoring my reply. “Use it.”

I shook my head slowly, praying that she knew better than to speak to me like this in public. I could let a lot go behind closed doors, but I couldn’t allow public insolence. At the end of the day, I was always campaigning to take my father’s spot one day, and no one would think me worthy if I couldn’t control my wife.

“Renzo should have punished you more as a child,” I remarked.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I’m being punished plenty now,” she shot back.

Chapter 16

Kasen~

I was tired.

Like really fucking tired.

Between sleeping in a chair last night, the conversation with Ryan, the showdown with Nero, and the moving, I felt beat. Now, while I didn't have court tomorrow, I did have it beginning Tuesday, and court always made for a long week. Surprisingly, it wasn't actual court that drained me. In fact, being inside a courtroom felt like the best kind of high for me. I was in my element when I was arguing a case. I was at my best when I was showcasing my legal talents.

Court didn't scare me.

It was actually my clients that drained me, though I didn't hold it against them. When your freedom was on the line, your emotions had no rhyme or reason. The fear of going to prison was a real thing, especially when you hadn't been raised on the streets. So, it could be exhausting to present a court case at the same time that you had to soothe another person's feelings of fear.

At any rate, I was ready for bed. I still had to move my boxes into my office in the morning, and that meant getting up at five, though it wouldn't be the first time. The problem was that I couldn't see myself getting much sleep tonight, no matter how tired I was. I didn't want to be here, and I sure as hell didn't want to sleep next to Nero. I was used to having the bed to myself, and living alone, I'd never had to worry about disrupting someone else in the household with my unpredictable routine.

I also didn't know what to expect. Common sense told me that Nero would expect me to have sex with him at some point, but I prayed that it wouldn't be tonight. I was seriously tired, and even if I weren't, I didn't know Nero Sartori. While I'd had my fair share of fun in my life, I hadn't ever had sex with a guy that I hated. I was pretty sure that I hadn't even had *any* angry sex in my life.

Now, while the shower stall was a state-of-the-art paradise, I had still taken a shower in a bathroom that wasn't mine. It had felt like showering in a hotel room, though nice, it still didn't feel like *home*. Granted, I no longer had a home, so I was just going to have to suck it up, but still.

There was also the fact that I hadn't eaten since grabbing a breakfast sandwich after leaving the office this morning. The day had gotten away from me, what with Nero controlling the rest of it, and I refused to eat at his table. I worked enough hours to eat on the go, so in all actuality, this was the only room that I needed to know anything about; I couldn't care less about the rest of the house. Now, while that might make me sound like a stubborn brat, my entire life had been upended yesterday, so I felt like I had the right to have a childish tantrum or two.

Walking out of the bathroom, wrapped in my robe, I stepped into the bedroom to see Nero standing out on the balcony because, yes, his bedroom had a goddamn balcony. Of course, when you lived in a guarded mansion, a luxurious balcony probably came standard, not like the small sitting balcony that I'd had at my condo. I'd bet my career that this house probably had every luxury under the sun built right in, and why wouldn't it? What good was money if you didn't use it to make your life easier? Nero was also still dressed in a suit, giving me the hope that he planned on sleeping elsewhere.

Now, normally, I slept in a t-shirt and panties, but if Nero did end up planning on sleeping next to me tonight, then that wasn't going to work. It wasn't that I pegged him for a rapist or anything unsavory like that, so much as I just didn't know or like the man. I had no desire to get comfortable around him.

So, with that in mind, I walked over to the dresser to pull out a pair of pajama pants that I usually just wore around the house during the weekends. Yeah, it might take a little getting used to, but it wasn't like I was counting on a good night's sleep anyways.

As soon as Nero heard me moving about, he walked back into the bedroom, shutting the balcony doors behind him. It

was unfair that someone so wicked looked so good. Granted, all of this was unfair, so Nero's looks were probably the least of my worries.

"Did you find everything to your satisfaction?"

"It was a shower," I remarked drolly. "It wasn't a stay at the Sheraton."

"That attitude of yours has to be exhausting, *il mio cuore*," he replied, a bit of a smirk in his voice.

"All you have to do is leave me alone, and then you'll be spared my exhausting attitude," I fired back, shutting the dresser drawer.

As I headed back towards the restroom to change, Nero's voice called out to me. "Which side of the bed do you prefer to sleep in, *il mio cuore*?" I turned to look back at him. "After all, I wouldn't want my *bride* to feel uncomfortable on her first night in her new home."

"Then I guess you'll be sleeping in another room if that's a real concern for you," I retorted.

He arched a brow. "Do you really believe that I'm going to sleep elsewhere?"

I took in a steady breath before saying, "I want to be very clear about something, Mr. Sartori." I could see the tick in his jaw, his patience being tested by my 'exhausting attitude' again. "I have no desire to sleep with you. However, I'm also pragmatic enough to realize that you're going to want children one day. So, if you're really concerned about my *comfort* while I live here, you'll go on entertaining yourself with the blonde from last night until you're ready for children." His jaw ticked again. "If not, then condoms would be nice until you're ready for kids, because I really don't have the time or desire to visit the free clinic every other week to get tested for STDs."

"Well, unfortunately for you, I *do* expect you to fulfill your marital obligations," he replied, and his voice sounded hard and unyielding.

"Lucky me," I deadpanned right before walking back into the bathroom, slamming the door because I didn't know what

else to do. I'd never had to sleep with someone that I didn't want to, and I could feel my chest burning with the idea.

Five minutes later, I was walking back into the bedroom, and Nero's suit jacket and tie were gone. He was undressing, his fingers effortlessly unbuttoning his white shirt, and I didn't need to witness him taking it off to know that he had a great body underneath.

So, turning away from him, I pulled back the covers from the bed, not caring which side was which. Again, I was used to having an entire bed to myself, so either side was going to be uncomfortable for me. Plus, if Nero was intent on having sex with me, he could just shove it in from behind, then leave me the hell alone afterwards.

However, things got weird when he didn't get into bed beside me. Instead, he walked over to my side, then squatted down in front of me, his hands finding their way to the outside of my thighs. His chocolate-color gaze had me pinned in place, and I could see why people listened when he spoke. He'd also done me the courtesy of not removing his shirt completely.

"While I don't expect you to believe me because it's obvious that you've already made up your mind about my character, I slept alone last night," he said, but I'd be stupid to believe him. "Of course, that was after I spent all night looking for you."

"What are you expecting me to say to that?"

"I suppose I'm wondering if you really think that I'm the kind of man that would sleep with another woman on my wedding night," he replied, and I felt like it was a trick question. The last thing that Nero Sartori cared about was what other people thought of him.

"I think that you're the kind of man that would allow another woman to hang all over him while his men got sucked off by strippers and his brother taunted me into sticking around to further humiliate me," I replied, recapping last night. "Luckily for me, I hadn't really expected better from you, so I wasn't exactly blindsided by that little setup."

His jaw ticked again.

Christ, he was gorgeous.

“And what if I told you that I killed every man in that room for disrespecting you?”

I arched a brow. “I’d call you a liar since you, your brother, and Aurelio are still alive.”

His brown gaze searched mine for a few seconds before he stood up, my thighs cold now that his hands were no longer touching me. I had no idea what he was going to do next, but I could feel the anger radiating off him in waves. Still, he’d asked a question, and I had answered it honestly. If he wanted to be pissed off at me for that, then so be it. I wasn’t going to mince my words around him. Though Nero was intimidating as hell, if I showed any weakness around him, he’d own me, and that wasn’t going to happen.

Looking down at me, he said, “Get some sleep, *il mio cuore*. You look like you need it.”

I didn’t say anything as I watched him grab his suit jacket and tie, then walk out of the room. Since he had grabbed his tie, I assumed that he was probably heading back out, no doubt back to his blonde if not someone new. After all, why wouldn’t he? I’d just given him permission to, hadn’t I? Hell, not only had I given him permission to, but I had also encouraged him to sleep with anyone that wasn’t me.

Laying down, it wasn’t the man that I had married that began occupying my thoughts; it was my family. I knew that Papa was worried about me, and I also knew that Mammi was probably too busy still consoling Fia. Though I had a long week coming up, I knew that I needed to visit them, to reassure my father if nothing else.

It was hours later before I’d finally fallen asleep.

Chapter 17

Nero~

“I want the shipment receipts double checked,” I ordered.

“Nero, I know that he’s a spoiled jackass, but he knows how to do his job,” Aurelio replied, and even though I knew it to be true, that still didn’t help my anger towards my brother.

After leaving Kasen to sleep alone, I’d gone out to take care of Silvio. I’d been mad enough to make him pay for my brother’s transgressions, but that still hadn’t helped. Kasen felt disrespected and disposable, and even though I really wanted to, I couldn’t kill my brother. She also believed that I really had slept with Chastity, and how ironic since I hadn’t touched a woman in over six months.

“Just keep him out of my face for a few more days,” I told him, glancing at my watch. It was already after nine and Kasen still wasn’t home.

“Sure thing, Boss,” Aurelio chuckled. “Anything else?”

“You tell me,” I huffed.

“Schulz is still trying to push for more access to the ports,” he said. “I’ve got an uneasy feeling about his...*insistence*.”

Now that I was married to Kasen, the Italians made up the biggest Mafia family in the city. The Russians were next in numbers, only outnumbering the Irish by a couple of hundred. The Germans were the smallest family in town, though they were rather brutal. Emil Schulz was always looking for ways to grow and take over more territory, but boxed in by us and the Irish, he didn’t have a whole lot more options unless he took one of us out, which wasn’t ever going to happen.

“Put some eyes on him for the next week or so,” I ordered. “Also, add a few more guards to the ports.”

“Sure thing,” he replied.

“Mr. Sartori, sir?”

Aurelio and I both looked over towards the door. Normally, I kept my office door closed, but I'd been waiting for Kasen to get home, so I'd kept it open to listen for her. Having stalked her for two years, I'd already known that she worked long hours, but that wasn't going to work for me. I needed a way to make this marriage work, and never seeing one another was not the way to go about it.

“Yes, Rafael?”

“She's home, sir,” he said, stating the obvious. When seven o'clock had come and gone, I had called Rafael to instruct him to let me know the minute that Kasen walked through the doors of our home.

“Thank you, Rafael.”

As soon as he left, Aurelio said, “Well, I'll let you get to it.”

I shot him a look. “Thanks,” I deadpanned.

The bastard grinned. “Hey, I'm not the one that trapped some poor woman into marrying me.”

“Go find out what you can about Emil Schulz,” I replied, making it clear that I was finished discussing the difficulties of my marriage.

Five minutes later, I was walking into what used to be my bedroom, and Kasen was already taking off her shoes, getting ready for bed. She'd taken a shower this morning, so I didn't know if she planned on taking another one tonight, but something told me that she was willing to run all the hot water cold just to avoid having to speak with me.

“Have you eaten?”

She let out a heavy sigh as she started pulling clothes from one of her drawers. “Yes.”

“Do you always stay at the office this late?” I already knew the answer, but I wanted to see what excuse she was going to come up with.

“No,” she answered honestly, which surprised the fuck out of me. “While I've always worked a lot of hours, I usually

worked them at home.”

“And the reason that you can’t do that now?” I prompted.

I watched her lips curl inward, and it was easy to tell that she was desperately trying to rein in her temper. Kasen wasn’t used to being questioned, and she clearly didn’t like it.

Finally, she answered, “Because of the lack of privacy.”

“The lack of privacy?” I echoed.

“Before moving in here, I had a private home office that no one ever entered but me,” she went on to explain. “My job is all about confidentiality, Mr. Sartori. Everything that I deal with is sensitive in nature, so I can hardly leave my client files lying around a house filled with guards and housekeepers.”

That pissed me off.

“Have you any idea how big this fucking house is?” I bit out. “Pick a room, Kasen. Hell, pick five of the motherfuckers. There’s more than enough space in this house to remodel a home office for you.”

“A room where I’ll be the only one with the key?” she challenged. “C’mon, Mr. Sartori. You and I both know that I will never be allowed that kind of privacy in your home.” She lifted her chin with attitude. “So, the hours needed to do my job well will be spent at my work office because I take my job seriously enough to understand the delicate issue of privacy for all my clients.”

“So, your plan *is* to avoid this marriage,” I surmised.

“I’m not avoiding anything,” she lied. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yet, you won’t ever be here for any meals together or conversations beyond where you’ve been.”

Kasen let out a dark laugh. “Oh, please,” she scoffed. “You and I both know that we’ll never need to have any conversations about where I’ve been anymore.” She cocked her head. “Rafael’s very good at his job, by the way.”

“As expected,” I shot back. “He was chosen to guard my wife, so he’d better be good at his job.”

Ignoring that, she asked, “What do you want, Mr. Sartori?”

“I want you to quit fucking calling me Mr. Sartori for starters,” I snapped, wondering how this woman kept knowing exactly what to say and do to piss me the fuck off.

“Just making sure that neither of us loses sight of what this really is,” she replied flippantly.

“And what is this?”

“Revenge,” she stated easily, and that surprised me as well.

“I see,” I said, sliding my hands into my pockets. “Revenge for what, exactly?”

“For Fia and Mano,” she answered, shrugging a shoulder. “I mean, someone has to pay for their betrayal, right? Why not it be me? After all, isn’t that what Saturday night had been all about? Fia and Mano humiliated you by going behind your back like that, so turnabout was fair play?”

While she couldn’t be more fucking wrong, I couldn’t tell her that. At least, not yet. Not only would she not believe me, but I was still keeping my distance from Elio. Even though what he’d done was unforgivable, I hadn’t realized just how much damage he’d done until right now. Kasen believed the whole thing had been a setup to make her pay for her sister’s transgressions.

Instead of getting into a messy conversation this late at night, I said, “I want you home for dinner from now on.”

Her hazel eyes flared. “I’m not coming all the way out here for a meal, then drive all the way back into town to finish working.”

“I have a place in town-”

“Of course, you do,” she laughed darkly. “I mean, it’s not like you’d be the first Made Man to have a secret fuck pad that his wife doesn’t know about.”

“Since you keep bringing up my past, I’ll have you know that no other woman has ever stepped foot in any of my homes,” I informed her, my voice hard, my patience running thin. “I have enough money to afford any hotel room in the

city if the lady in question prefers privacy.” I eyed her angrily. “However, you’d be surprised by how many women are okay with flipping their skirts up by an alley dumpster when they think that they can get something out of it.”

“Spoken like a true misogynist,” she replied evenly.

“Make up your mind, Kasen,” I bit out. “Either I love women so much that I’m fucking them all, or else I hate women enough not to give a fuck about them; which is it?”

Instead of answering the question, she said, “I’m tired. I need to take a shower, then get some sleep. Are we done here?”

“No, we’re not,” I answered honestly. “However, I’m very aware that you have court tomorrow, so we can finish this discussion another time.”

“How magnanimous of you,” she deadpanned, and it was clear that this couldn’t continue for much longer.

“Do whatever you have to in order to clear your calendar for this weekend, because you and I are going to come to an understanding about this marriage once and for all,” I ordered.

Her chin came up another fraction. “Whatever you say, Mr. Sartori.”

“My name is Nero,” I snapped. “Use it.”

“As soon as you stop calling me that other thing, I will,” she retorted, clearly lying again.

“That’s not going to happen, *il mio cuore*.”

Chapter 18

Kasen~

It was finally Friday, and while I had no desire to fight with Nero all weekend, I was finally glad that court was over, my client had been found innocent, and the senior partners at Milton had another reason not to fire me. Yeah, I had my trust fund, but that wasn't the route that I wanted to use in life.

So, after leaving the office early, instead of going home to have dinner with Nero, I was at my parents' house, having dinner with them. Rafael was dutifully waiting outside in the car, and if I were a better person, I would have invited him inside to join us. However, I was still trying to take a stand against what had happened to me, so my behavior was still rude and bratty, something that I knew couldn't go on forever. In fact, I didn't *want* it to go on forever. I didn't want a miserable life. I knew what it felt like to be happy, and Nero could have no idea how right he'd been when he had asked me if my attitude was exhausting.

After lying through the skin of my teeth, my father said, "Well, I'm glad to hear that you are doing well, Kasen. While Nero is a man of his word, I have to admit to being... concerned that he might be taking his displeasure out on you."

"Everything's fine, Papa," I lied. "Honestly, we both work so much that I've hardly seen him all week. I had court, and Nero...well, Nero has a lot on his plate."

Papa nodded. "Indeed, he does."

"You know, I thought you would have come to check on your sister way before now, Kasen," my mother sniffed, and I felt overwhelmed by how much anger I had in me. Everyone was treating me like I was in the wrong somehow, and that had me extremely flummoxed.

"Really?" I asked, setting my fork down. "Because I don't have any missed calls or messages from her, asking *me* how *I'm* doing after what happened."

Mammi bristled. “You’re not the one that lost someone dear to them.”

“No, you’re right,” I replied, not disguising the snark in my voice. “I’m just the person that was put in the horrible position of having to marry a total stranger to save my family.”

“I didn’t realize that helping your family was such a sacrifice-”

“Enough,” Papa snapped, glaring at my mother. “Kasen is not to blame for Fia’s theatrics.” My mother immediately looked back down at her plate. “I will hear no more of it, Sonya.”

Not wanting to be in the middle of their favoritism, I asked, “Where is Fia? I think now is a good time to go check on her.”

“She’s hiding up in her room,” Papa grumbled. “She’s been sulking up there all week.”

Standing up from the table, most of my food untouched, I excused myself from this uncomfortable situation. “Dinner was wonderful as always,” I semi-lied. “Thank you.” I looked between my parents. “I’m going to go check on Fia.”

Not waiting for permission, I headed upstairs to go check on my sister. Where it was true that Fia also hadn’t bothered to check on me, I wanted to be the better person here. Even though Fia and I had both been witnesses to Papa’s fury, I hadn’t been the one in love with Mano. I hadn’t lost the man that I’d wanted to marry. I also wasn’t the one pregnant by him.

Knocking lightly on the door, I walked in without waiting for Fia to give me permission because something told me that she might not give it. Papa hadn’t been lying when he had described Fia’s tantrums as theatrics. My sister was the epitome of a drama queen, and even if her grief was genuine, Fia was the type to make the most of her emotional spotlight.

As soon as Fia spotted me, she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I came for dinner,” I answered, walking further into her room. “Work was kind of hectic this week, so rather than sending a text or trying to fit in a phone call, I decided to stop by for dinner and see how you guys were all doing.”

“How do you think I’m doing?” she snapped. “Mano is gone.”

“And I’m sorry for your loss, Fia,” I said, and I really was. This entire situation was an epic disaster, and I was pretty sure that we were all still trying to piece everything together. “I have no doubt that you must have loved Mano very much to break your word the way you did. However, Mano knew the risks that he was taking when he pursued you.”

Fia jumped up from the rocking chair in the corner of her room. “Are you seriously saying that it’s Mano’s fault that he’s dead?” she screeched. “This is all Nero Sartori’s fault!”

That threw me for a loop.

“What?”

“It’s Nero’s fault that Mano is dead,” she repeated, though she hadn’t yelled it this time.

I shook my head, confused. “How do you figure? It was Papa that shot him, not Nero.”

“If Nero hadn’t come over that night, then none of this would have happened,” she argued. “I would have been able to tell Papa in my own way, and he never would have killed Mano.”

“Are you insane?” I asked, a question that I found myself asking her a lot.

“It’s true,” she insisted. “And I’m going to make him pay.”

My entire body turned cold.

“What?”

“Nero Sartori doesn’t get to just kill Mano and get away with it,” she said, and the seriousness in her voice had the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

“Fia, don’t do anything stupid,” I warned her. “Even if he wasn’t Nero Sartori, you’re pregnant. You have to think of your baby-”

“I *am* thinking of my baby,” she lied. “What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t avenge its father?”

“He’s *Nero Sartori*, Fia,” I bit out. “He’s the Sartori Underboss. How can you possibly think that you could get away with such a thing? If you think that being a woman and pregnant will save you, it won’t. Marco Sartori will demand your head, and Papa will have no choice but to hand it over.”

“Not if no one suspects that it was me,” she replied smugly.

“And how do you plan on pulling that off?”

“You’re telling me that it would be that hard to slip some poison into his dinner?”

Fia was obviously not thinking clearly. “How do you plan on getting close enough to his food to-”

Sonofabitch.

“All you have to do is slip it in-”

“I am *not* poisoning Nero Sartori for you, Fia,” I told her, disappointed but not surprised that she would ask such a thing of me.

“You’re seriously choosing him over your family?” she cried out, those theatrics back in play.

“The fact that you can even ask me that after last Saturday positively astounds me,” I told her, her selfishness almost crippling me. “I married a man that I don’t even know just to save this family from his wrath. A wrath that he’s entitled to, might I add.” I shook my head again. “And because that wasn’t enough for you, you want me to risk my life by poisoning the Sartori Underboss for you.” I let out a disenchanted sigh. “You’re unbelievable.”

“He killed the father of my child,” she said, repeating the lie, still refusing to place the blame on either Mano or herself.

“If that’s how you really feel, then I’m not sure what to say to make you see things differently,” I told her. “However, if you want the Sartori Underboss dead, then you’re going to have to do the dirty work yourself.”

“What makes you think that you’re my only option, Kasen?” she sneered at me. “You were just the easiest since you’re sleeping with the bastard every night.”

“Fia, it can’t be done,” I said, trying one last time to reason with her. “Do you know how many people have tried to kill Nero and have failed? His family is the most powerful one in the city for a reason. Even if he wasn’t Nero Sartori, his father and brother are pretty powerful themselves.” I could feel my heart sinking in my chest. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop.”

“I think you need to leave,” she said, her voice sounding like that’s exactly what I needed to do.

Walking out of her room, I raced downstairs, and it only took me a minute or so to find Papa in his office, enjoying his evening cigar. Thankful for his predictability, I shut the door behind me, and I ratted my sister out in the hopes of saving her life. I couldn’t see Nero caring that she was a woman, my sister, or pregnant. After all, Fia had already betrayed him once.

However, to my utter horror, Papa had dismissed Fia’s threats as nothing more than her having another tantrum. Just like I did, Papa knew the impossibility of killing a Sartori, so he really hadn’t seemed concerned with Fia’s plans to seek revenge.

So, after having Rafael drive me around for two hours, biding some time to figure out what to do, I was back at Nero’s house, my heart in my throat, my mind no longer sure of right or wrong anymore. Though I knew what I had to do in order to save my family again, it still felt like I was...picking sides.

Letting out a shaky breath as I straightened my back, I raised my fist, then knocked on Nero’s office door, knowing that he had every right to turn me away.

Chapter 19

Nero~

“Enter,” I called out, though the last person that I had expected to see walking into my office was my wife. As far as I knew, Kasen only knew the inside of our bedroom and bathroom, and that was it.

She looked sick to her stomach as she shut the door behind her, and I didn’t like that she looked nervous and upset. Whatever put that look on her face, I’d do anything to erase it. Even when Renzo had blown Mano’s brains out, Kasen hadn’t looked this upset. Sure, that could have been due to shock, but still. It was also concerning how much I was bothered by her distress. I mean, I was very aware of the hold that Kasen had over me, but this felt different.

I leaned back in my seat, folding my hands over my lap. “What can I do for you, *il mio cuore?*”

When Kasen stopped in front of my desk, I watched her straighten her back, and it was clear that she was trying to be brave. “I need to talk to you about something, but I also understand that...that I don’t necessarily deserve to have you hear me out.” She let out a shaky breath, and I *really* didn’t fucking like it. There was only one person on the planet that shouldn’t fear me, and it was my wife. “I realized how much of a hypocrite I’m being by asking you for anything while I’ve been acting less than...accepting. However...” She let out a low, hollow, troublesome chuckle. “Well, let’s just say that I wouldn’t be here if I had any other options.”

“Just tell me what it is, Kasen,” I ordered softly.

“I just came from my parents’ house, and...and I had a talk with my sister.” Somehow, I wasn’t surprised to hear that Fia Milano was the cause behind her distress.

“And how is your sister?”

Kasen was quiet for a few seconds before saying, “She’s vowed to kill you for what happened to Mano.”

I almost laughed.

“Has she now?”

“Even though it was Papa that killed him, she’s convinced herself that it’s your fault,” she went on. “She believes that she could have gotten my father to come around had she been able to tell him the truth in her own way.”

“I see,” I murmured, unsure of why Kasen was telling me this. “And what’s her plan? How does she think she’ll succeed where so many others have failed?”

“Her original plan was for me to poison you for her,” she confessed.

That got a smirk out of me. “Well, well, well...it looks like the youngest Milano isn’t as useless as she appears. Stupid, yes. Useless, not so much.” I leaned forward across my desk. “And did you inform her that you and I would have to share a meal together for that to happen?”

Kasen shot me an annoyed look, but I preferred it to her looking upset. “I told her that she was crazy. I also made it clear that I wasn’t going to risk my life to avenge her dead lover.”

“I bet she took that well,” I drawled out.

“We argued,” she admitted. “She accused me of picking you over my family.”

I cocked my head. “If she only knew. Right, *il mio cuore?*”

Ignoring that, she said, “After I told her that I wasn’t going to help her, she insinuated that she knew other people that were willing to help her out.”

I stood up, then walked around my desk until I was standing in front of my wife. Leaning back against the oak, I asked, “Why are you telling me this, Kasen? Your sister killing me would be the answer to all your prayers, no?”

She shot me another annoyed look. “You and I both know that she could never get close enough to kill you,” she replied. “I also know that whoever she might enlist won’t be good enough, either.” My wife let out a heavy sigh. “After Fia told me about her ridiculous plan, I told Papa.”

My lips twitched at that bit of news. “And what did Renzo have to say about that?”

“He brushed it off,” she grumbled disappointingly. “He said that she was just throwing a tantrum, and the last thing that Fia was capable of was bringing down a Sartori.”

“Yet, you think that she’s serious enough to tell me,” I surmised.

“No matter how spoiled or self-absorbed my sister is, she’s still my sister,” Kasen remarked. “For better or for worse, she’s my blood, and I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I just stood by and did nothing as she put herself in harm’s way.” My wife sighed again. “I even mentioned the baby, but she refused to listen to reason. Papa had dismissed it as hormones, but...I’m not willing to take that chance.”

I regarded my wife carefully. “So, what are you asking of me, Kasen?”

“Even though Fia isn’t a real danger to you, your men don’t know that,” she answered. “I’m...I’m asking you to take her...emotional state into consideration if she really does try to go through with this.”

“You’re asking me to let her kill me, is that it?”

“Of course, not,” she snapped. “I’m asking that you don’t order your men to kill her on the spot.”

“Why not?” I stubbornly asked. “It’s what I’d do with any other enemy that was trying to take me down.” I cocked my head to the side again. “In fact, not once since the betrothal agreement has your sister shown *me* any consideration. Yet, you’re asking me to show *her* some? C’mon, *il mio cuore*.”

Kasen shook her head. “This was a mistake,” she muttered. “Just...forget I said anything. I’ll try to talk to my father again, maybe even talk to Fia-”

“Well, while I’d love to grant your wish, it’s kind of hard to forget someone wanting to kill you,” I pointed out. “Especially, when my enemy claims to know someone that’s willing to do the job for them.”

Her face looked troubled again, and I felt the weight of it on my chest. “I just don’t want anything happening to my sister, even if she does deserve it. It would destroy my family.”

While this wasn’t how I had wanted this to go, I’d be a fool to ignore the boon that just landed in my lap. “So, let’s say that I explain to my men that my sister-in-law is just out of her mind with grief, and the attempts on my life are just a combination of that grief and pregnancy,” I posed. “What’s in it for me, *il mio cuore*?” Her back immediately straightened. “What do you think I deserve as an even tradeoff for allowing your sister to continuously hire people to try to kill me?”

After a brief second, she asked, “What would you want?”

It was clear as day on her face that she was expecting me to say sex, and while that would be a huge part of this bargain, it wasn’t the most important. I didn’t want just sex from Kasen. Since I could get that anywhere if I chose, that’s not what this was.

I reached out, slid my finger in the waistband of her pencil skirt, then yanked her forward. To her credit, she didn’t stumble, even when I let her go. With those bright hazel eyes staring up at me through those black lashes of hers, I knew for a fact that I wanted more than just sex from this woman.

I wanted everything.

“I want you to treat this like a real marriage,” I answered. “I want you to quit punishing me for something that your sister and Mano did. I want you to lower those reinforced walls of yours and act like my *wife*. I want you to recognize that it was *your sister’s choices* that led you to be here. No matter what, we would not be married today if your sister knew what it meant to possess any honor.”

“And if I don’t agree?” she asked, her voice low and husky.

“Then I will instruct my men to treat your sister like I would any other enemy that was threatening me and my kingdom,” I replied easily. “At the end of it all, I owe Fia Milano nothing.”

“Once again, you’re giving me a choice that’s not a choice at all,” she replied, her voice a bit frosty. “It’s come to heel or destroy my family.”

“Those are still choices, *il mio cuore*,” I pointed out. “While they might not be the ones that you want to be able to choose from, they’re still choices.”

That troubled look appeared again, but I couldn’t let that sway me this time. This was my one chance to put our marriage on a different path, so I couldn’t let that anxious look in her eyes derail me.

“And what would that mean?” she asked. “What is a real marriage to you?”

“For starters, you quit calling me Mr. Sartori,” I replied. “Secondly, you make the time to share a meal with me. I don’t care if it’s breakfast or dinner, especially since I work odd hours myself, but I do expect it to be one or the other. You’ll also change all your legal documents to reflect your married name as soon as possible and quit walking around here like you’re a guest in this house.” She licked her lips, no doubt wanting to tell me to go eat a dick. “You will also quit treating Rafael as if he’s to blame for any of this. His job is to protect you, and it’s his life if he doesn’t.”

That sobered her up quickly. “Of course,” she murmured.

Reaching out again, I pulled her black ponytail across her shoulder, then twirled some of the strands around my finger. I couldn’t wait to see the ebony curtain laid out on the pillowcases of our bed, her naked body warm underneath the sheets.

“Finally, starting now, I want you laying in our bed every single night, those legs of your spread wide for me, so that I can violate you any fucking way that I want to,” I told her truthfully. “You’ll also only shower in the morning, because I don’t want to taste soap and water when I’m eating your pussy.”

Her entire face turned red, but those hazel orbs of hers flared with something very promising.

Chapter 20

Kasen~

After Nero had laid out his demands, it'd only taken me a few seconds to decide. Though it could be argued that my sister didn't deserve my consideration, she was pregnant, and that child growing inside her was innocent, even if Fia wasn't.

For the most part, all of his demands had been reasonable enough. They were basic things that transpired between spouses all over the world. However, his insistence that I only shower in the morning had come across a bit controlling, but it wasn't like I was in an actual position to negotiate. In the event that my sister was serious, I couldn't take the risk and still live with myself.

There was also no denying how his dirty words had gotten a reaction out of me. My thighs had clenched, and images of Nero's head between my legs had taken over my brain. There was no doubt that the man was probably a beast in the bedroom, but I wanted to be strong enough not to let that sway me. While I had agreed to treat this like a real marriage, that didn't mean that I had to be dumb about it. Nero Sartori was a Mafia Underboss, and I practiced criminal law; we were not the same.

“Thinking of jumping?”

I shook my head as I kept looking out at the manicured landscape that made up Nero's home. The balcony had the most perfect view of the grounds, and I could see myself sitting out here a lot. If the weather held, I wouldn't mind working out here when I could.

“Not today,” I answered. “Just...looking at the view.”

I felt his body heat warm my entire back as he neared, and I knew that this was a dangerous game that I was playing. No matter how much I might want to distance my emotions from my marriage, I had a feeling that Nero's touch was going to make that virtually impossible.

“I see you finally opened your wedding gift,” he said, his breath warm on the skin of my neck.

When Nero’s men had moved me in last Sunday, I had noticed a white box with a dark blue ribbon tied around it in the bedroom, but I had ignored it. The box had been sitting on top of the dresser this entire time, my stubbornness refusing to give an inch. However, as an act of good faith, I had opened it tonight, and the slip and matching robe inside had been custom made to match the color of my eyes. Ignoring the thump in my chest, I had put the exquisite lingerie on, throwing my hair up in a bun to feel the full effect of the buttery material against my skin.

“It’s beautiful,” I admitted.

I felt one of Nero’s hands slip underneath the hem of the lingerie, his warm palm sliding up the outside of my right thigh. “*Il mio cuore?*”

“Yeah?” I replied, not being able to disguise the hitch in my voice.

“You’re the only woman that I’ve touched in months,” he said, and I hated how I wanted his words to be the truth. “I know that you don’t believe me, and I also know that there’s no way to prove it. Nevertheless, it’s the truth. If you never believe anything else that I ever say to you, believe that you are the *only* woman that I desire. I can hardly breathe with how fucking much I want you, baby.”

Before I could say anything to that, his other hand was pulling the robe off my right shoulder, and the feeling of his lips on my skin caused me to shiver. However, before I could wrap my mind around how good that felt, the hand beneath my slip slid across my hip, Nero’s fingers making their way underneath the lace fabric of my panties.

Unabashedly, I closed my eyes, letting his fingers slide through my wet folds, and it was criminal how good his lips and fingers felt on me. While I was hardly a blushing bride, I was feeling everything right now, and this really was a dangerous game that I was playing.

Barely hanging onto my common sense, I asked, “What about your guards? Can they see us up here?”

“Yes, they can,” he answered as he slid two fingers deep inside my body, a choked gasp escaping at the pleasure. “They can see everything that I’m doing to you, *il mio cuore*.” *Why did that sound so sexy?* “However, I would never let them see what is for my eyes only.”

Jesus Christ, the man was fingering me in public. “Does that mean that this is for their eyes, too?”

“No one but me will ever see you naked, nor will anyone else ever see what you look like when you cum,” he clarified. “However, I plan on letting everyone see and know that you belong to me in every sense of the word now.” My body clenched around his fingers. “So, yeah, this is for anyone that might doubt the legitimacy of this marriage.” His teeth nipped at my ear. “However, rest assured that I’ll be carrying you back into the bedroom before you cum all over my hand.”

When he curled his fingers inside me, all reason fled. “Nero, please...” I begged, not caring how much of a hypocrite that made me; how weak.

Nero’s free hand came up, grabbed the front of my neck, then turned me around, my back pressed up against the iron railing, his fingers still deep inside me. “Say it again, *il mio cuore*.”

I knew exactly what he was referring to. “Nero,” I panted.

He leaned down until his lips were breathing over mine. “By the time that I’m done with you, you’ll be fucking *screaming* my name,” he vowed.

I believed him.

“I’m going to fuck you until you can’t walk, baby.” I could feel my knees beginning to weaken. “I’m going to fuck you until you forget every man that ever came before me.” His fingers curled inside me again, and the last thing that I was thinking about was other men. “I’m going to fuck you until you can’t go a day without me touching you.”

“Oh, God...Nero...”

When he pulled his fingers out of my body, I whimpered like I didn't know what a backbone was. "Not here, *il mio cuore*," he whispered in my ear.

Before I knew it, Nero had me in his arms, carrying me bride-style into the room, and when he placed me on the bed, he didn't just toss me down like a bag of potatoes. He placed me carefully on the bed, his large frame looming over mine. It was intimidating and sexy all at the same time.

Nero straightened, then reached beneath my slip, grabbed my panties, then pulled them down my legs. I could feel my heart leap into my throat with how exposed I felt, but the look on his face had me feeling eager for whatever came next.

"I'm going to lock the balcony doors," he said. "Then I'm going to lock the bedroom door." His brown eyes glowed with desire, and it was hard not to feel sexy with that gaze pinning me to the bed. "While I'm doing all of this, I want you to find a comfortable spot on the bed, then spread your legs to show me that sweet pussy that I've been craving for what feels like an eternity."

My chest started heaving, and I couldn't control the sensual shiver that traveled throughout my body at his request. It was obvious that Nero Sartori liked to take control in the bedroom, and I was more than inclined to let him.

Watching Nero making his way across the room, I did as he'd asked. Getting comfortable against the pillows, I let out a shaky breath as I let my knees fall open, exposing myself to a man that I'd hated only this morning and still wasn't completely sure if I still didn't.

When Nero turned to face me, the need was written all over his face when he finally got a good look at me. I felt like I was about to have a heart attack as Nero began removing his jacket. I wanted to believe that he hadn't slept with any of those strippers on our wedding night, and I felt stupid for wanting to believe that. It was expected for him to cheat, but I wasn't sure if that was something that I would ever be able to accept.

"Remove the robe," he instructed as he pulled off his tie.

I sat up on my knees, then removed the robe from my shoulders. Nero started kicking off his shoes as I tossed the robe aside, and I could feel myself getting wet, not sure how I'd gone from not liking this man to wanting to spread my legs for him. That little taste on the balcony shouldn't have been enough to turn me desperate, but it'd done exactly that.

"Come here," he ordered, and he said it in a voice that expected to be obeyed.

I got on my hands and knees, then crawled to the edge of the bed until I was back on my knees in front of him. My heart still felt like it was lodged in my throat, and I wondered if he could tell how anxious I was. Was it written all over my face? Could he see it with each movement of my body?

Nero reached down, lifting my chin with his fingertips. "Take my dick out, *il mio cuore*."

With shaky hands, I reached for his belt, then unbuckled it while blood rushed in my ears. I couldn't understand why I was feeling so overwhelmed. Nero wouldn't be the first guy that I'd ever undressed, so I had no idea why I was feeling like a sacrificial virgin.

After unzipping Nero, I reached for the waistband of his slacks and boxers, then pulled them down, setting him free, and he was everything that his six-foot-three frame promised. He was long, thick, veiny, and he looked painfully hard. Nero Sartori definitely had the goods to back up his arrogant attitude, and if I wasn't careful, I could see him having me in love with him by the time the sun came up tomorrow morning, something that I was nowhere near ready for.

I reached for him, but he surprised me by grabbing my wrist, stopping me. "Not yet, baby," he said. "It's your pussy that I want for our first time. You can suck my dick clean afterwards."

Oh, God.

Removing the rest of his clothing, Nero Sartori was a true work of art as I looked up at him, a warrior's body standing in front of me. When he reached out to slide his finger

underneath the right strap of my slip, I wasted no time in grabbing the hem, then lifting the material up over my head.

Nero let out a low hiss. “Fuck, you’re stunning,” he said as he reached down and ran the back of his hand over my left breast. “Lay back and show me that pussy again, *il mio cuore*.”

Complying immediately, I laid back on the bed, then let my knees drop open again, showing him everything up close. When Nero dropped to his knees, I closed my eyes, knowing what was coming next. He confirmed it seconds later when I felt his warm hands grip the inside of my thighs, spreading me wider. I knew that I should feel some kind of hesitation or embarrassment since I hardly knew the man, but I didn’t. All that I felt was need, and the feeling intensified with the first swipe of his tongue.

“Nero,” I moaned as my hand automatically slid into his hair.

His hands tightened on my thighs, his tongue making out with my wet flesh, a moan escaping me every time that his tongue hit my clit. As he devoured me, I expected him to slide his fingers inside my waiting heat, but he didn’t. Instead, Nero fucked me with his tongue, and every time that he flicked his tongue inside me, I wanted to keep him there forever.

Nero took his time eating me out, and the longer that he teased me, the worse that my need grew. When he finally slid two fingers inside me, I was ready to explode. My legs began to shake, and my grip on his hair tightened.

“Nero, don’t stop...oh, God...”

“Come for me, *il mio cuore*,” he ordered.

Letting go of everything but the feeling of this man’s fingers and tongue, I came for him and for myself, letting the sexual euphoria wrack my body, not caring how I got here. Nero was owning my pleasure, and I was letting him. If I were in the habit of lying to myself, I’d let my pride convince me that I was only cumming for him to honor our agreement, but that’s not what this felt like.

“Fuck, baby, you’re incredible,” he growled, and my body was all his as he grabbed my hips, then positioned me across the bed. “I’m going to eat your sweet pussy for breakfast every fucking morning.”

I forced my eyes opened when I felt Nero’s body crawl across mine, and the heat radiating off him was enough to put me to sleep. He felt heavy, good, and safe, and I had to be crazy to ever think that a Mafia Underboss was *safe*.

“*Il mio cuore*, look at me,” he ordered.

Focusing, his name was the only thing that I could say. “Nero...”

In one thrust, he was ripping me open, my earlier orgasm doing nothing to ease the invasion. Nero was thick enough to pull my flesh with him, and I’d never felt so full in my life. Even spreading my legs wider didn’t help, though I tried my best.

“Goddamn it, you feel so fucking tight around me,” he growled as his hips began to move. “You feel like I would kill every living soul on the planet just to keep you with me.”

“Nero...” I groaned.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he grunted above me. “I promise I’ll make it better the next time.”

I had no idea what he was talking about because everything already felt good. However, when he started slamming into me like a battering ram, I understood what he’d meant. Nero wasn’t romancing me, he wasn’t taking his time with me, he wasn’t even pretending to show me any consideration. Nero Sartori was fucking me, and I’d never been so wet in all my life.

His thrusts, every single one of them more powerful than the last, were driving me to the edge again, and all I could do was hold on. As my fingernails dug into the muscles of his back, all I could do was hope that he didn’t destroy me. All I could do was hope that there was still a sensible part of me left when Nero was done with me.

Without warning, Nero pulled out of me, flipped me over, then slammed back inside my quivering heat as he grabbed my throat, pulling me up against him. “I’m going to fuck you all night long, baby,” he warned. “I’m going to fuck you until I have nothing left to give you.”

“Nero...oh, God...” I felt myself getting closer.

“I’m going to fucking wreck you, and just when you can’t take any more, I’m going to fuck you even harder, Kasen,” he grunted, the head of his cock hitting my cervix painfully.

“*Nero...*”

The sun was already coming up by the time Nero Sartori finished with me.

Chapter 21

Nero~

This was wrong on so many levels, but I didn't care. After this weekend, there was no way that I was going to go a day without my wife. Whatever had convinced Kasen to agree to my terms and give herself to me, I was eternally grateful for it. She'd been everything that I could ever dream of, and she'd definitely been worth the two years of work that I'd had to put in to make her mine.

Now, while I understood that this was her workplace, it wasn't enough to make me leave. Besides, it was the end of the day, so it wasn't like the building was full of clients. Yeah, Mondays were pretty busy for most people, but thanks to Morocco's hacking skills, not only did I know exactly where her office was, but I also knew that whoever occupied the office next to her was already gone for the day.

Knocking on the door, I didn't bother to wait for Kasen to give me permission to enter her office. I walked in like I owned the place, and if there ever were a time when Kasen became unhappy here, then I would. If I could help it, this woman wasn't ever going to be unhappy again.

"Well, that's rude," she stated when she noticed who was walking into her office unannounced.

"Very," I agreed as I shut, then locked the door.

Those hazel eyes of hers regarded me carefully. "Why are you locking the door?"

"I have a...commitment that I need to see to this evening, *il mio cuore*. I'm not sure when I will be home," I answered.

Kasen arched a black brow as she leaned back in her chair. "What does that have to do with my office door being locked?"

I pulled the blinds shut as I smirked at her. "You don't honestly believe that I'm going to go to work without seeing you, do you?"

“You saw me this morning,” she pointed out. “Breakfast or dinner; those were your terms, remember?”

“I remember,” I assured her. “However, I also remember the other terms that I had set forth this weekend after you let me inside that perfect pussy of yours.” Her cheeks turned pink. “I’m pretty sure that I’d made it clear that I wasn’t going to let a day go by without cumming inside you.”

“Nero...” she whispered.

“What, *il mio cuore*?”

“I’m at work,” she said, though she didn’t sound like she cared.

“I realize that,” I chuckled wolfishly. “That’s why I locked the door and pulled the blinds.”

“I can get fired for this.”

“No, you can’t,” I pointed out. “Do you honestly think that the senior partners of this firm are ballsy enough to fire a Sartori?”

“That’s beside the point, and you know it.”

I walked over until I was standing directly in front of her, and Kasen had to crane her neck back to look up at me, though she was in the perfect position to suck my dick, something that she was going to need to do for what I planned on doing to her next.

“Is your pussy sore, baby?”

Her cheeks pinkened again. “Yes.”

Credit to my wife, she’d held out like a champ all weekend. I had spent all of Saturday and Sunday in bed with her, ordering Elio and Aurelio to handle all the little shit for me. Elio owed me, and Aurelio had simply been happy for me. He knew what Kasen meant to me, so he’d done his best not to bother me with anything that could wait.

Nevertheless, even though she hadn’t complained once all weekend, Kasen’s body hadn’t been prepared for all that I’d done to her over the past couple of days, so I wasn’t surprised

to hear that her body was sore. However, lucky for me, even though her jaw might also be sore from all the times that I'd made her choke on my cock, her ass had been untouched this weekend.

“Do you need me to kiss it and make it feel better?”

“Nero, we can't do this here-”

“Oh, we're doing this here,” I told her, cutting off her protests. “Unless you want to leave with me right now and do this at home.”

“I can't leave,” she replied like I'd known that she would. “I have three cases that I have to-”

“I don't care, *il mio cuore*,” I said, interrupting her again. “All I care about is you getting up on that desk, and then spreading your legs for me.”

“Are you forgetting that I'm sore?” she asked. “I won't be able to keep quiet if you-”

“Nothing that your panties shoved in your mouth won't fix,” I assured her.

“Nero-”

“Besides, it's not your pussy that I plan on fucking,” I finally told her.

Kasen's prism-colored eyes widened. “Have you lost your mind?” Her eyes started to dart around as if we weren't alone in the room. “I am not doing *that* with you here, Nero.”

“I beg to differ, baby,” I smirked.

“I'm at *work*,” she tried again. “You can't do this to me, Nero.”

I leaned down, placing my hands on either side of her chair. Staring into her multi-colored eyes, I said, “Don't tell me that you don't want my face between your pussy right now, kissing it all fucking better, Kasen. I won't believe you.” Her lips parted, and it was clear that she had no idea what she did to me, even after everything that we'd done this weekend.

“You want my tongue on your cunt just as badly as I want it there, and you know it.”

Her eyes shimmered with that backbone of hers that I loved so much. “Having you eat me out is a lot different than having you fuck my ass, Nero.”

I moved one of my hands to slide it up underneath her skirt, her soft skin getting my dick hard. “Are you saying that you didn’t think about it at all this weekend while I was buried deep inside you?” Her eyes flashed. “Because I know that I did whenever my tongue was licking you everywhere, *il mio cuore*.” When my fingers forced their way through her thick thighs and found her panties saturated in her juices, I said, “You’re soaked, baby. You’re fucking drenched, and I bet it’s from more than just the thought of me eating you out on top of your desk.”

“Nero...” she whimpered as my fingers bumped her clit.

“After everything that you let me do to you this weekend, that little shy act is hardly convincing anymore,” I went on. “Shy girls don’t choke on cock, baby. They also don’t sit back, open their mouths, then let their husbands cum all over their face.” I slid two of my fingers inside her, causing her to moan. “They also don’t let their husbands take pictures of their cum-covered faces.”

“Oh, God...” she mouthed, her hips moving of their own accord, despite her soreness.

“Shy girls also don’t love being fucked like dirty sluts,” I told her, my breath hot on her neck. “I’ll go to my death bed remembering how much you begged for my cock this weekend, baby. I’ll go to my death bed remembering it *all*.”

Kasen’s hands latched onto my forearms. “Don’t stop...” she cried out, but then catching herself, she bit her lip to keep quiet.

“Cum on my fingers, *il mio cuore*,” I instructed. “Then, after you cum for me, you’re going to get my dick nice and wet because it *is* going in your ass, and you’re going to take it like a good girl.” Her pussy clenched around my fingers,

giving me all the consent that I needed. “By the time that I’m done with you, you won’t be able to walk in here without thinking of how I stretched your ass out on your desk.” Her wet heat clenched around my fingers again. “You’ll blush every time you walk in here, remembering what a filthy, eager, perfect slut you were for me.”

I watched as my wife bit into her arm to muffle her cries as she came all over my fingers, and if I knew then what I knew now, I would have easily paid Mano Barone one-hundred-million dollars to seduce Fia Milano out of our betrothal contract. Honestly, I probably would have just kidnapped this woman if Mano hadn’t been game.

“Fuck, you’re everything,” I said, her pussy holding my fingers hostage as her orgasm shook her body. “You are fucking *everything*.”

Her body was still twitching when I pulled my fingers free, automatically putting them in my mouth to savor the flavor of her release. Kasen tasted like pure euphoria, and even heroin couldn’t touch what she did to me. Like cigarettes, Kasen was another vice to me, and there was no way that I could go an extended period of time without touching her.

Straightening, I pulled my gun out, then placed it on her desk before my hands went to my belt. I freed myself while Kasen was catching her breath, her chest heaving, her eyes dilated with lust. While my wife was undeniably a beautiful woman, she was at her most beautiful when she wanted me. Nothing was better than that look in her eyes when she was about to be bad for me.

Stepping closer to her, I took my cock in my hand, stroking it just for her. “C’mon, baby,” I said as I looked down at her. “Get my dick nice and wet, so that I can work it into that tight ass of yours.” Kasen licked her lips, and I could feel myself on the verge of losing it. I knew that her job was very important to her, but right now, I couldn’t care less if she screamed the entire building down.

Wrapping her hand around the base of my cock, Kasen took the head in between her lips, and the sight was better than

any skyline out there. Her black hair was pulled back in a slick ponytail, so I was able to see her lips swallowing my cock perfectly.

“Take that dick down your throat like a good girl, baby,” I grunted as I fucked her mouth, her gagging sounds loud enough for just me to hear. “Swallow me like a good fucking slut.”

Kasen moaned around my dick, and I’d struck gold when I had discovered that she liked dirty talk along with getting her face sprayed in cum. Kasen was very open-minded in the bedroom, and I was the lucky bastard that was going to benefit from it. Looking at her, all assertive and professional, you’d never guess that she liked rough sex. She came across as a ball-buster in the courtroom, so no one would guess that she liked to be manhandled in the bedroom.

“Spit on it, baby,” I ordered. “Get it sloppy wet.”

When my wife pulled her mouth off my dick, then spat on it like a fucking porn star, I felt violent with how much I wanted this fucking woman. No matter how many times that I took her in a day, it was never going to be enough; I knew this.

Not being able to take it anymore, I grabbed Kasen by her shoulders, then positioned her over her desk, not caring about the files on top or even her computer. Pushing her skirt up over her hips, I ripped her panties off in one tug, then reached over to stuff them in her mouth. After the past couple of days, it wouldn’t be the first time that she was tasting her own pussy.

Spreading her wide, I dropped a bead of spit on her ass, then mixing it with some of her release, I slid one finger into that tight hole to gauge just how much prepping she needed. Her forbidden paradise was so tight that there was no way that she was going to be able to keep working after this.

I wasn’t sure how long I finger fucked her, but after more spit and a second finger, it wasn’t much longer before Kasen was moaning around the panties stuffed in her mouth, and my dick was hard enough to bend steel. I’d never felt so painfully hard in all my life before, and that was a good thing for what I was about to do.

After dropping another bead of spit on Kasen's ass, I finally lined my cock up with that sacred nirvana, and her moans got louder as I worked the head of my dick inside her perfect asshole. When she tried to pull away, I grabbed her shoulder with one hand, forcing her in place, then I reached around and teased her clit with my other hand. As soon as I did that, her body collapsed on the desk, and I was able to breach that tight ring, my entire dick sliding in easily because it was so fucking hard.

"Fuck, baby," I hissed once I was buried to the hilt. "I can't believe you were trying to deny me this."

Pulling my hips back, I began fucking my wife's tight ass, the pleasure nearly driving me insane. She felt hot, tight, and incredible wrapped around my cock, and when she started pushing her ass back towards me, that's when I really started fucking her.

"Such a good girl," I praised as I worked her clit faster. "Taking every inch of my cock up your ass." Kasen moaned louder. "Such a good slut for my cock."

No longer pretending that this wasn't blowing her mind, Kasen let me fuck her hard, and I was going to have to set her up a bath before I left tonight. She was going to be incredibly sore after this, but nothing that my tongue couldn't fix later.

When Kasen's right hand started slamming down on top of the desk, that's when I knew that she was about to cum for me. So, making sure to get us both there, I worked her clit as I rammed my dick deep in her ass, and as soon as she tightened around me, I exploded inside her, feeling like a goddamn animal with its life mate.

After a few clouded moments, I finally removed her panties, and she gasped, "Oh, God..."

I pulled out of her body slowly, and when nothing seeped out, I was almost hard again with the thought of my cum buried safely inside her.

"Next time, I'm taking a picture of my dick in your ass," I told her as I lightly slapped one cheek.

“Nero?” she panted.

“Yeah, *il mio cuore?*”

“I think I’m going to have to work from home tonight,” she muttered, causing me to grin.

“Anything you want, baby.”

An hour later, Kasen was in the bathtub, up to her ears in bubbles, and for the first time in my life, I was cursing having to go to work. All my life, I’d been all about The Family, but not anymore. Nowadays, I was all about my wife.

Chapter 22

Kasen~

Placing my briefcase on my desk, I was looking forward to a hot bath when I got home. Though Nero had made his preferences clear about me showering at night, I felt beat enough to not care. Besides, he'd been considerate enough to let me know that he had some business to attend to tonight, so it wasn't like he was going to be home when I broke the rules. Plus, after the stunt that he had pulled on Monday, he was going to have to let me have my baths, though that wasn't a complaint in the least. The sex over my desk had been hot enough that I planned on asking for more this weekend.

As soon as I sat down, my desk phone rang, and I already knew that it was my final appointment for the day. A gentleman named Jonathan Smith had called earlier this week for a consultation about something to do with receiving stolen goods.

After assuring our receptionist, Darlene, that I'd be right down, I grabbed one business card, a fresh notepad, a pen, and my phone. I only bought suits that had pockets in the inside lining of the jacket for my phone. If I was wearing a pantsuit, then I didn't have to worry about where I put my phone, but when I was in a pencil skirt, I needed the jacket pockets.

When I walked into the lobby to greet Jonathan Smith, it became immediately clear that he was not a Jonathan Smith. While I knew that I was racial profiling, I'd been raised by my father enough to recognize a Made Man when I saw him. Though I'd say that 'Jonathan Smith' might be a German by the way that he looked and carried himself, I couldn't be sure.

Though he wasn't very tall, he was a lot taller than my five-foot-three. He also had blonde hair and blue eyes, making him look typical when you thought about Germans. He seemed to be in his late thirties/early forties, and he also seemed like it'd be a bad idea to underestimate him. He was doing his best to come across as unassuming, but I knew better.

“Mr. Smith,” I greeted as I held out my hand. “I’m Kasen Milano.”

“Ms. Milano, I am Jonathan Smith,” he greeted, and though his English was good, there was no disguising his accent. There was also no ignoring the fact that Jonathan Smith was *not* his name. So, instead of escorting him to my office like I would most clients, I chose to have our meeting in the lobby conference room for the first time ever.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Smith.” I gestured towards the right. “If you’ll follow me, we can begin discussing your concerns.”

Once we entered the room, I shut the door, and I waited until ‘Jonathan’ sat down before taking a seat across the table from him. Like most of the conference rooms in the building, the walls were clear glass, though they came with frosting capabilities if you needed privacy, though our clients didn’t know that. In this day and age, professional privacy could come back and bite you in the ass.

“So, Mr. Smith, explain to me what is going on, and I’ll see what we can do to rectify your situation,” I said, using my standard opening.

‘Jonathan’ placed his arms on the table, leaning forward, the polite façade fading quickly. “I was thinking more along the lines of me being able to help you rectify *your* situation, Ms. Milano,” he replied, his accent a lot thicker than it’d been a few minutes ago.

Even if I weren’t married to Nero, I’d been raised by Renzo Milano. While I wouldn’t call myself arrogant, I didn’t lack confidence. In fact, you couldn’t be good at my job if you lacked self-assurance. Meek didn’t cut it when you were fighting for people’s freedoms. Plus, even if I had carved my own separate path in life, eighteen years of being raised by a Mafia Boss had taught me a lot.

I leaned back in my seat after setting my pen down on top of my notebook. “And what situation is it that you think I have, Mr...?”

He arched a brow condescendingly. “What? You don’t believe my name is Jonathan Smith?”

“I’m not sure why you think I’d find it acceptable for you to waste my time, but I don’t,” I told him. “So, either tell me who you are and what you’re doing here, or kindly leave, *Mr. Smith*.” I lifted my chin. “Believe it or not, I’ve got shit to do.”

His lips lifted in a lazy grin. “You don’t disappoint, *Mrs. Sartori*.”

This time, I was the one that arched a brow. “Who are you and what do you want? I won’t ask a third time.”

He leaned back in his chair, getting comfortable. “My name is Franz Meier,” he finally answered. “While I’m not as popular as my boss, I’m sure that you’ve heard of Emil Schulz, yeah?”

The fucking Germans.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Meier?” I asked, neither confirming nor denying that I knew who his boss was.

“I heard that we have a common enemy,” he said, surprising me. “And isn’t the enemy of my enemy my friend, yeah?”

“It would be if I knew what you were talking about,” I replied, my voice cool and unimpressed.

“I’m talking about your husband, Mrs. Sartori,” he retorted smugly, and I could feel my blood run cold. “It’s my understanding that your marriage is...perhaps, more of a burden than a blessing.”

Fia.

I didn’t want to believe it, but no one else knew that I had been opposed to marrying Nero. As planned, everyone had spun the story about keeping the ‘true’ betrothal a secret to keep me safe, so, besides my family, only Nero, Aurelio, and his father knew the truth. Of course, they could have told others, but I highly doubted it. It wouldn’t benefit anyone for the truth to come out.

There was also the fact that I would never betray Nero. When I had approached him about keeping Fia safe, I'd felt sick to my stomach over asking a favor of him after the way that I'd treated him. Eating crow was never fun, but instead of shoving that crow down my throat, Nero had simply asked me to honor my vows in exchange for allowing my sister to take aim at his life.

Yeah, I was never going to betray my husband.

"I'm not sure where you're getting your information from, but your source left out a very crucial fact, Mr. Meier," I told him.

"And what's that?"

"That my marriage is no one's business but my own," I pointed out. "Whoever is feeding you gossip doesn't know what they're talking about."

"Really?" he drawled out, not believing me. "Because my source is *very* reliable, Mrs. Sartori."

"I doubt it since the only person that knows how I feel about my marriage is my husband," I semi-lied. "However, you're more than welcomed to ask him yourself."

"I can offer you half his kingdom," he said, ignoring me. "If you help us take him down, half of the spoils will go to you. Like a real divorce, yeah?"

"Look, I'm going to say this only once more, Mr. Meier," I said. "My marriage to Nero Sartori is the real deal, and whoever told you that it wasn't is a liar."

"I don't think so, Mrs. Sartori," he replied, a slimy grin on his face. "I think you just need some time to think it over." He inclined his head. "It's never fun to be blindsided, and I could see how it might upset you to be called in here unprepared."

I leaned forward, placing my arms on the table. "And what makes you think that I won't be calling my husband as soon as you leave to let him know that the Germans are trying to take over his territory? Territory that also used to belong to my family, might I add."

“Because I’m positive that you would hate to see anything happen to my source,” he answered, and I could feel my stomach churn with the implication of his words. “It’s my understanding that the two of you are very close, *mein schatz*.”

“A bit of advice, Mr. Meier,” I said. “Always be aware of who your *real* enemies are and do not make the mistake of underestimating them.”

Ignoring my advice, he said, “I’ll give you some time to think about it.”

“There’s nothing to think about,” I replied as I stood up, finished with him.

Franz stood up as well, that grin still on his face. He was looking at me like he had me bent over a barrel, and maybe he did. Even though the Italians were a bigger syndicate, the rest of the city’s players weren’t stupid. If Fia reached out to the Germans to cut a deal, I had no doubt that they were smart enough to ensure a victory for themselves. I could totally see them making me choose between my husband and my sister, another lose/lose situation that Fia didn’t seem to mind putting me in.

“I’ll be in touch,” Franz said cordially, but I said nothing as I watched him walk out of the conference room.

As soon as I was gone, my first instinct was to call Nero, but I quickly decided against it. He was going to ask questions that I didn’t have the answers to, and this really wasn’t a conversation that I wanted to have over the phone anyway. I also needed to talk to my sister about what she was doing. If she thought that the Germans were the type to play fair, then she was sorely mistaken. None of the families played fair, if they did, then they wouldn’t be in power the way that they were now.

What the fuck, Fia?

Chapter 23

Nero~

“I’m...I...I’m...so...sorry...” he wheezed, oxygen evading him.

“Yes, you keep saying that,” I replied evenly. “However, I just don’t believe that you mean it.”

While we had other things happening in Alaska, that wasn’t the only warehouse that we used for situations like this one. All beautifully camouflaged, we had about six scattered throughout our territory, and all equipped with whatever we needed to make our point known.

“I am,” Carl Dollar sobbed.

Carl Dollar had been the reason behind what happened in Kasen’s office on Monday. A month ago, Carl had approached Elio, asking my brother if he could use our port for an overseas shipment of cocaine. For a reasonable percentage, Elio had agreed, another few dollars in our pockets.

However, I’d gotten a call on Monday that Carl’s shipment had *not* been cocaine as he’d claimed. One of our guys at the dock had seem him escorting children into three black vans, and that was one thing that the Sartoris didn’t deal in; we did not do human trafficking. Sure, we dealt in prostitution, but every girl that worked for us had to be at least twenty-one. People could say what they wanted about eighteen being legal, but not in this fucking business. At eighteen, there was still hope for something better, so all our girls were grown.

So, after escorting my wife from her office after what she let me do to her, I had taken her home, had run her a bath, then had left to take care of Carl Dollar and his band of fucking idiots. Currently, there were five of them strung up in the warehouse because the other two had been stupid enough to fight back after we’d found them.

Luckily-though there wasn’t enough luck in the world to save these pieces of shit-all the children had been found and accounted for, and I had found someone to help get them back

home or situated here if they couldn't be sent back. My distaste for human trafficking was well-known, so I hadn't been too worried about my orders being carried out. Death was easy to dish out whenever it came to someone harming a child.

I looked over at my brother. "We'll start with that one over there."

"Good choice," Elio smirked, and one of Carl's drivers started thrashing around, doing his best to try to free himself from the chains.

Looking back at Carl, I said, "See, I'd start with you, but what fun would that be?" Carl started sobbing again. "I want you to see what we have in store for you, Carl. I want you to see what's coming, and I'm going to make sure you know *exactly* what those children might have had to endure because of you." His sobbing got louder. "By the time that I send you to the bowels of hell, you're going to be convinced that the devil actually lives in Port Townsend."

Four hours later, all five men were dead, the pieces of their mutilated bodies decorating the warehouse floor. Since Elio knew how to clean up the mess, I had decided to leave him to it, so that I could go home to my wife. As troublesome as it sounded, I wanted nothing more than to bury myself inside of her, using her body to get rid of my bloodlust.

Walking into my office, Aurelio was right behind me, not ready to leave until he knew that we were done for the night. If Aurelio slept, I'd never seen him do it. The man was like a machine, and it didn't matter that it was already past two in the morning. If anyone could go for seventy-two hours without sleep or rest, it was Aurelio Provenza.

"I know what you're thinking," he chuckled. "She has to work in the morning."

"It wouldn't be the first time this week that she's gone to work with little to no sleep," I huffed before pulling out my cigarettes. Kasen knew that I smoked, but if it bothered her, she was keeping it to herself. So, until she said otherwise, I was going to keep up the habit, though I made the effort to smoke near a window or outside if I wasn't in my office.

“Well, there’s also the fact that you’ll have to shower before joining her in bed,” he pointed out. “Most women think the worst when their husband’s shower constantly.”

“No matter what Kasen chose for her life, she grew up in this lifestyle,” I reminded him. “Kasen will understand that there are hundreds of reasons that I might need to take a shower, the very last one being another goddamn woman.” I took a drag of my cigarette. “There’s no way in hell that I’d ever touch another female when my wife is all that I could ever want.”

“Have you thought about telling her the truth, Nero?” he asked, and that surprised me a bit.

“What?”

“Nero, I’ve never seen you so...grounded before,” he said. “Since the day that I met you, you’ve always been doing ten different things at once. You’ve always been capable and in control, but this is something different.”

I scowled at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Ever since you and Kasen came to that agreement, you seem...let’s just say that I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone stopped listening to your father and started following you blindly.”

“As it should be,” I reminded him. “I’m going to take over this family one day.”

“You’re carrying yourself like you’ve already taken over it,” he replied. “It’s like...she’s made you more powerful or something, even though I know that sounds ridiculous.”

I let out a dark chuckle. “She *has* made me more powerful, Aurelio.”

“Then tell her the truth,” he advised. “While I’d never say a word, these things have a way of coming out, Nero. If you tell her now, then she won’t be as hurt if she finds out later.”

“She’ll never find out,” I insisted. “*I’m* certainly not going to say anything. I’ve got that woman sleeping in my bed and

eating meals with me now, I'd be a fool to undo all that progress."

"Well, maybe telling her the truth will help her see just why other women aren't a threat to her," he suggested. "Though a tad unorthodox, I think if she knew the full extent of your obsession with her, she might be able to rest a little easier. Especially after that bullshit that Elio pulled on your wedding night."

I blew out some smoke before saying, "Don't remind me. Even though Kasen and I are in a better place, I still want to fuck him up for setting me up like that. He keeps brushing it off as a joke whenever I'm pissed enough to bring the subject back up, and the little fucker has no idea how close I came to killing him that night."

"I'm just saying that coming clean serves two purposes," he went on. "One, it clears your conscience where your relationship with your wife is concerned. Two, she'll never have to feel that sickening feeling of betrayal whenever she sees you talking to another woman. You might have a past, but then so does she. This will be about Kasen knowing that she owns your present and future."

"I'll lose her if I tell her, Aurelio," I replied, believing it in my soul. "She'll see the manipulation for what it was, and I can't see her ever forgiving me."

"She might not forgive you if you tell her now, but if you wait until she falls in love with you to confess, she might just be hurt enough then to actually leave you, Nero. Right now, you'll be pissing her off, not breaking her heart."

I put out my cigarette in the ashtray on my desk before saying, "I'll think about it."

"Look, all of your secrets are safe with me," Aurelio reiterated. "However, one day, when she's looking up at you like you hung the moon, that guilt might start eating away at you. I'm telling you, better a pissed off woman than a heartbroken one."

While I could see the validity of what he was saying, there was no guarantee that Kasen wouldn't try to leave me right now if I told her the truth. Kasen wasn't some meek wallflower with no backbone. She was strong, capable, and stubborn as fuck. Luckily for me, we had sold her car and condo in no time, so besides her parents' house, she'd have nowhere to go if she tried to leave me.

"Like I said, I'll think about it."

"Sure thing, Boss," he snorted, and that was enough to make me smile, despite the late hour.

"Go home," I ordered. "I'll call you in the morning."

"Do you want me to swing by the warehouse and see if they need any help?"

I shook my head. Even though my brother still had a lot of growing up to do, he knew his shit when it came to work. "Nah, Elio's got it handled."

"Okay," he replied, giving me a terse nod. "Then I'll see you tomorrow."

I smoked one more cigarette before heading towards one of the guest bathrooms because I didn't want to chance waking Kasen by making too much noise. If she woke up, then I wanted it to be with my face buried between her legs. She might awaken a bit annoyed, but that annoyance wouldn't last long.

After I was done showering and cleaning up, I headed to the bedroom, and when I opened the door, I saw my wife taking up the entire bed, which wasn't an easy feat since it was a California King, large enough to fit my frame.

Quietly, I walked over to the bed, then just stood there, staring down at a sleeping Kasen, and my heart did that weird thing in my chest again. Though telling her the truth might be the right thing to do, I was more interested in keeping my wife than doing the right thing. Nothing mattered more to me than forever with Kasen Milano-Sartori.

Chapter 24

Kasen~

I wasn't sure how I'd gotten through the day, but I'd done it. While I'd always been able to compartmentalize, that particular skill had truly come in handy today, because all I kept thinking about was that visit from Franz, my sister, and what I'd overheard last night between Nero and Aurelio.

After leaving work yesterday, I'd gone to visit Fia, but she had refused to see me, and my mother had sided with her like always. Papa had brushed it off as another one of her famous tantrums, and I'd had no choice but to wait it out. As much as I needed advice, I knew that if I told my father about Franz Meier, he'd lose his shit, and Fia's pregnancy was really tying my hands.

There was also what I'd overheard when Nero had gotten home last night. After thinking it through, I'd found myself accepting my harsh reality, and I had planned on telling Nero about Franz's visit to Milton. With Fia refusing to speak with me, Papa too emotionally close to the situation, and Mammi useless, I'd had no choice but to ask Nero for help. However, all that had changed when I'd overheard him talking with Aurelio, alluding to some sort of secret that had to do with me.

Waiting for Nero to come home, I had fallen asleep in his office, but when I'd woken up a little after two, I'd gone to get some water, then use the bathroom. When I had returned to his office, I hadn't expected to overhear Aurelio advising Nero to confess to something that was bad enough to make me leave him if I ever found out.

Now, normally, I wouldn't have thought much about it since my marriage hadn't exactly started out with any semblance of love, respect, or trust, but...but like all the stupid women before me, I had let the sex get into my head, and I couldn't say that I no longer felt anything for Nero beyond our arranged marriage. Whenever he took me, he did it with enough passion that it had me believing that there was something more between us. The lines between lust and

genuine affection had started to blur, and I had no one to blame but myself for being a fucking idiot.

So, with my thoughts and emotions a jumbled mess, I'd gone back upstairs last night, then had pretended to be sleeping when Nero had come to bed. Not surprisingly, he had 'woken' me up with his face between my thighs, and I had let him. For just an hour, I had wanted to forget the mess that was my life right now, so I had allowed Nero to use me before putting me back to sleep. It'd been a weak move, but it was crazy how tired I was beginning to feel. Only two weeks later, but I felt as if I'd been in this marriage for years, still trying to find a way to navigate around everything that I still didn't know.

Now it was the end of the day, most everyone already gone, and I was still sitting in my chair, wondering what in the hell I was going to do. Before overhearing Nero's conversation with Aurelio last night, I had trusted that he'd know what to do about Franz Meier. Even if I hadn't trusted him with my heart before last night, I had trusted him to handle the situation with Franz. However, now I didn't know who to trust. All I knew was that Nero was keeping a secret from me, my sister was avoiding me, and my parents were no help. I could fight my way through a courtroom without breaking a sweat, but when it came to dealing with territory wars, I had no idea where to start, despite my upbringing.

On top of all that, I'd gone and done the stupidest thing that I could possibly do, muddying the waters even more. This morning in my office, I had looked up what *il mio cuore* meant. I had used a language translator, and if Nero was indeed speaking Italian to me, then he was calling me 'my heart', and I had no idea what to do with that piece of information, especially since he had first called me that at my parents' *before* we'd gotten married.

"Good, you're still here."

Startled out of my thoughts, I looked up to see Ryan standing just inside my office. "Ye...yeah," I muttered. "I... I'll probably be here a while. What about you?" I grabbed my phone, looking at the time. "Is everyone already gone?"

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, it’s just you and me here.”

“Well, now, that’s not exactly true, Buckner.”

I stood up out of my seat as soon as Franz Meier walked into my office, shutting the door behind him like he had every right. When I glanced over at Ryan, my first instinct was to protect him, but all that changed when it dawned on me that Franz had called Ryan by his last name.

With anger and dread swirling around in my gut, I asked, “What’s going on?”

“I told you that my source was a reliable one, did I not, *mein schatz*?”

Jesus Christ.

I looked over at Ryan, doing my best to sound calm. “What’s he talking about?”

“I did this for us, Kasen,” he blurted, and I could feel my eyes widen at that. “When you told me that you’d rather live here than hang out with a man that you have to pretend to love, my heart broke for you. I couldn’t stand the thought of you being unhappy. Then, when you told me that you had no choice but to stand idly by while he slept with other women...” He shook his head. “I...I just couldn’t believe it.”

“Ryan, friend or not, it’s not your place to interfere in my marriage,” I pointed out, doing my best to keep my wits about me.

“And I wasn’t going to,” he lied. “But...but then I saw...”

“Saw what?” I bit out, irritation joining all my other jumbled emotions.

His shoulders deflated a little. “I saw Nero Sartori walking you out of your office Monday evening. I was still here, and I...well, it wasn’t hard to guess why he showed up here.” He shook his head again. “His blatant lack of respect for you finally pushed me to make a decision.”

This dude was nuts.

“Have you lost your mind?” Though I was angry as hell, I still felt a rush of relief that Fia hadn’t been the one behind all of this. My sister was in the clear, making this situation that much more easier to navigate. While I still had no idea what was going on, at least my family was safe.

“Now, now, now,” Franz drawled out mockingly. “I see no reason not to tell Mrs. Sartori the whole truth. Do you, Ryan?”

Ryan’s face turned red, and that’s when I knew that this mess was not about my damn happiness. Again, no matter how I’d chosen to live my life, I’d been raised by a Mafia Boss, so I knew a fucked-up situation when I saw one.

“What are you talking about?” I asked again, addressing Franz this time.

“Well, *mein schatz*, your buddy, Ryan, has a bit of a gambling problem.” Franz looked over at Ryan. “Don’t you, Ryan?”

Ryan started shaking his head, but I could see the truth written all over his face. “Don’t listen to him, Kasen,” he said. “I really am doing this for you.”

“Doing what?” I snapped. “Bringing the German Mob to my fucking doorstep?”

“No, no, no,” he rushed out, his nerves getting the better of him. “With Nero out of the picture, my debt might be cleared, but you’ll be happy again.”

My head reared back in surprise at how naïve Ryan sounded. Did he really believe that the Germans were going to let him live? Did he really believe that he wasn’t going to go down for this? Even if the Sartoris didn’t kill him, no way were the Germans going to let a degenerate gambler live after something like this. That’s not how things worked. The Mafia left no loose ends, and if Ryan wasn’t so blinded by his gambling addiction, he’d recognize this.

“You told them that I would kill Nero Sartori to clear your fucking tab?” I couldn’t believe how enraged I felt over his stupidity. He had dragged me into something that I had no idea

how to get out of because he was a fucking idiot. “Are you insane?”

“Are you?” Franz countered, and when I looked back at him, he added, “After all, if you don’t do this, then I will kill you both.” He cocked his head at me. “Are you willing to die for Nero Sartori.”

“I’m not stupid,” I snapped. “Regardless of who I’m married to, I’m Renzo Milano’s daughter; I know how this works, and this doesn’t end with me quietly poisoning my husband or smothering him with a pillow in his sleep. If I kill Nero Sartori, then the entire Sartori family will burn this city to the ground with their revenge.” I looked back over at Ryan. “How stupid can you fucking be?” His eyes widened like a child’s. “Do you seriously think that they’re not going to do everything in their power to cover their tracks, Ryan? Do you honestly believe that they’re not going to get rid of all the loose ends once the Sartori Prince is dead?”

“N...no...no,” he stammered. “They promised.” He looked over at Franz. “You promised that you would clear my debt and leave me alone if I got Kasen to kill Nero.”

“And we will,” Franz lied. “However, it seems like she’s not willing to cooperate, and that’s not what *you* promised *us*, Ryan.” Franz sounded like he was speaking to a small child. “You said that Mrs. Sartori would be more than willing to help us out, but I’m not getting that vibe from her.”

Ryan looked back at me. “Why can’t you do it?” he asked, and he really was fucking stupid. “It would free you from a marriage that you don’t want, and...and...well, if it helps me out a little, then so be it.” He looked earnest enough to believe what he was saying. “C’mon, Kasen.”

“The Sartoris will torture and kill my family if I harm one hair on Nero Sartori’s head,” I bit out. “What don’t you get about that?” I let out a steady breath, trying my hardest not to lose it. “It can’t be done, Ryan. If it were that easy to kill Nero Sartori, someone would have done it by now.”

“Awe, but he’s never been married before now,” Franz pointed out. “As his wife, you are the only person that is close

enough to him to fly under the radar.”

Staring Franz right in the eye, I said, “I am *not* killing Nero Sartori for anyone.”

“So, you’re willing to die for him?” Franz asked. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

Without hesitation, I answered, “Yes.”

Now, while most people would believe that I was being noble, I wasn’t. This wasn’t about Nero or my marriage to him, not really. This was about keeping my word and what my personal integrity meant to me. No matter what, I wasn’t about to betray *any* members of my family, blood or otherwise. This was about how I’d been allowed to live out my dream and practice law because my father had given me his word, and if someone didn’t have their word, then what did they have? While a lot of people could rationalize betrayal, I wasn’t one of those people. Either you kept your word, or you didn’t; it was that black and white for me.

Before I could form another thought, pain and fire radiated throughout my body, and I dropped in my chair as blood began to ooze down my arm, the sound of gunfire barely an echo thanks to the silencer on the end of Franz’s gun; the one that I should have known that he had.

“Oh, my God!” Ryan cried out. “You shot her!”

“How about now, *mein schatz*? Do you still feel like dying for him?”

The pain in my arm felt excruciating, but I also knew that it wasn’t life-threatening. Franz was messing with me, and I could only imagine what awaited me if I didn’t cooperate. However, I also knew that it was too late. There was no way that I was going to be able to explain a bullet wound with some fabricated lie, and Franz knew it. By shooting me, he had already kicked off a war, and Ryan was the only idiot that didn’t know that.

Letting out a shaky breath, I stood up, proud of myself that I wasn’t a hysterical mess. No tears, no theatrics, just pain. “Yes,” I answered again.

Franz glanced back at Ryan. “You said that it wasn’t a love match.”

“It’s...it’s not,” he stammered. “I swear, it’s not.”

When Franz looked back my way, I really thought that he was going to kill me, but when he cocked his head to the side, that slimy smile back, he said, “If you’re willing to die for Sartori, I wonder if he’s willing to do the same for you.”

I could feel my heart leap into my throat.

I also already knew the answer.

“He’s not,” I replied. “If you think that Nero Sartori is going to sacrifice himself for a woman that he’s only been married to for a couple of weeks, then you’re stupider than I gave you credit for.”

Ignoring the insult, Franz looked back over at Ryan. “Get her phone, then text Sartori to meet at the docks. They’re his ports, so he’ll know exactly where you’re talking about.”

“What do...what do I text...I don’t know-”

“Make it sound like the text is coming from his wife, you moron,” Franz snapped, finally losing his cool with Ryan.

With Franz’s gun aimed at me, I didn’t move as Ryan fished my purse out of my desk, then pulled out my phone. I also didn’t resist when Ryan grabbed my hand to unlock my phone. They were underestimating Nero, and I was going to let them. There was no way that I would ever text Nero to meet me by the docks, and Nero would know that. Plus, even if there weren’t cameras in my office, there were cameras everywhere else, and it wouldn’t take Nero long to figure out what happened.

“Now what?” Ryan asked, sounding agitated and scared.

Franz grinned. “Well, now you’re going to meet Nero Sartori at the docks and tell him that we have his wife.”

Ryan’s eyes widened. “What? I can’t...oh, my God... what?”

“Relax, Buckner,” Franz chuckled darkly. “You’ll be safe as long as we have his wife. Simply let him know that we’ll trade her for him, then all will be well.”

“He’s lying, Ryan,” I said, doing my best to save another life that might not be deserving.

“If I were you, *mein schatz*, I’d keep my mouth shut,” Franz said, his voice sounding clipped and like he was close to losing his temper.

Shaking my head, I said, “I’m not going anywhere with you. I’d rather bleed out here.”

Franz grinned again. “I was hoping you were going to say that.”

The next thing that I knew, everything had turned black.

Chapter 25

Nero~

I kept flipping my phone over in my hand, anger making it nearly impossible to function. There was no way that Kasen would ever text me to meet her at the fucking docks, so the use of her phone was intentional, and when I found out who was behind this, I was going to fucking obliterate them.

Knowing that I would be walking into a trap, I'd had Morocco pull up all the feed on the docks from the past two days. When he couldn't find anything suspicious, I had sent some of my men to case the docks because I needed eyes on the ground. When they had reported back that it was empty, save for the dock workers, that's when I'd gotten in the car to head over.

As I got out of the car, I was still deciding what to do with Rafael. When I had called him, demanding to know where my wife was, he'd sworn to me that she'd still been in her office, working late. Not allowed in the building, Rafael spent his days parked outside, always close to the entrance, always escorting her out. When I had proposed forcing The Milton Group to hire guards, Kasen had begged me for a compromise. Not wanting to draw any unnecessary additional attention her way, I had agreed to no guards as long as she always texted Rafael when she was on her way down. Gritting my teeth, it wasn't a good feeling to know that I had compromised my wife's safety in a weak attempt to get into her good graces when she'd already been mine. Even though Aurelio was wise enough not to say it out loud, this was all of my bullshit coming back to bite me in the ass.

At any rate, after having Morocco pull all the footage from The Milton Group's security feed, it'd been easy to see that two guys had abducted Kasen, and she'd been passed out while they had carried her out. Unbeknownst to Rafael, they had taken her out back through a delivery entrance, and while I hadn't recognized either man, I knew that it wasn't going to take Morocco long to identify them.

“I don’t see anything,” Aurelio stated, both of us scanning the area.

While I had a few of my men secured in place, I’d wanted it to look purposely like it was no big deal for me to meet my wife at the docks. Whoever was behind this was a stupid motherfucker, and I was going to use that to my advantage. I even pulled out my cigarettes to make it appear as if I had all the time in the world.

Just then, one of the guys on the security feed came walking out from behind one of the dock’s storage containers, and it was easy to see that he was faking his bravado. He looked to be about six-foot-one, had brown hair and blue eyes, and he also looked fit, though that didn’t mean shit. Just because you looked like you could fight didn’t mean that you actually could.

He made sure to keep a few feet of safe distance between us, but little did this asshole know that he was never going to be safe from me ever again. If anything happened to Kasen, this man’s great-great-grandchildren wouldn’t be safe from me. He just sealed his entire family’s fate, and I bet that he didn’t even realize it.

“Kasen isn’t here,” he blurted, and there was something in the way that he said her name that had the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

Doing my best not to end him before I got answers to where my wife was, I asked, “And how do you know Kasen?”

His blue eyes shifted, his nervousness radiating off him in waves. “Well...we... we work together,” he stuttered anxiously. “And we used to sle...we’re friends.”

They used to fuck.

I could feel the blood rushing through my ears, and if I thought that I couldn’t be any more angrier than I’d been a few moments ago, I was wrong. Even though I knew that Kasen hadn’t been a virgin when we’d gotten married, I hadn’t expected to meet up with any of her ex-lovers. Feeling the incredible compulsion to beat this man to death for ever

having touched my wife's naked body was a brutal eye-opener. Feeling what I was feeling, I couldn't imagine how Kasen must have felt the night of our wedding when she had walked into the VIP room to see Chastity with her hand on my dick. Elio was lucky that he wasn't here with me right now, or else my father might have been burying his youngest son tomorrow.

I felt Aurelio step closer to me in an attempt to calm me down before I did the unthinkable and killed this motherfucker before getting any answers out of him. My only hope was that he claimed to be friends with my wife, so maybe she really was unharmed.

“Where is she?”

He straightened, pretending to be brave again. “She's safe as long as you cooperate.”

“And what exactly do you need my cooperation for?”

“Your life for hers,” he stated simply. “That's the deal. If you surrender, then she'll be free to go.”

I dropped my unsmoked cigarette on the ground, then put it out with my shoe. Sliding my hands in my pockets, I looked at the dead man in front of me. “If I agree to this, exactly *who* would I be surrendering myself to?”

“Oh...uhm...” His eyes started shifting around, and whoever this sonofabitch was, it was obvious that he was merely a pawn for someone else. “Uhm...Franz, I think.” He shook his head, straightening nervously. “I mean, Emil Schulz. That's who's in charge. Franz Meier is also in charge...uh, I think.”

The fucking Germans had my wife.

“And how did you come to be a part of all this?” Even though he was irrelevant, the more information that I had, the better.

“Don't worry about that,” he bit out, almost embarrassed.

I lifted my chin. “So, I just pull up to Emil Schulz's home and just walk right on in? How exactly does this work?”

“Uhm...I’m supposed to call him after I tell you what to do,” he said, and it was so fucking hard not to kill this motherfucker.

I also knew that there was no way that Emil Schulz was going to let Kasen live, if she wasn’t already dead. Emil knew enough to know that her father would never let her death go unpunished. Hers and my deaths would bring the wrath of the entire Italian Mafia down on their heads, so there was something more at play here. Emil wasn’t looking to just get rid of me and Kasen; he was looking to take us all out, taking control of our territory. Just like the rest of this city, he knew that his chances of that happening were better if he took me out. While my brother could hold his own, Elio wasn’t me.

“If you and Kasen are friends, why is she in the hands of my enemy?”

The bastard actually had the balls to look remorseful. “I owe Franz Meier some money,” he grumbled. “They’ll clear my debt if I deliver you to them.”

“You traded my wife for some gambling debts? Is that what you’re telling me?”

His blue eyes hardened. “No,” he lied. “I did it because she never wanted you.” His jealousy was obvious, and it was hard to blame the man. “Kasen deserves to be happy, and she’s not happy with you.”

“She told you this?” Now it was my jealousy that was threatening to boil over.

“She didn’t have to,” he snapped. “I was there when you showed up at Milton on Monday.” He looked repulsed and angry with the recollection. “What kind of man disrespects his wife at her place of work? Kasen deserves to be worshipped in a proper bed, not treated like some dirty slut.”

Surprisingly, his words were welcomed. If he thought that Kasen only wanted to be pleased behind closed bedroom doors, then he didn’t really know my wife at all. Whatever they’d had didn’t compare to what I had with her. Kasen *loved*

being fucked like a dirty slut, and it gave me a sick satisfaction that this asshole had no idea.

“Make your phone call,” I instructed.

His head jerked back a bit, seeming to remember the reason that we were here. “Yeah, okay.”

My eyes darted around, and I could make out some of my men positioned exactly where they needed to be if things got ugly. This idiot had at least ten guns aimed at his head right now, and he had no idea. He was already dead, though he had absolutely no idea.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he said into the phone. “Yeah, no...he’s standing right in front of me...No, I told him...Yeah, he knows.” He started gnawing on his lower lip. “Hmm...yeah, okay.”

When he hung up the phone, I asked, “Problem?”

“No,” he rushed out nervously. “Franz said that Emil’s going to call you right now, and so you better answer.”

“Emil Schulz doesn’t have my number,” I informed him.

“He has Kasen’s phone,” he replied. “He’s going to call you on that.”

After waiting a heartbeat, I asked, “What’s your name?”

He scowled. “Ryan. Why?”

“Ryan, you do know that Emil’s going to kill you after you’ve served your purpose, right?”

His face turned an ugly shade of red. “No, he’s not,” he snapped. “Franz promised.”

Before I could disillusion him some more, my phone started ringing, and I could feel an eerie calm settle in my bones. I knew Emil Schulz well enough to know exactly what needed to be done. While I had no doubt that I’d get Kasen back, I didn’t want to think about what condition she might be in when I did.

I answered the phone, Emil Schulz and his entire syndicate already dead men.

Chapter 26

Kasen~

When I had woken up, it'd been to my head bleeding and aching almost as badly as my arm. Franz had knocked me out with the butt of his gun, and I probably had a concussion with as nauseated as I felt. However, looking around the room, a concussion was the least of my problems right now. There were four other men in the room with Franz Meier while I was tied to a chair near one of the windows, the glass boarded up like all torture hideaways.

“Ah, you're awake,” Franz announced, making the other four turn and look my way. “We just got off the phone with Buckner and are ready to call your husband.”

“If you think that Nero is going to make the trade, you're crazy,” I spat, my head a little woozy. “There's no way that he's going to sacrifice himself for something that can easily be replaced.”

“Shut up!” Franz yelled. “Just shut up!”

“Well, we'll see about that,” said the guy in the black suit. The others were wearing dark blue suits, and while I didn't know if that was intentional, it made the guy in the black suit stand out more. Even though I'd never seen the man before, it wasn't hard to guess who he was.

With my phone in his hand, I watched him dial Nero, and because he was a sick sonofabitch, he put it on speaker. He wanted his men to hear the Sartori Underboss give himself up in some sort of powerplay, but the joke was on him; there was no way that Nero would ever surrender to anyone.

“Schultz,” Nero greeted as he answered the phone.

“Sartori,” Emil replied, his tone cocky with the premature feeling of victory.

“I heard that you're interested in making some sort of deal with me,” Nero said, his voice betraying nothing.

“We have your wife,” Emil told him. “Your life for hers. No fuss, no muss, nothing complicated.”

“Now, while I can see where you might think that you have the upper hand, you can’t honestly believe that I’m going to agree to such a thing, Schulz,” Nero replied calmly, and I could feel bile churning in the pit of my stomach.

“We’ll kill her if you don’t,” Emil said seriously. “Don’t think that we won’t, Sartori.”

“Then kill her.”

The entire room froze at those three little words. Even the air around us seemed to stop. It was impossibly quiet, no one knowing what to do or say next. As I glanced around, every man in the room had a look of surprise on their faces, not quite believing what they were hearing.

“What did you say?” Emil finally asked.

“I said to go ahead and kill her.”

Franz glanced my way, and I almost laughed at how he actually looked like he felt sorry for me.

“I’m not fucking bluffing, Sartori,” Emil snapped. “I will kill the bitch. Of course, not until after I let my men have a bit of fun with her, but she will end up dead eventually.”

“You really should do your homework before you kick off a war, Schulz,” Nero replied, his voice as smooth as silk. “My marriage to Kasen Milano was a business arrangement between our fathers. So, by killing her, you’re actually doing me a favor.”

“What are you talking about?” Emil hissed, his plans unraveling, making him unpredictable.

“Killing her rids me of a wife that I never wanted,” Nero answered, and I had no idea how I was not retching with every word out of his mouth. “You will have made it to where I have honored my commitment but am still free to be able to marry someone else of my choosing. Since Kasen isn’t pregnant, then she’s not anything that can’t be replaced.”

“You...you...can’t mean that,” Emil stammered, his face turning red with fury.

“I’ve been married to the woman for all of two weeks, Schulz,” Nero pointed out, his voice sounding patronizing and bored. “You really should have done your homework better.”

“I don’t believe you,” Emil seethed.

After a heartbeat of silence, Nero said, “Okay, let’s say that I do hold some sort of affection for her. Hell, let’s even say that I love her. No matter how I feel about my wife, there’s one thing that will always be the number one love of my life, and that’s my position as the Underboss of the most powerful syndicate in the state. If you think that I would willingly hand over my position of power for a woman, then you really don’t know who the fuck you’re dealing with, Schulz.”

I watched Emil Schulz pull out his gun, then stick it underneath Franz’s chin. Franz had miscalculated, and he’d miscalculated badly.

“Also, there’s another thing to consider,” Nero went on.

“What’s that?” Emil hissed, ready to gun down everyone in the room.

“If you kill her, then you give the Irish and the Russians the green light to approve me taking you and your entire family out for killing an Underboss’ wife,” Nero told him, and it was funny how my only thoughts were of my father right now. While I wasn’t afraid to die, it would have been nice to be able to tell my father that I loved him one last time. “More than happy to divide your territory at no risk to them, your entire legacy will be wiped off the face of the earth, and you’d better believe that even your pets won’t be safe from me.”

Choosing his mortality over his pride, Emil asked, “And what would you ask for if I don’t kill her?”

“You wanted a trade, then I’ll give you one,” Nero answered. “We still have your lackey with us. Since it’s my understanding that he owes you money, we’ll give him back to you, so that you can collect it. In return, I’ll send a couple of my soldiers to collect my wife.”

“I thought you didn’t care if we killed her,” Emil sneered, defeat making him act nasty.

“Oh, make no mistake, Schulz,” Nero chuckled darkly. “I don’t care what you do with her. However, she’s still Renzo Milano’s daughter. If you think that Renzo won’t defy me to avenge his favorite child, then you haven’t done your homework on him, either. So, my suggestion is that you return her unharmed, then do what you want with the idiot that you used as a messenger.”

“I’ll call you back,” Emil told him before hanging up.

“Boss, I-”

“You told me that he loved her,” Emil spat as he shoved his gun deeper into Franz’s chin. “You told me that this would fucking work.”

“Tha...that’s what Ry...Ryan said,” Franz sputtered. “He said-”

The gun blast rocked my eardrums, and when Franz’s body hit the floor, there was nothing left of his face. The other three men all stepped back from the body, and if they pissed themselves, I wouldn’t be surprised.

I started laughing.

My head hurt, my arm was still on fire, and I was still bleeding some, but I laughed. I laughed because I didn’t know what else to do. Maybe I was becoming hysterical, but I wasn’t sure. I just knew that, even if Emil Schulz let me go, my life was never going to be the same again. I wanted to feel hurt by what Nero had said, but I wasn’t. I was hurt because I *hadn’t* been surprised by his words.

“Shut up, bitch!” Emil snarled.

I stared into his blue eyes as he stormed his way over, his arm swinging down, backhanding me hard enough to knock my chair over. Landing on my arm with the bullet wound, I felt it start bleeding again, and the dire part of me hoped that I just bled out. That would be a lot less painful than whatever else could be done to me.

“Boss-”

“What?!” he roared to a guy with light brown hair and hazel eyes.

“Maybe we leave her alone and not make things worse?” he suggested right before Emil Schulz raised his gun again, shooting the guy clean through his heart, another body hitting the floor.

“Someone get this bitch,” he hissed, jerking his head my way. “I’m going to let the others know to expect a couple of Sartori soldiers and Ryan Buckner.” After one of his guys righted my chair, Emil stepped back in front of me. “You must really mean nothing if he’s sending a couple of disposable soldiers to come get you.” Then he reached out, grabbed the neckline of my blouse, ripping it open. “How bad of a fuck are you that Sartori can so easily replace you?”

I thought about all the Mafia wives that were constantly cheated on, and that question had me chuckling humorlessly. “Don’t you know? All pussy’s replaceable, Emil.”

His blue eyes regarded me carefully. “Sadly, I think that you actually believe that.”

“Because it’s true,” I replied. After all, hadn’t Neo easily replaced Fia after she had betrayed him?

Turning away from me, he told his men, “Since Sartori doesn’t care about her and Milano’s numbers aren’t as big as they used to be, you guys can do whatever you want with her.” Emil looked back down at me, “After all, why should I be the only one getting fucked here tonight?”

He stormed out of the derelict farmhouse, leaving my blouse hanging open in a room full of men that hated my husband. Nevertheless, I was a fighter, and they were going to have to kill me before I let the worst happen.

I also wasn’t afraid to kill them if I had to.

Chapter 27

Nero~

I felt like I was losing my motherfucking mind.

Everyone was here, but none of them mattered a fuck. I had gambled with Kasen's life, and even though I knew that Emil Schulz's narcissism was clinical enough that he'd never risk having his entire legacy wiped out, that didn't change the fact that I had taken chances with my wife's life with no guarantees. No matter how well you thought you knew someone, anger made people unpredictable.

There was also the fact that I'd had no choice but to send a couple of foot soldiers to pick her up to keep the façade going. Not only would they kill me or Elio if we showed our faces, but they'd immediately know just how important Kasen was to me.

Finishing my cigarette, I walked back into the main sitting room of the house, everyone gathered around, absolutely fucking worthless. Nevertheless, everyone in the room belonged here, and if Kasen's mother and sister weren't such fucking selfish bitches, they'd also be here.

Renzo straightened when he saw me, and I knew that he was going to try to take Kasen from me once we got her back. Now, did I blame him? No. If it were my daughter, I'd probably feel the same way. In fact, if it'd been my daughter, I probably would have killed her husband already, something that I wasn't ruling out just yet. Renzo Milano may answer to the Sartoris now, but I also knew that he wasn't afraid to die for his family; he'd said as much the night that I had married Kasen.

"You should have let me go get her," Elio said, not for the first time.

I looked over at my brother. "So that they could kill you both?"

"I owe you," he said seriously, and this was the worst possible time for him to finally grow the fuck up.

“Not with your life,” I pointed out.

“As far as I’m fucking concerned, you *all* owe my daughter your lives,” Renzo snarled, anger lacing every word. “If I’d known that this was how you planned on taking care of my child, I would have taken my chances with the other families.”

“Now, relax a bit, Renzo,” Marco ordered calmly. “Pointing fingers doesn’t help the situation.”

Renzo shot my father a look of hatred. “Oh, really? Then tell me what fucking does, Marco? Tell me how relaxed you would feel if it were *your* child.”

“No one could predict-”

“I don’t care!” Renzo thundered. “Even with a guard on her, you guys couldn’t keep Kasen safe! Don’t give me fucking excuses!”

What Renzo didn’t know was that Rafael felt sick over what happened. When I had finally spoken to him, he’d been ready to put his neck onto the guillotine. However, how could I kill him for doing the same thing that I’d had? I had allowed Kasen to call the shots on her protection detail, and all Rafael had done was follow my instructions.

“We’ll get her back,” Marco stated, trying to appease my father-in-law.

“Yeah?” Renzo scoffed. “In what condition?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, not bothering to defend myself. “As long as we get her back, the rest of it can be worked out.”

Renzo’s hazel eyes reminded me so much of my wife’s eyes as they glittered with anger. “If you think that I’m going to leave her here with you after we get her back, then you better think again.”

“She’s my wife,” I reminded him through clenched teeth, doing my best to remember that he was a worried father right now. “She belongs with me.”

“No,” Renzo snapped. “She belongs with someone that can protect her, and that person is obviously not you.”

“She stays with me!” I roared, even though I had no right because Renzo wasn’t wrong. I had failed to protect the only thing in this world that mattered to me, and that was something that I was going to have to live with for the rest of my life.

“The fuck she is!” he roared back. “You’ll have to kill me first!”

“Okay, that’s enough,” my father ordered, stepping in. “Let’s all calm down-”

“No one is taking my wife from me!” I shouted, letting everyone in the room know where I stood.

“Someone already has!” Renzo yelled back, and if that wasn’t something that I already knew, I’d be leveled by his words. However, I was very aware of my failure to keep my wife safe, so there wasn’t much more that Renzo could say to me about it.

“Watch yourself, Milano,” Marco warned. “I will allow your rudeness only so far. You will watch how you speak to the Sartori Underboss.”

“What are you going to do, Marco?” Renzo sneered. “Kill me for speaking the truth?”

“True or not, my wife stays with me,” I said, stopping my father from challenging my father-in-law. “In fact, it’ll be over *my* dead body before I let you take her from me.”

Renzo’s chin lifted. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what Kasen says about it.”

“She has no fucking say, Renzo,” I growled. “This isn’t open for discussion.”

Twisting the knife in deeper, Renzo said, “I supposed I should just be happy if she comes back to us at all.”

“No matter what, I’m killing every single last one of them,” I vowed. “Even if I have to do it alone.”

“You know better than that,” Elio said. “This is a Family issue now.”

I glanced over at Aurelio, and he was leaning against the fireplace, always observing, never saying a word. Those black eyes of his looked blank, but I knew that his mind was racing a mile a minute. I knew Aurelio well enough to know that our counterattack was probably all planned out in his head already. No matter what, the Germans were going to pay for what they did to Kasen.

“Family or not, they’re not getting away with this,” I repeated, and Renzo just snorted, unimpressed.

Just then, Elio’s phone chimed with an incoming text. Every associate, soldier, and Capo had Elio’s number for emergencies. Only the Capos had my direct number, and even then, most of them called Aurelio first to check if their concerns were anything worth disturbing me for. Usually, Aurelio was able to take care of their issues, but I was still always in the loop.

Elio glanced down at his phone, then looked up over at me. “They’re there already. They just pulled up to the road that leads to the farmhouse.”

When Emil Schulz had finally called me back, he had given me the address to where they had Kasen, and even though an exchange was supposed to be made, I wouldn’t be surprised if Emil had left, leaving his men to handle the swap. Since things hadn’t gone down as planned, I could see him doing his best to save himself. Again, Emil Schulz was a narcissist of the highest order, and if he thought there was even the slightest chance that we’d be showing up to take them all out, he’d flee. While he had enough numbers to fight back, Renzo joining our family had given the Sartoris the advantage.

Short of having Morocco hack into government satellites, there were no eyes on the farmhouse. After Emil had given me the address, Morocco had been able to locate its whereabouts, but with no live feed. Now, could Morocco hack into government satellites? Yes. However, by the time he would finally be able to get in undetected, the exchange would already be made, so I hadn’t seen the point.

“It’s their heads if they don’t have that fucking camera on,” I said, warning Elio since he was in charge of the soldiers.

“They know,” he replied carefully, knowing that I was close to losing my temper. No matter our differences, my brother still knew me fairly well.

“The exchange should only take a couple of minutes,” Marco remarked, trying to ease the tensions threatening to boil over. “I’ll go make sure Dr. Chapman is all set up.”

Even though we hadn’t been able to see what happened in Kasen’s office, being carried out the way that she’d been, she could only have been drugged or knocked out, and both possibilities needed medical attention. Plus, as much as I hated to think about it, I had no idea what was being done to her at the farmhouse. It was a sickening feeling, but everyone knew what the go-to for breaking a woman was. While it wouldn’t make a difference to me in how I saw and felt about her, rape changed a woman, and how could it not? I had no idea if my wife would ever let me touch her again, and even if they hadn’t touched her in that way, did I even deserve to? The thought of never being able to touch Kasen again was almost crippling. However, it wasn’t worse than the idea of needing to touch another woman to satisfy myself if my wife never came around.

“Fuck!”

No one moved as the lamp slammed up against the wall, the entire thing shattering into a million pieces everywhere. The end table was next, and it wasn’t until Aurelio was yanking another lamp out of my hand that he ordered me to go have another cigarette, though he’d said it low enough for my ears only. After all, while he was the only other person in the room that knew how I truly felt about my wife, he still knew his place in public.

I listened, though I knew that having a cigarette wasn’t going to do shit.

Chapter 28

Kasen~

I was standing on the sagging porch of the deserted farmhouse, and the only positive thing that I could say at this point was that the guard-didn't know his name-had been kind enough to hold onto the arm that hadn't been shot.

Small favors.

When Emil Schulz had walked back into the farmhouse to call Nero, leaving the call on speaker again, he had agreed to the exchange, warning Nero that it'd better only be the two soldiers driving up to the address. After Nero had casually agreed, Emil had ordered the three guys inside to get rid of the two dead bodies, directing them to leave the corpses out in the woods for the animals. It hadn't been until I'd been escorted outside that I could see just how remote the farmhouse was. I imagined that they probably used this place a lot for this kind of thing.

I'd also been surprised at how many men with guns were here. Of course, they'd been expecting the Sartori Underboss to show up, so I could see how they might have felt the need for so many guns, but still. Close to twenty guys just for Nero Sartori?

"There they come," the guard uttered as a pair of headlights cut through the night. While there was a dim porch light adding a soft glow, it wasn't much to put a real dent in all the darkness around us. If a serial killer needed a place to take his victims, this place would definitely be ideal.

As the car came to a stop, I could feel my heart start beating faster in my chest. I wasn't sure if it was nervousness or anger that was causing it, but it was beating hard enough for everyone to hear if they tried. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't safe until I was miles away from this goddamn place and not a minute sooner. The place was littered with armed men, most of them angry that their plan had failed.

When I saw the car doors open, the guy on the left walked to the backseat, then opened the door, yanking a very alive

Ryan Buckner out of the car. Even from a distance, I could see what a blubbering mess he was. Granted, he'd just been delivered to his death, but still. Ryan had no one to blame but himself for this mess, and in all honesty, he'd already been a dead man the minute that he'd decided to borrow money from these people.

Once it was clear that no one else had come, Emil Schulz came out from inside the farmhouse, and nothing was worse than a coward, really. He'd been so tough just a few hours ago, but now he was just another bitch trying to overcompensate for his spinelessness.

“We'll let her go-”

“No,” the guy not holding Ryan called back, interrupting Emil's instructions. “We get her first.”

“We trade them at the same time,” Emil insisted.

The guy shook his head. “We have our orders, and if you think that we're going to risk our lives for disobeying them, you're wrong.”

“Kasen, I'm sorry!” Ryan cried out, and that's when I realized that my heart was beating erratically in anger, not nervousness.

Looking at Ryan now, it was hard to believe that I had actually considered him a friend once. I had actually looked back on our brief fling with fondness whenever I'd thought about it. I could remember all our late nights working, the laughs, the rants, the stress...all of it. I could even remember the hot sex, even though it'd been so long ago. We'd been somewhere between friends and a little more, and he had sold me out to settle a gambling debt.

Yeah, I was angry.

“No hard feelings, yeah?” Emil Schulz said as he looked back over at me. “After all, it was just business, *mein schatz*.”

The sad thing was that he wasn't lying. It was always ‘just business’ when it came to the Mafia. It was always about the bottom line, and if they couldn't profit from something, then they had no use for it. Ryan owed Emil money, and when he

had presented his stupid plan to Franz, greed had prevented Franz from seeing all the flaws in Ryan's plan. All these men had overestimated my importance, and now they were all going to pay for it. Regardless of how disposable I was, there was no way that Nero, Elio, and Marco Sartori were going to let this slight go unpunished.

"No hard feelings," I repeated, finding that I actually meant it. Everyone had choices, and all Emil had done was try to capitalize on an opportunity that had been presented to him.

Turning back to the Sartori soldiers, Emil said, "Let's get this over with, then. Send him over as soon as she's safely in the car, all nice and civil."

As soon as the guard let go of my arm, I stepped off the porch, and clutching my blouse closed, I walked in between the two rows of armed men, getting angrier and angrier by the second. Yeah, everyone had choices, and I had chosen to marry Nero when Papa had given me the choice not to. Nevertheless, that didn't take away from how angry I was feeling with each step.

In this life, it didn't matter if Nero never loved me. In this life, it didn't matter if he was unfaithful to me. In this life, it didn't even matter if he fathered children that weren't mine. The only thing that Nero Sartori was supposed to have done was keep me safe, and he hadn't. He hadn't because he hadn't been prepared for me; he hadn't been prepared for a wife with a demanding career. I had also underestimated what being a Mafia wife *truly* meant. Even though I had grown up in this world, for almost fifteen years, I'd been allowed to do whatever I'd wanted, and I had naïvely believed that I could continue to do so.

So, yeah, I was angry.

I was angry at everyone, including myself.

"Kasen, you have to believe me," Ryan sobbed as soon as I was standing in front of him, and that was all it took for me to lose my goddamn mind.

Pushing on the guard that was holding onto him, I reached inside his jacket, pulled out the gun that I knew would be in there, then turned and slammed it against Ryan's skull. I heard all the guns cock back around me, but I didn't care. This sonofabitch had gotten me shot, then almost raped and killed. Right now, fury had me not caring about the consequences; if they killed me, then so be it.

As soon as Ryan tumbled to the ground, I jumped on top of him, pistol whipping him with everything that I had. I was so enraged that I couldn't even feel the sting in my left arm from the bullet wound anymore. All I felt was Ryan's skull being crushed in by the force of the blows to his head, and it wasn't until the fragments of broken bone splattered back at me that I stopped beating him.

With my chest heaving, my clothes a bloody mess, and my hands shaking with more unspent anger, I stood up, looked down at a dying Ryan Buckner, then pointed the gun at him, emptying the entire clip into his chest. When the gun started clicking uselessly, I handed it back to the soldier that I'd taken it from, sure that he knew what to do with it after the fact.

When I glanced back at everyone, they all still had their guns aimed at me, everyone but Emil Schulz. He was still standing on the porch, his eyes wide in disbelief. The only sounds that could be heard were the woodland creatures nearby, and it was ironic how peaceful nature sounded at this moment.

"How much did he owe you?" I asked Emil.

Stepping off the porch, he answered, "One-hundred and fifty."

"You'll have it by the end of tomorrow night," I told him.

His eyes darted around. "Put your guns down," he ordered his men. As soon as they did, he asked, "You're going to pay his bill?"

"Since I'm the reason that he can no longer pay it, then that makes his debt mine now," I explained. "You made a deal to be able to collect payment from him, and I robbed you of that

opportunity. So, yeah, I'm going to pay his bill." I shot Emil a look. "After all, it's just business, right?"

Emil regarded me carefully for a few long seconds, and it was clear to see that he didn't know what to make of me. Hell, *I* didn't know what to make of me right now. I'd never taken someone's life before, and I was sure that once all the anger and adrenaline wore off, I was going to be a mess, but that was a crisis for another time. Right now, I needed to make this right, then get the hell out of here in one piece. I could look for a therapist later.

"I'm going to say that the debt has already been satisfied," Emil finally said, but that wasn't how this was going to end.

Over my dead body would I owe anyone.

"The money will be delivered here tomorrow night, even if I have to deliver it myself," I told him. "You can leave it here, burn it, give it to the homeless...I really don't care. However, it *will* be paid."

"Understood," he replied evenly.

Ignoring the two Sartori soldiers, I got into the backseat of the car, and I'd never been so grateful for tinted windows in all my life. I dropped my head back, closed my eyes, then prayed that my father was at the house. In this entire world, he was the only person that I trusted, and this was one of those moments when a girl just really needed her father.

"Are you ready to go, Mrs. Sartori?" the driver asked as he started the car.

Not even close.

Chapter 29

Nero~

“They’re here,” Elio announced after looking at his phone.

I could feel my heart threatening to beat out of my chest, and I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to hold it together if Kasen was seriously hurt or worse. The very idea of another man touching her had me ready to burn the city to the ground, and even if they hadn’t touched her in that manner, I still wasn’t certain that I wouldn’t go ahead and do it anyway.

When the soldiers walked into the house with her, I could actually feel my heart stop. Kasen was covered in so much blood that she looked like she just walked out of a horror movie.

“*La mia ragazza preferita,*” Renzo rushed out as he made his way to stand in front of her.

“It’s not mine,” she said. “I mean, some of it is, but not all of it.”

Just then, Dr. Chapman went to go stand next to Renzo. “Where are you hurt, dear?”

That’s when Kasen’s eyes scanned the room, taking in everyone that was here. If she was bothered that her mother and sister weren’t in attendance, she wasn’t showing it. In fact, she wasn’t showing much emotion, which suggested shock, though I couldn’t be too sure. When her eyes landed on mine, nothing registered, and the selfish part of me hoped that she was in shock. The alternative wasn’t acceptable to me. I would not accept losing her when I just fucking got her.

Looking back at Dr. Chapman, she said, “I was shot in my left arm and hit hard enough with a gun to knock me out. I was also backhanded across the face, but that’s not a big deal.”

“And the rest of the blood?” he asked carefully, like he didn’t want to spook her.

“Not mine,” she repeated.

Dr. Chapman smiled at her kindly. “Well, if you’ll follow me, we can get you all patched up.”

Kasen nodded before turning back to her father. “I need one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars before tomorrow night. Can you get it for me?”

“Of course,” he quickly answered.

“I can pay you back with my savings, and-”

“Stop it,” he scolded. “You will do no such thing.”

“What do you need that kind of money for?” I asked, finally speaking.

Kasen’s hazel gaze looked back my way. “I have a debt to settle.”

If I thought that I was furious before, that was nothing compared to how I was feeling now. “The fuck you do,” I snapped.

“Maybe you can discuss this later,” Dr. Chapman suggested. “I need to see to that bullet wound.”

I gave him a terse nod, but as soon as Kasen, Renzo, and Dr. Chapman were out of the room, I turned to Carmine. “What the fuck happened out there?”

“It’s all on the dash cam,” he answered. “We were making the trade, then as soon as she was standing in front of us, she grabbed Enzo’s gun, then started beating that fool in the head with it.”

“What?”

Carmine just nodded. “She pistol-whipped the fuck out of him. Then, as he lay dying, she stood up, then emptied the gun into his dead body.”

That answered my question about whether she was in shock or not.

“What’s this about money?” I asked.

“After she killed ol’ boy, she took on his debt, telling Schulz that she owed him since she was the reason that he

couldn't collect from the dead man," he explained. "You can see it all on the recording."

I pulled out my phone, then dialed Morocco. As soon as he answered, I said, "Erase all the camera feed from Milton that shows Meier and Buckner walking into Kasen's office. Glitch it out as soon as Meier makes his first appearance on the feed."

"Sure thing," he replied before hanging up.

I looked over at Aurelio. "With Ryan Buckner being reported as missing soon, Kasen can't be the last person to have seen him alive. I also need you to get her purse and things from her office. Everything needs to look like she left work like normal."

Aurelio nodded. "Me and Morocco will take care of it."

Turning back towards Carmine and Enzo, I asked. "How is she supposed to get the money to Schulz?"

"She said that she was going to drop it off at the farmhouse before the end of tomorrow night," Enzo answered. "She guaranteed the delivery, even if she had to deliver it herself."

Since Schulz had called me from Kasen's phone, I didn't have his number. However, some of his men might still be there if they had Buckner's dead body to dispose of.

"Wait right here," I ordered. "I'll get the money, then you guys can deliver it. I want this shit finished tonight."

They both nodded, and as soon as I turned to head into the basement, Aurelio was walking with me. While most people had their safes in their bedrooms or offices, I had three different safes, and the biggest one was located in a basement that only Aurelio and my father knew about. Even Elio didn't know that I'd had a walk-in safe built in the basement. It housed a small arsenal, bricks of gold, stacks of cash, and even some priceless art. However, it was mostly filled to the brim with guns.

As soon as we were down in the basement, Aurelio spoke freely. "You need to get it together, Nero. I can *see* that you're about to lose it."

“Those sonsofbitches shot my wife,” I seethed.

“And you’ll get your revenge soon enough,” he reminded me. “However, right now, this is about your wife. Even if she hadn’t been shot and knocked out, she just beat a man to death. Do you honestly think that she’s not going to wake up from this a fucking mess once the shock wears off?”

Opening the safe, I walked in, then grabbing a small black bag, I began stuffing it with cash. “I’ve got it handled.”

“No, you don’t,” he argued. “If you don’t want her going home with Renzo, then you need to get it the fuck together, Nero.”

“He’s not taking her from me!” I roared as I turned to look at my best friend. “She’s mine!”

“Then act like it!” he yelled back, the only man on the planet that would dare. “Nero, you’re going to lose her if you let your pride dictate your actions right now.” Aurelio was no longer shouting, but he didn’t need to shout to make his point. “Take your anger out on Schulz when the time comes.”

Handing Aurelio the bag, I said, “As long as Renzo doesn’t try to take her home with him, then I’ll be fine.”

My best friend shook his head as he took the bag from me. “Don’t say that I didn’t warn you.”

“Duly noted.”

Once we got back upstairs, Aurelio handed the bag to Carmine as I said, “Even if Schulz isn’t there, his men will know how to get a hold of him. Do not leave the cash until you’ve spoken to Schulz. I want him to *know* that the debt’s been paid before I kill every single one of those motherfuckers.”

“Of course,” Carmine replied.

When they left, I turned to finally address my brother and father, pulling out my cigarettes, not caring who objected. “I’ve got it from here.”

Elio looked like he didn’t believe me, but Marco just said, “We’ll give you tonight to get your wife situated, then we can

all meet tomorrow to discuss what's next."

"I already know what's coming next," I replied coolly before taking a hit of my cigarette.

"No matter what goes on behind closed doors, as far as the Russians and the Irish are concerned, *I'm* the Boss of this family, Nero," he said, stating facts. "We need to handle this professionally and carefully."

"They shot my wife," I reminded him.

Marco arched a brow. "Your *wife* came home to you covered in someone else's blood," he retorted. "I think it's safe to say that Kasen Milano can handle herself."

"Do not ever call her that again," I growled.

My father cocked his head, his brown eyes regarding me closely. Luckily, I didn't give a fuck what he saw when he looked at me. I didn't care if I was wearing my emotions for my wife on my sleeve. All I cared about was avenging Kasen and wiping out every single man that had dared to breathe the same air as my wife.

Choosing to play it safe, Marco said, "We will regroup tomorrow, then go from there."

"Fine," I conceded, needing to go check on Kasen anyway. While Dr. Chapman was the best, I still needed to see for myself that she was going to be okay.

Marco left without another word, but Elio had stopped on his way out. "We'll get them, Nero. Every last one of them."

"Of course," I agreed. "We're Sartoris."

Elio looked like he wanted to say something more, but what was there to say? The enemy had come knocking on our door, and we had answered it.

Chapter 30

Kasen~

Everyone was finally gone, and it'd taken a lot for me not to leave with my father. He had asked-pleaded even-but the look on Nero's face had been enough to convince me not to make things worse. The tension between my father and husband could be felt like it'd been a living, breathing, growing thing, and when it was all said and done, Papa was no longer a Mafia Boss where Nero was the Sartori Underboss. So, to keep the peace, I had declined to go home with my father, leaving me stuck at home with a pissed off Nero Sartori.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

I kept staring out at the landscape as Nero took a seat next to me on the balcony. Like everything else about his house, the balcony furniture was also tastefully expensive. It was actually comfortable enough that you could probably fall asleep on it.

I was also surprised that he had waited until after I'd taken a shower to begin peppering me with questions. I'd been certain that he'd demand answers as soon as I walked through the front door, but I guess I didn't know him as well as I'd thought. Granted, how well could you really get to know a person in only two weeks? No matter how he made me feel when he was inside me, I still didn't know him as well as most wives knew their husbands.

“What for?” I asked, and not to be combative, either. No matter what I said, Nero and his family were going to go after Emil Schulz, so what did the details matter?

“So that I can make them all suffer accordingly,” he replied, his voice even and smooth.

“I'm sure that you know exactly how badly you're going to make them suffer already,” I remarked. “I don't see how the details matter.”

“Are you upset because I told Schulz to kill you?” That had me looking over at him. “Since Schulz had me on speaker phone, I assumed that it was for your benefit.”

Since my phone wasn't the latest and greatest, it was easy to tell when someone was on speaker. Now, while I could afford the best, I wasn't materialistic. My phone worked just fine, and I didn't see the need for a new one until it stopped working. I was also mildly grateful that Emil had returned my phone to me after agreeing to the swap. It would have been an added inconvenience to replace it.

"No," I answered honestly.

"Kasen-"

"Do you want to know what's upsetting me?" I asked, interrupting whatever bullshit he'd been about to say in an attempt to placate me.

"What?"

"I'm upset that I *wasn't* surprised by what you did," I told him, and his back immediately straightened. "I had expected it, and that's what's bothering me."

"I'm not following."

"Choices, Nero," I said. "It's all about choices. It's always been about choices." I sighed, the pain medication finally doing its thing. "There are very few real victims in this world, and most of them are children. The rest of us have choices, though not always easy ones. I chose to marry you. Even when Papa had been willing to suffer the consequences of Fia's betrayal, I'd still chosen to marry you." I looked back out at the stunning landscape. "In doing that, I had also chosen to take responsibility for marrying you, and when Franz aimed that gun at me, do you want to know what he asked me?"

"What?"

I looked back over at my husband. "He asked me if I was willing to die for you."

"*Il mio cuore-*"

"Don't call me that," I said, my voice sounding as serious as it'd ever been. "Don't ever call me that again." His entire face hardened with that order. "You have no right to call me that. You never did."

“Kasen-”

“He asked me if I was willing to die for you,” I repeated, not wanting to get into a discussion about Nero’s feelings about me or mine about him. I was already in over my head, letting the incredible sex blur my vision, making me see things that hadn’t really been there; making me feel things that I shouldn’t have felt. “He had asked me if I was willing to die for you, and I’d said yes.” His russet gaze looked rueful, but I didn’t care. “After Franz shot me, he asked me again, adding if I was sure now that I had a bullet in my arm.” I could feel my chest tightened with emotions that were coming out of nowhere. I was never supposed to have fallen in love with my husband, especially after only two weeks. “I said yes again.”

“That’s enough, Kasen-”

“The fuck it is,” I hissed as I sat up straighter. “You don’t get to shut me up, Nero. You don’t get to tell me what to do anymore. At least, not tonight. Tonight, I *earned* the right to tell you what I think and feel.”

“Of course,” he replied softly, catching himself.

“By taking that bullet, by not begging for mercy, by not turning on you, I honored our agreement, my father, your family, and you. I did what I was supposed to do. I was willing to die for you; I *chose* to die for you and everything that I’d been raised to believe that we stood for.” I could feel my eyes begin to sting, but I’d pluck my own eyes out before I cried in front of this man. “Only to find out that you weren’t willing to do the same.”

“If I had shown up, they would have killed us both,” he replied, and I hated how calm and reasonable he sounded. “You have to know that, *il mio cuore*.”

“I told you not to call me that!” I screamed, standing up, feeling like everything was finally crashing down on my head.

Nero stood up, his hands up in mock surrender. “Baby, calm down,” he ordered evenly, his words deliberate. “You need to rest and-”

“I don’t need to rest,” I argued, though I did stop yelling. “Not until I tell you how things are going to be from now on.”

Nero’s jaw ticked in anger, and as he slid his hands in his pockets, I noticed that he did that whenever we were fighting. I wondered briefly if that was his way of making sure that he didn’t strangle me in the heat of the moment.

“And how do you believe things will be from now on?” he asked coolly.

“I have no plans on leaving you-”

“Good, because that’s something that I will *never* fucking allow,” he bit out.

I took in a deep breath, the fatigue coming back now that I was no longer screaming like a shrew. “I still plan on being the wife that my father promised you in the betrothal contracts between you and Fia. I will still do my part to help your empire succeed. I will still do my part not to bring shame to the Sartori name. I will still let you use me as you see fit. I will also still give you legitimate children when you decide you’re ready.”

“In exchange for what?” he asked, his voice hard.

“In exchange for nothing,” I answered honestly.

“Then what’s the catch?”

“You will get everything that you were promised,” I repeated. “Everything, except for the one thing that you weren’t, and that’s my love.” His entire body froze. “That’s the one thing that I still have control over, and if I’m ever lucky enough to find a man that deserves it, hopefully it’s after I’ve fulfilled all my obligations to you and your family.”

Nero was in my face before I knew it, his hold on my arm painful, and I could only be grateful that he hadn’t grabbed my left arm. “I will kill you before I see you with another man,” he seethed down at me. “I swear to God, Kasen.” He shook me a little and pain radiated inside my skull, confirming Dr. Chapman’s diagnosis of a mild head concussion. “I will see you dead before ever allowing you to fall in love with another man.”

Not giving a fuck, I wrenched my arm from his hold. “I’m tired,” I told him. “I’m also done with this conversation.”

“The fuck you are-”

“What?” I scoffed, my head throbbing. “You’re going to keep me up all night to fight?”

That seemed to remind him that I wasn’t well. “My apologies-”

“I’ll also pay you back the money,” I told him, and the man looked like he was two seconds away from pitching me over the balcony rail. “My father told me that you paid Emil.”

“You are *not* paying me back-”

“Then Emil Schulz will have three-hundred-thousand dollars to spend, because I’m paying that money, no matter what you say,” I insisted. “I refuse to owe *anyone*.”

“I’m not anyone,” he snapped. “I’m your fucking husband.”

“Yeah, I know,” I replied, exhaustion hitting me with enough force to make me turn from him, then head to bed. After all, as of right now, I still had to go to work on Monday, and I could only hope that Nero didn’t take that away from me also.

Chapter 31

Nero~

Normally, meetings like this one were held at my father's house with all the Capos in attendance. However, because what we were doing required absolute secrecy until we put our plan into action, we were at my house with only a few of us here, in on what was happening.

We were all in my office, but instead of me sitting behind my desk like a dick, I was leaning up against it, Marco, Renzo, Elio, and Aurelio all in here with me. Elio's guard, Costas, and Marco's consigliere, Victor, were also here. While I wasn't sure if Elio and Costas were as close as Aurelio and I were, I knew that he was trustworthy and that my brother thought very highly of him.

"Now that we have the green light, what's next?" Elio asked, and as much as I wanted to go in there with all guns blazing, I knew that we couldn't. While we'd just been given the green light to take out Emil Schulz, if we did it like savages, then the Russians and Irish might rethink their position on all this. After all, no one wanted to deal with a feral animal, and I was still feeling very fucking feral.

Nevertheless, money did talk, and when we presented our business deal with the other two families, they had eagerly agreed. Sure, we'd gotten their 'sympathies' and a bunch of talk about how they didn't blame me after hearing what happened, but that'd all been bullshit. No one cared about my wife, least of all the Irish Mob or the Russian Bratva. Emil Schulz had presented them each with gifts worth millions and it wasn't even Christmas.

We had agreed to split Emil's territory evenly, giving Declan O'Brien a leg up over the Russians because we had offered him the northern border, which gave them access to a nearby airport across state lines. Emil's territory had always been boxed in between us and the Irish, so it was easier for O'Brien to take over the northern section, leaving the Russians with the rest. Offering Declan the opportunity first had

ensured that Avgust Kotov would agree to take what was offered to him. We already outnumbered the Russians by a few hundred, but with the Irish on our side, Avgust didn't stand a chance if he'd wanted to fight for more.

However, the agreement didn't make us all friends. Even though our numbers were a lot stronger now that I was married to Kasen and the Milanos had joined us, I knew that Declan and Avgust were hoping for a bloodbath. If the Germans managed to put a dent into our resources, then both Declan and Avgust would come for us, hoping to take ownership of the ports. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if one or both of them gave Emil a heads up about us coming for them. Of course, Emil Schulz already knew that we were coming for him. No matter what, he knew that there was no way that his actions would go unpunished. Besides, it was all about semantics. I had agreed to the trade if he returned my wife unharmed, and the bullet wound in her arm and her mild concussion was not unharmed.

"Schulz will be expecting us," Aurelio answered. "So, whatever we do, we need to plan it carefully, and we need to bring Morocco in on the planning. We need a surprise attack if we can." He let out a humorless laugh. "I wouldn't be surprised if O'Brien or Kotov haven't already tipped him off."

"I was thinking the same thing," I agreed.

"Schulz will definitely be expecting me, so I can act as the diversion," Renzo suggested, and while it sounded like a good start, all I could think about was how Kasen would never forgive me if I got her father killed. "If he kills me, then even better. He'll think it's over, maybe let his guard down."

"I am not sending you in there to get killed," I bit out. "I still have to be able to look my wife in the eyes, Renzo."

"Because you can now?" he challenged, making me step away from my desk.

"Oh, hey," Marco said, stepping in front of me. "Now is not the time."

I stared at my father-in-law. “I’ve given you a lot of leeway because I know how close you and Kasen are, but if you keep testing me, I’ll show you exactly why I’m the youngest Underboss in Sartori history. I mean it, Renzo. Keep fucking around and find out.”

“Why can’t we just go in shooting?” Elio asked. “We outnumber them, don’t we?”

Marco let out a frustrating sigh. “And that is why you’re always getting into trouble, Elio. You’re constantly acting before thinking things through.”

“I want this done tonight,” I announced. “I want Morocco on this, then after he’s gotten us everything that we need, I want to hit them tonight. Schulz is going to think that we’ll need a few days to form a plan and bring everyone up to speed, so while he might be expecting us, he won’t be expecting us tonight.”

“Plus, it’ll give O’Brien and Kotov less time to form an alliance with Schulz,” Aurelio added.

I looked over at my brother. “I guess this is the one time when Elio might be right.”

My brother grinned. “It was bound to happen.”

“Besides, we’re already war-ready, so it’s not like we need that much of an advanced notice,” Costas remarked. “I’m willing to bet that Schulz will have most of his men with him in a futile attempt to protect him. I don’t think that we’ll need to go far to hunt them all down.”

“He has a point,” Victor said, finally giving his two cents, feeling useful for the first time in ages. Everyone knew that Aurelio was my consigliere, regardless of the picture that Marco and Victor presented to the rest of the family.

“Then it’s decided,” Marco agreed. “We’ll let Morocco in on what’s going on, then we’ll all meet back here at six.”

“Go home and kiss your wives goodbye, gentlemen,” Elio smirked. “Shit is bound to get bloody tonight.”

As everyone began leaving the room, I called out to my father-in-law. “Renzo, do you have a moment?” Even though I’d phrased the words like a question, it hadn’t been, and he was wise enough to recognize that.

Hanging back, he waited until everyone else was gone. “What did you need?”

I thought back to last night, and I was man enough to admit that I was still wrestling with the fact that my wife’s plan was to never love me if she could help it. When she had reiterated her promise to honor the original betrothal contract, I’d already known that there’d be a catch. Nothing was ever that easy, and when I was in love with my wife the way that I was, her withholding her love from me was the worst thing that she could probably ever do to me, even worse than cheating on me. While I would still kill any man that dared to touch her, everyone knew that nothing was more powerful than a woman’s love.

“I will pay you back the money that you delivered last night,” I informed him. “Kasen’s debts are mine, something that I’m sure you can appreciate.”

“I can afford any commitments that my daughter makes,” he replied smoothly.

“While I’m sure that you can, she is my *wife*,” I reminded him for the millionth time. “I need you to understand something, Renzo.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“The only reason that I haven’t put a bullet through your head for your blatant disrespect is because of Kasen,” I told him truthfully. “If she didn’t love you so fucking much, your family would have buried you already.” His hazel eyes glittered with anger. “So, this will be the last time that I tell you to get your shit together. I am not going to spend the rest of my life bumping dicks with you, upsetting Kasen when she doesn’t need to be.”

“Don’t act like you care about her,” he shot back. “We both know the truth.”

A couple of inches shorter than me, I leaned down in my father-in-law's face. "You don't know shit about how I feel about my wife," I snapped. "Nevertheless, whether I love her or hate her, that doesn't change the fact that she's my wife, Renzo. She belongs to *me*."

"Fine," he spat. "Just as long as you know that I have no problems dying for her." I immediately knew what that meant. If Kasen asked him to help her escape me, then he would.

"I think now is a good time for you to take your leave, Mr. Milano," I ordered, straightening before I killed him.

"I think that you're right, Mr. Sartori," he replied coolly.

After Renzo took his leave, I pulled out a cigarette and smoked that motherfucker like it was the only oxygen in the room. I felt calm yet out of control all at the same time, and I'd never felt this way before. I'd always been the levelheaded one. I was known for always being reasonable and ready, but I felt neither right now. I felt like Elio, ready to paint the streets red, not caring about any consequences that might come my way afterwards.

As soon as I finished my cigarette, I made my way up to my bedroom, and I took a seat in the rocking chair, watching my wife sleep. Dr. Chapman had given her the good stuff, and after we'd fought last night, Kasen had fallen into a deep slumber, and thank God. Had she not been passed out on pain medication, she never would have let me hold her all night long like I'd had.

While I was confident enough to know that I was going to make it out alive tonight, avenging Kasen only strengthened my position as the Sartori Underboss. Tonight was not going to matter where Kasen was concerned. I could bring her a pile of bodies, and it still wouldn't endear her to me. I'd lost any chance that I'd had with my wife, and now I needed to do whatever I could to fix that.

Chapter 32

Kasen~

While I looked like shit and was still sore as hell, that hadn't stopped me from showing up to work this morning. Everyone had been so concerned about me after my horrible 'car accident', and they'd been quick to offer their help if I needed anything. There'd also been some whispers of Ryan not showing up, but I had ignored those. Two days later, I still didn't know how I felt about what I'd done. I probably still wasn't done processing this weekend, but as of right now, I didn't feel sorry for killing Ryan. It was hard to feel guilty when he had put my life on the line first.

I also hadn't seen Nero since our argument Friday night. I had slept most of Saturday away, Dr. Chapman being kind enough-*or ordered*-to check on me throughout the day. It hadn't been until I'd gone down to make some soup that I'd notice how eerily quiet it'd been in the house. There'd also been more guards stationed on the grounds than usual, and it'd only taken me a few seconds to figure out why. When I'd seen the missed calls from my mother, that'd been enough to confirm my suspicions.

At any rate, when I'd been ready to leave for work this morning, Rafael had been waiting for me, and he hadn't looked happy about it. In all honesty, I'd been surprised to see him still alive, but then when I remembered how replaceable I was, I just laughed instead.

Unfortunately for me, as soon as I'd shown up for work this morning, my secret had gotten out. Since Rafael refused to wait outside like before, I had tried to explain him away as my help while I was injured, but Rafael had quickly put an end to that when he had also mentioned that he was my guard and why. Though I'd been wearing my wedding rings for two weeks now, it was like no one had noticed until Rafael had mentioned me being married to Nero Sartori.

So, with Rafael sitting outside my office, my afternoon pretty much clear for a Monday, I actually thought about going

home before the powers that be divvied up Ryan's work to the rest of us. No matter how good Ryan was at his job, the senior partners weren't going to wait long for him to show up. Besides, refusing to wear a sling, I needed to get home, take some ibuprofen, then elevate my arm.

However, before I could pack it up for the day, Myra was walking into my office with a guy that was pretty good-looking if anyone were to ask me. He kind of reminded me of an older Oliver Ekman-Larsson, and what hockey players weren't sexy?

"Oh, great," she gushed. "You're still here."

Sitting up straighter, I smiled at her and the stranger. "I am."

"This is Noah Murphy, and he'd been hoping to see Ryan, but..." She gave me a nervous smile. "Do you have time for a consult?"

"Of course," I automatically answered.

"Oh, great," she said, breathing a sigh of relief. "Then... then I'll leave you to it."

As soon as Myra left, Noah Murphy took one of the seats in front of me, and though he might have fooled Myra in that suit, I knew better. There was something in his blue eyes that already had me knowing what this was, and I was getting really fucking sick of this shit. I also knew that Rafael would have made him had it not been for Myra walking him in here, which was probably why he'd done it.

"So, tell me, do you see Ryan making it in to work at all this week, Mrs. Sartori?" he asked, and while still good-looking, I wanted to smack that smugness off his face.

Stretching my neck back, cracking the tension, when I looked back over at him, I said, "Look, I don't have time for more bullshit. If Emil sent you to kill me, then just fucking do it already."

His brows rose in surprise, then his lips twitched before saying, "Emil didn't send me."

“Sure, he didn’t,” I scoffed.

“You really don’t know?”

That had me lifting my chin. “I don’t appreciate being mocked, no matter why you’re here, Mr. Murphy. In fact, is that even your real name?”

His blue eyes glittered with interest. “Noah Murphy is my real name.”

“Well, good for fucking you,” I bit out, so fucking tired of men. Nevertheless, if that was his real name, then Emil Schulz hadn’t sent him; Declan O’Brien had.

“I’m here because my boss would like to meet you,” he stated, finally telling me what he was doing here.

“Why in the hell would Declan O’Brien want to meet *me*?” When his brows rose in surprise again, I added, “Don’t forget, Mr. Murphy, while I might be signing my name Kasen Sartori now, I used to sign it Kasen Milano. I know exactly who your boss is. I also know who Avgust Kotov is.”

“Fair enough,” he conceded.

“So, again, why in the hell would Declan O’Brien want to meet with me?”

“Because he’s curious,” he answered.

“Curious about what?” I asked. “And before you think of fucking me around, I warn you that I am not in the fucking mood.” His lips twitched again, and a part of me thought he looked impressed, but that could also be the after-effects of the pain medication.

“You’ve heard of Helen of Troy, yes?” I nodded. “Well, Declan is curious about the woman that launched a thousand semi-automatic weapons that wiped out the entire Schulz syndicate this weekend.”

I could feel the blood rushing through my veins, my heart beating faster. “What?”

“You really didn’t know?”

“Do I look like I would have been consulted?” I asked dryly.

“Well, with the Germans out of the picture now, Nero was kind enough to gift us with a third of their territory.” Noah grinned. “You know, since they won’t be needing it anymore.”

Nero had spent all weekend wiping out the Germans, and honestly, I didn’t know how I felt about that. Oh, I’d known that he’d retaliate, but I hadn’t believed that he’d really kill them all. I had expected some sort of negotiations since it was always about business with these men.

“How kind of him,” I deadpanned.

Noah’s lips twitched again. “Declan would like to thank you personally for our good fortune. After all, had it not been for you, none of this would have happened.”

“If that’s the case, then you should be thanking Ryan Buckner for your good fortune. After all, if it hadn’t been for his stupidity, then none of this would have happened,” I corrected.

“Well, we can’t very well do that since you killed him, can we?”

While I had no idea how he knew that, it didn’t matter. However, it did matter what Declan O’Brien knew, and if he thought that he was going to be able to intimidate me or blackmail Nero, he was wrong. I was not going to live my life looking over my shoulder, worried about the goddamn Irish.

“Tell your boss that I’ll meet him at Monroe’s in fifteen minutes,” I said.

“That’s not how this works-”

“He can meet me at Monroe’s in fifteen minutes, or he can meet Nero later,” I told him. “I honestly don’t care either way, Mr. Murphy.” I gave him a pointed look. “You might also want to let him know that my guard will be going with me.”

Noah bit the bottom of his lip before pulling his phone out, and I leaned back in my seat, awaiting the verdict. Growing up in this life, you’d think that I’d be used to overbearing men,

but this was beginning to be a little too much for me. I couldn't have these assholes showing up at my office every week just to test me. I really, genuinely, truly had better things to do.

"She said that she'll meet you at Monroe's in fifteen minutes," Noah spoke into the phone. "It's that or you can meet with Sartori, she said. Her guard will also be attending the meeting, just so you know." A few seconds went by before he said, "Okay, I'll let her know."

When he hung up, I asked, "What's it going to be?"

"He'll meet you at Monroe's in fifteen minutes," Noah confirmed. "The reservation will be under O'Brien. He will also have someone with him since you insist on bringing a guest."

"Perfect," I drawled out.

Noah Murphy stood up, grinning down at me. "It really was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Sartori."

I stood up, even though it took some effort. "Mr. Murphy?"

"Yes?" he asked as he buttoned his suit jacket.

"The next time that you show up here, it better be to kill me," I told him. "Not only do I no longer fear death, but I also don't have the time, desire, nor the energy to deal with you people."

"You people?" he chuckled.

"At least Nero has the decency to leave me the hell alone," I informed him. "That's more than I can say for the rest of you."

Noah's smile was genuine enough to turn him from good-looking to gorgeous. "It really was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Sartori. Really."

"Glad I could make your day," I replied sarcastically.

The jerk threw me a wink before leaving my office, and I sat back down, needing a minute. Even though I was the one that agreed to this, I was beginning to feel the weight of this

day hitting me hard. Nevertheless, I grabbed my purse from the drawer, then stood again to lock up, then let Rafael know that we had a business dinner to attend.

It'd taken every single one of those fifteen minutes to get me to Monroe's because I wasn't moving as quickly as I normally did. Still, when I walked up to the hostess podium, giving her Declan O'Brien's name, she had rushed to escort me and Rafael to Declan's table, the Irish Boss already seated with his guard.

When I approached the table, Declan immediately stood up, and at this moment, I hated that manners were sexy on a man. I should not be thinking anything positive about Declan O'Brien ever. He was just as highhanded as the rest of them, and I hadn't been lying when I'd told Noah that I didn't have any desire to deal with this bullshit.

Once I was seated, Declan sat back down, then got right to the point. "Is it possible for us to speak privately?"

"As long as my escort still has a clear view of you, so that he can shoot you in the head should it become necessary," I agreed.

Declan grinned. "Noah said that you were something else." He looked over at Rafael. "That table over there gives you plenty of access to Mrs. Sartori."

"As long as your guard is keeping me company, then I'll allow it," Rafael replied smoothly, and that almost had me grinning myself.

Within seconds, Declan and I were alone at the table, and wanting to go home, I asked, "What am I doing here, Mr. O'Brien?"

"Honestly, Noah wasn't lying to you," he answered. "I really just wanted to meet the woman that has Nero Sartori painting the streets red for her."

I laughed.

I laughed, and when I was done, I literally had to dry my eyes.

“What’s so funny?” Declan asked as he cocked his head at me.

“The way that you guys keep making me out to be more important than I am,” I answered truthfully. “My marriage to Nero was an arrangement between our fathers. He doesn’t love me, or even particularly like me much. He did what he did because he’s a Sartori and Emil Schulz dared to fuck with him. This weekend has nothing to do with me.”

“It’s rumored that you took a bullet for him,” he remarked, and men really were worse gossips than women. “It was said that you were willing to die for him.”

“Do you know what the problem is with you men?”

“By all means, tell me,” he chuckled.

“You continuously underestimate women,” I told him. “You’ve been raised to believe that women are nothing but accessories to this lifestyle.” I leaned my arms on the table. “What I did had nothing to do with Nero. Don’t you get it? Nero Sartori can do or say whatever he wants. He can sleep with as many other women that he wants to. He can order his enemies to kill me once a week if that’s his deal. This isn’t about him; this is about *me*.” I could feel my heart beating faster again, and at this rate, I was bound to have a heart attack from the stress before I was even thirty-five. “This is about *my* word. This is about *my* honor. This is about *my* integrity. This is about *my* loyalty. I did what I did because my word means something to *me*, even if it doesn’t mean anything to anyone else.” I leaned back in my chair. “So, the next time that you send someone to my office, it better be to kill me, Mr. O’Brien, because I will *never* betray the Sartoris. Not because I love Nero, but because my father promised that his daughter would be everything that a Mafia Underboss deserved, and I am not about to let my father down.”

Declan’s blue eyes regarded me carefully before saying, “Nero Sartori will never deserve you.”

I chuckled darkly at that. “I’ve got news for you, Mr. O’Brien; *no* man deserves everything that a woman does for

him. If she's lucky, he might actually love her back. Still, even then, he'll never deserve all of her."

"I think you might be right," he murmured.

I stood up, done with this conversation. "Noah said that you wanted to meet me, well...you've met me," I told him. "Now, if you don't mind, I've had a long goddamn day, and it has nothing to do with my concussion or bullet wound."

Declan stood up, inclining his head a bit. "My apologies, Mrs. Sartori."

"You know what? We can quit with the Mrs. Sartori nonsense," I said. "My name is Kasen. I'm Kasen Milano, and no matter the ring on my finger, I'm no more a Sartori than you are."

"I think that you're more of a Sartori than you think," he countered.

"Goes to show what you know," I replied before leaving him to think whatever he wanted.

Chapter 33

Nero~

I slammed the door behind me, unable to believe that I could still feel this angry after just annihilating hundreds of men. You'd think that I'd be tired and that my fury would be spent. However, the second that Rafael had called me to tell me that Kasen was meeting with Declan O'Brien, any tiredness that I'd been feeling had vanished immediately.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I stormed into the bedroom just as Kasen was kicking off her shoes and removing her suit jacket. My wife looked exhausted, but I was too pissed off to take that into consideration.

“What in the fuck do you think you're doing?” I seethed.

Kasen dropped her jacket on the bed before turning to face me. “Excuse me?”

Her casual tone had me nearly burning down the place. “What in the fuck are you meeting with Declan O'Brien for, Kasen?”

Her hazel eyes looked like they were shooting daggers, but she still looked tired. “And what would you have me do when an Irishman from the O'Briens shows up at my office to inform me that they're aware that I killed Ryan Buckner?” she fired back. “He said that Declan wanted to meet me, so I met with him, Nero.”

“You should have fucking called me!” I thundered.

“For what?!” she yelled back. “The last time that you were called to handle a situation that I got dragged into, you told them to kill me!” She shot me a look that would have leveled a lesser man. “Sorry if you're not the first person I think of when I need a hero.”

I clenched my fists at my sides, anger and pride swirling dangerously inside my chest. “If you think that I won't keep you prisoner in this house, then you're very mistaken, Kasen. While I've done my best to allow you to continue with your career, I won't lose any sleep if you lose your job.”

She lifted her chin like I hadn't just slaughtered an entire family bloodline for her this weekend. "Then do it, Nero," she dared me. "You're always going to do whatever it is that you want to do anyway, so you can quit with the threats."

Ignoring that, I asked, "What did O'Brien want?"

"I already told you," she hissed. "He just wanted to meet me."

"Bullshit!"

"It's the truth!"

Taking a step back from her, I let out a low, long, it-better-fucking-calm-me-down breath. "What did he say?" I asked as calmly as I could.

Unaware of how close I was to losing my shit, she answered, "Ask him yourself."

"Oh, make no mistake," I snarled at her. "I plan to."

"Then leave me the hell alone, Nero," she shot back. "I'm tired, my arm and head hurt, and I just want to take a shower, then go to bed. Unlike you, I don't get to make my own work hours."

"What. Did. He. Say?" I repeated, praying that she knew better than to keep testing me.

"Ask. Him. Yourself," she answered again.

I had her by the throat, never imagining that I could ever feel this level of rage at her. "I will not ask again, Kasen," I warned her. "I swear to God, if you don't answer me, I will make sure that I am the *only* person that you're able to speak to for the rest of your life." I leaned down in her face. "If you think that I'm going to stand back and watch you crawl into bed with my enemy, then you are very mistaken."

Her hazel gaze widened, shock etched all over that fucking gorgeous face of hers. I didn't care if I was showing weakness. I didn't care if she could see the deepest parts of me. I didn't have anything if I didn't have this woman.

As far as Declan O'Brien was concerned, I knew that he wasn't a real threat. While we outnumbered both the Irish and the Russians, the Russians outnumbered the Irish, so there was no way that O'Brien would get into bed with the Bratva. With the Russians outnumbering them, there'd be nothing stopping Avgust Kotov from taking over everything if they got together to take us out; O'Brien knew this. That same logic could be applied to any of us thinking of aligning ourselves with the enemy, so that alone was enough to keep everyone in check. Besides, everyone had more than enough after recent events, so everyone's greed was satisfied for the time being. It was a delicate balance, one that we all understood very well.

So, what in the fuck did Declan O'Brien want with my wife?

"You're jealous," she stated, surprised that I would be.

"Just a couple of nights ago, my wife told me that she's never going to love me," I reminded her. "Then I find out that she's meeting with one of my enemies." I tightened my hold on her neck. "Tell me why I *shouldn't* be jealous."

Her eyes flashed, and this fucking woman had more pride than a hundred men. "Because I also told you that I would honor my vows until I gave you however many legitimate children you needed."

"Then I guess I'll just keep you barefoot and fucking pregnant," I threatened.

"May I take a shower now?" she asked, her voice steady but tired.

I let go of her neck. "We're not done talking about this, *il mio cuore*."

"I told you to quit calling me that."

"You told me a lot of things," I replied. "Things that I'm not ready to accept yet, if ever."

"Nero-"

"What did he say, Kasen?"

“The conversation lasted all about ten minutes, Nero,” she said. “He said he was curious about the woman that Nero Sartori married.”

“What else?”

“Nothing,” she bit out, glaring at me. “He was just trying to feel me out, see what I was about. When I let him know that I wouldn’t be intimidated or blackmailed by whatever he thought he knew about Ryan, that was the end of the conversation.”

She was lying.

Now, while what she was saying was probably true, I knew Declan O’Brien well enough to know that more was said. Declan wouldn’t have risked my wrath just to exchange pleasantries with my wife. Plus, according to Rafael, they’d been at the restaurant for a lot longer than that simple conversation.

“I’m only going to say this once, Kasen,” I told her. “You will never meet with Declan O’Brien again. You will also never meet with Avgust Kotov if he tries.”

“Anything else?”

I let out a deep breath, wondering what in the fuck I was going to do with this goddamn woman. I’d wanted the fire that I’d seen that day in the courtroom, and I was getting it in spades. While I’d wanted a warrior at my side, I just hadn’t expected the war to be between us.

“Go take your shower,” I said, finally granting my permission. “I’ll bring you up something to eat.”

“I’m not hung-”

“I didn’t ask if you’re hungry!” I roared, my anger getting the best of me.

Realizing that I was finally at the end of my rope, Kasen let out a shaky breath, saying nothing more. After the other weekend, I’d been certain that we had turned a page in our relationship, but now we were right back where we’d started. Hell, we weren’t even back at where we’d started; we were

way worse. Kasen acted like she truly hated me, and I didn't know what to do with that. People could believe what they wanted, but all I'd been thinking about when we'd taken Schulz out had been my wife. I hadn't been thinking about the Sartori name, my reputation, respect, money, territory, or anything like that. All I'd thought about was how someone had dared to harm my wife. Feared Mafia Underboss or boring insurance adjustor, I still would have killed for my wife. I was so fucking in love with this woman that it was becoming dangerous and destructive.

"I'm tired, Nero," she repeated.

Clenching and unclenching my fists, I counted to ten before saying, "Go take your shower, and I'll go make you something to eat." Kasen wisely kept quiet this time. "Do you need anything more from me?"

"No, thank you," she replied coldly but politely.

"Il mio cuore-"

"I'm fine," she lied. "I just want to take a hot shower, then get some rest."

An hour later, I was bringing Kasen's food to her just as she was coming out of the shower. With her arm still healing, her movements were slow, but I knew better than to offer her any help. While nothing would give me greater pleasure than helping my wife in the shower, the past few days were finally catching up with me, and I really was tired of fighting with her. Luckily for me, Elio was trying to prove himself, so he and Aurelio were handling our newest areas of territory. If Kasen hadn't been shot, everyone would be expecting me to be handling business as expected. However, everyone was learning rather quickly how I really felt about my wife. Even my father-in-law couldn't deny it any longer.

Now, if just my wife would believe it.

Chapter 34

Kasen~

I thought that nothing would be able to wake me up after that hot shower. Between my pride forcing me to show up to work, that nonsense with Declan O'Brien, fighting with Nero, and the food that Nero had bullied me into eating, I hadn't even needed pain medication to knock me out for the night. Shortly after eating, I had fallen asleep, the rest welcomed and needed.

However, Nero's grip on my thighs and his tongue in between my legs had me waking up from a deep sleep that I should be insisting on. Even if I didn't need the rest, I should be pushing him away after everything that'd happened. Granted, I had promised to let him continue to use me as he saw fit, but it was clear that it'd been a huge mistake to promise him that. When we'd gotten married, I'd been prepared for a marriage without emotions, but that's not what I'd gotten. This marriage was full of nothing *but* emotions, and I had no idea if I was going to be able to distance myself from my husband like I was hoping. Nero made me feel everything, whether we were fighting or screwing.

When Nero's tongue slid around my clit, my hands automatically slid into his hair, and it was hard to remember how much I was supposed to hate him. With his hands on my thighs, his tongue working its magic, and the way that he made out with my pussy, it was so hard to remember that I wasn't supposed to want him.

"Oh, God..." I moaned, forgetting about my pride for the moment.

Nero just groaned against my center, his tongue doing its thing. When I'd gone to sleep, it'd been in my customary t-shirt and panties, so I wasn't surprised that Nero had gotten this far, this easily without waking me up first. If left up to my husband, I'd sleep naked, something that he'd stated on our first night like this together.

It wasn't long before Nero was sliding two fingers inside my soaked mess, and my entire body arched with how thick

his fingers felt inside me. No matter what Nero did to me, I felt it everywhere. No matter how much I wanted to hate him, his hands on my body made me stupid. No matter how strong I wanted to be, it was undeniable that I was attracted to my husband. It also sucked that I cared for him, something that I wished I could lie about.

As soon as that third finger found its way inside my newest kink, my fingers tightened in Nero's hair, my orgasm rocking my body hard enough to threaten another headache. If Nero's plan was to make me come around by keeping me satisfied in bed, then I couldn't see myself lasting long. I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with this man, and if this was his way of winning every argument, then I didn't stand a chance.

I let out a shaky breath as Nero kissed his way up my body, his hands pushing up my shirt. Limp, I let Nero remove the fabric, leaving me naked underneath him, and the warmth of his body was enough to make me fall back asleep after that orgasm. I was feeling satisfied and free, if only for a few minutes.

When I felt Nero's mouth on my left breast, a low sigh escaped, his mouth and tongue working it like they'd done my pussy. His teeth nipped at my hardened peak, and all I could do was moan as his other hand took my other breast in its palm. I felt useless as he switched breasts, back and forth, lavishing each one with equal attention. The more that he sucked on them, the wider my legs spread, wrapping around his waist, just waiting for him to do his worst.

"I'll never let you go," he said against my flesh. "I will never let you go, and this past weekend will be nothing compared to what I'll do if anyone ever tries to take you from me again."

I knew that possessiveness didn't equal love; *I knew this*. Nevertheless, it was hard not to blur the lines when Nero said things like that while owning my body the way that he did. If he would just use me, it'd be easier. If he treated this like a transaction, instead of something more...

“Baby...” he growled as his lips moved up towards my neck, the rest of his body positioning itself where it needed to be.

While wishing that I was stronger, I still moaned as Nero’s teeth latched onto the delicate skin of my neck, his dick sliding into me achingly slow. I knew that he was trying his best to be mindful of my arm, but it felt like torture as I felt every inch stretching me wide, making me not care about my damn arm.

“Nero...” I panted when he finally bottomed out, the feeling euphoric.

“That’s it, baby,” he coaxed, making another mark on my neck. “Take my dick like a good girl.”

Nero didn’t make me feel like a good girl whenever he was splitting me in two. Instead of making me feel like a good girl, he made me feel dirty, and he made me like it. That day in my office played on my mind *a lot*, something that I never imagined that I would crave.

“Don’t stop...” I whimpered as his hips started that rhythm as old as time.

“Never, *il mio cuore*,” he grunted as he moved deeper and harder inside me, my legs wrapping around his waist tightly, holding him close to me.

Done marking me, Nero braced himself on his arms, looking down at me as he kept sliding in and out of me torturously. It felt like he was trying to drive me insane, giving me just enough to make me beg for more. His slow, deep, purposeful thrusts felt good enough to almost make me forgive him for anything.

My nails dug deep into the sinewy muscles of his back, and Nero rocked into me with a steady rhythm that was making me moan like a desperate slut. My moans, his grunts, and the bed moving beneath us were the only things that could be heard in the room, and the sounds were all tied together in a perfect symphony by the wet sounds of my body accepting his.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” Nero grunted above me. “I’ll never get enough of what you do to me.”

I bit my lip.

Afraid that I might say something that I'd surely regret, I bit my lip.

"You're mine, *il mio cuore*," he insisted, his hips moving faster. "You are fucking mine."

My hips started pushing back, my body pulling him in deeper. Though he was filling me up completely, he was purposely dragging my pleasure out, refusing to give me what I needed. Nero was edging me, and I recognized it for the powerplay that it was. Though he genuinely had no cause to ever feel jealous, he'd admitted to feeling that way earlier, and this was my punishment for daring to make him feel that way.

"Nero, please..."

"Please, what?" he demanded. "Tell me what you need, baby."

"I need you," I choked out, hating that I did. I didn't want to need *anything* from him, but I needed him for this. I'd never had a man make my body sing like this before, and it was an addicting feeling.

"You've got me, *il mio cuore*," he grunted, his thrusts quickening. "Only you."

As that familiar feeling of ecstasy began building deep in my core, my legs locked around Nero's waist, my fingernails broke the skin on his back, and then I came hard enough to see white spots dance behind my eyes, my entire body shaking with a release so powerful that I feared the truth of just how much I cared about this man that didn't deserve anything from me.

"*Nero...*" I cried out as another orgasm shook me, my body trembling deliciously.

"I love you, *il mio cuore*," he growled as I came all over him. "I have always fucking loved you, Kasen."

I let out another cry, "Nero, don't stop..."

"It's always been you," he snarled, his cock hitting me deep enough to hurt. No longer concerned about being careful

with my body, Nero was fucking me hard and ruthlessly, ready to cum. “It’s always been you, baby.”

My body was useless by the time that Nero came inside me with a roar of ownership. He came inside me hard enough to hurt, but it also felt incredible. The entire experience was enough to knock me out for the rest of the night, but I knew that I might not get that chance. Nero had something to prove, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he spent all night trying to prove it.

When Nero finally began softening inside me, it was only then that he pulled out, laying down next to me, pulling me into his arms while still being mindful of my bullet wound. I felt weary and confused, and I prayed that he didn’t mention what he’d said earlier. I was too tired to deal with something that heavy right now. There was no way that Nero could be in love with me, no matter what he’d said.

Right?

Just as I was about to fall asleep, Nero said, “As much as I’d like to spend all night in bed with you, I have a meeting that I need to attend.

Accepting of this lifestyle, I wasn’t surprised that he had to leave. I’d been raised seeing my father get up and disappear constantly, so I wasn’t taking this personal. However, when I went to roll over and free myself from him, Nero’s arm tightened around me.

“Not so fast, *il mio cuore*.”

“I’m tired, Nero,” I sighed. “Go do what you have to do.”

He let out a sigh of his own. “I will meet you for breakfast,” he said, though I knew it for the order that it was. “Get some rest.”

As soon as he got out of bed, I rolled over, got comfortable, then fell asleep to the sound of his voice telling me that he loved me again.

Chapter 35

Nero~

As soon as I walked into the restaurant, I spotted Declan O'Brien at a table in the back corner. After putting Kasen back to sleep, I had called Morocco to find O'Brien for me. It hadn't worried me that I'd have to meet him on his territory because Declan knew me well enough to be expecting me. He also wasn't a threat to me, not so soon after what just happened.

Declan inclined his head in a polite invitation to sit down, and as soon as my ass hit the chair, I got straight to the point. "What do you want with my wife, O'Brien?"

"Nothing," he answered, a small smirk playing on his lips. "It was pure curiosity."

"What was?"

"Before you wiped out the Germans, they'd been talking about your wife," he elaborated. "I guess she made quite the impression when she beat and killed Ryan Buckner. Instead of becoming hysterical, or acting like a wounded bird, she beat and killed a man with a bullet in her arm." He shrugged a shoulder. "I was curious."

Even if I hadn't planned on wiping out all of those sonsofbitches, I would have done it for their loose lips. The last thing that anyone needed to be doing was talking about how my wife had murdered a man that was going to be aired as a missing person soon. While I had enough police in my pocket to ensure that nothing would ever come of the rumors, people still needed to stop talking about my wife.

"That's not how this works, O'Brien," I reminded him.

"Would you have arranged a meeting if I'd asked you?" he posed, knowing the answer.

"No," I answered truthfully. "Unless a person is in need of a criminal attorney, no one has any business meeting with my wife."

Declan straightened in his chair. “Do you even know what you have, Sartori?”

“If you’re talking about Kasen Sartori, then the answer is yes; I know exactly what I have in her,” I replied smoothly.

“Do you?” he asked smugly. “Because the way that she tells it, it’s nothing but a simple business arrangement.”

I could feel the flames of my anger begin to burn brighter. “If I were you, I’d be very careful about any assumptions you might make about my marriage.”

“Are they assumptions?” he challenged. “After all, I’m only repeating what your wife said.”

“And what *exactly* did my wife say?”

“She said that her actions that night were about her and not you,” he answered. “She said that you were free to say and do whatever you wanted. She said that you were free to offer her life to your enemies on a weekly basis if you felt the need. She also said that you could sleep with however many other women that you wanted to. She said that she would never betray you, no matter what you did or said. She said that her father promised you a loyal bride, and she wasn’t about to make her father out to be a liar.” Declan chuckled softly. “She said that what she did that night was about *her* word and *her* integrity, not yours.”

I could feel my anger reaching dangerous levels. I loved Kasen more than my own life, but she didn’t care what I did with her. If O’Brien was telling the truth, then Kasen had to really believe that I held no affection for her.

“Anything else?”

This time, he grinned. “She also might have mentioned that men don’t deserve everything that women do for them.” He cocked his head a bit as he shrugged again. “I agreed with her.”

As clear as day, I said, “Stay away from my wife, O’Brien. I won’t be feeling so cordial the next time.”

“You’re a fool if you don’t love her, Sartori,” he remarked evenly.

I leaned my arms on the table. “Who says that I don’t?”

“She does,” he replied easily. “She even suggested that you didn’t even like her much.”

“Let me make one thing very clear, O’Brien,” I told him. “Regardless of what my wife might believe, I’m very much in love with her. This past weekend didn’t happen because of pride, territory, or because I’m a Sartori. This past weekend happened because Schulz dared to approach my wife. This weekend happened because Kasen Sartori is the most important thing on this planet to me.” I inclined my head a bit. “Something that you might want to let your people know.”

“I would never let any of my men go after your wife,” he said seriously.

“And what about *you*?” I challenged.

“I have no desire to start a war with you, Sartori,” he answered. “And even if I did believe that your wife might be the only woman on the planet worth risking my life for, she’s made it very clear that she belongs to you.” Declan’s lips curled in a rueful grin. “Even if I do think that you don’t deserve her.”

“Nobody deserves her,” I agreed. “However, that doesn’t mean that I’m not going to do everything in my power to keep her with me.”

Declan gave me a terse nod. “I have nothing but the utmost respect for Mrs. Sartori, Nero. You have nothing to be concerned about on my end.”

“I’m not concerned,” I informed him. “If nothing else, my wife has proven that she can take care of herself. However, I’m going to make sure that she’s never placed in that kind of position ever again.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“You can,” I replied. “However, that doesn’t mean that I’m going to answer.”

“Why have you allowed her to keep her job after all this?” he asked. “I’d think that you’d have her under house arrest after what almost happened to her.”

“Because I already almost lost her once,” I admitted regretfully. “If I take away the only thing that makes her happy, I’ll lose her for sure.” I leaned back in my chair. “Besides, I’m not the type of man that makes the same mistake twice, if ever.”

“Duly noted.”

With this conversation over, I stood up. “Just so we’re clear, O’Brien,” I said. “You and my wife are *not* friends. *We* are not friends. We have a mutual understanding and respect for each other, but that is it.” I buttoned my suit jacket. “Am I clear?”

“As crystal,” he chuckled.

I turned, then walked out of the restaurant, not appreciating the fucking experience at all. I didn’t appreciate that Kasen and Declan had this thing between them, even if it was just a ten-minute conversation. I didn’t appreciate how Kasen had made a big enough impression on the O’Brien Boss to earn his respect. I also didn’t appreciate how everyone was talking about my fucking wife.

Walking out of the restaurant, my first instinct was to go home and wake up the woman in question. I was nowhere near satisfied, and we still needed to talk about my confession. While she hadn’t reacted to my admission, there was no way that she couldn’t have heard me, no matter how hard her orgasm had been wracking her body.

Nevertheless, Kasen needed her rest, and I needed to check in with Elio and Aurelio. The transition on the new territory wasn’t going to happen overnight, so I needed to stay on top of it, no matter how competent my brother and best friend were.

I also had to touch base with Marco and Renzo. Marco simply needed reassurance that things were running smoothly, and Renzo just needed to know that his daughter was safe and getting better. Luckily, he was done questioning my place in

his favorite daughter's life, and things between us were better for it. Father or not, Kasen belonged to me now, and that was something that Renzo couldn't change, no matter how much he might still want to.

Getting into my car, I left Ireland. That's what we called O'Brien's territory, and we called Kotov's territory Russia. Now, was I worried that we'd had such a personal conversation? Not at all. I'd been serious about letting it be known that I was in love with my wife. While a lot of people might see that as me exposing a weakness, it wasn't. In return for Kasen's loyalty, I was exposing her power over me. I was letting everyone know just what would happen if anyone came after my wife again. I was letting everyone know the truth about how I felt about Kasen Sartori.

Five hours later, I was walking back into my bedroom, removing my clothes as quietly as possible, so that I didn't wake my sleeping hellcat. Washing the day off my body, I stayed in the shower a little longer than I normally did. I wanted to fuck my wife again, but since I couldn't, I wrapped my hand around my cock, then imagined her on her knees before me, those plump lips of hers closing around the head of my dick. I imagined the gagging noises that she made whenever I was choking her with my cock. I imagined how pretty she looked with tears streaming down her face, her lips swollen from use.

When my mind got to wandering, remembering how I had stuffed her mouth with her panties the first time that she let me take her ass, my hand started working faster. Remembering the feeling of my dick lodged deep in her had me exploding in no time, my cum wasted on the tiles of the shower, instead of inside my wife's cunt where it belonged.

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow and my girl was in my arms.

Chapter 36

Kasen~

For the first time in my life, I wasn't feeling that hungry drive that made my job my drug. Instead, I felt tired and found myself waiting for Saturday, even though I worked most weekends. I knew that my body was using a lot of energy to heal itself, but Nero's constant need to keep waking me up wasn't helping. Sure, he hadn't woken me up when he'd gotten home last night, but he didn't get points for that since he had woken me up early this morning for more than just breakfast.

At any rate, it was almost seven in the evening, but I wasn't here alone. With Ryan officially missing, his workload had been divvied up, and so I had three additional cases added to my workload, and I needed to brush up on every single one of them if I had any intentions of representing them to the best of my ability.

When I'd gotten to work this morning, there'd been hushed gossip being spread about how Ryan might have gotten involved with the wrong crowd because of some gambling debts, and while that was all true, the speculation was that he had skipped town. Of course, if that's what was being said, I knew that I had Nero to thank for that. I had no doubt that he'd been the one to start that rumor and had done his best to make sure it stuck.

It wasn't just this crap with Ryan, either. Before I had married Nero, I had thrived on this kind of pressure. Adding three more cases to my workload wouldn't have made me bat an eyelash before I'd gone and married the Sartori Underboss. Yeah, I was still recovering, but it was more than that. I was mentally taxed, and I didn't know how or where I could regroup to get back on track with my life. As long as Nero was there-*consuming me*-I had no idea how to just...breathe.

A knock on the door had me looking up, and I almost laughed when I saw Nero standing in the doorway. It didn't matter that it was afterhours, or that he wasn't a client. By

now, everyone in the building knew that I was married to Nero Sartori, and no one was going to challenge the Sartori heir if he wanted to come visit his wife at work.

“It’s almost seven,” he stated in lieu of a greeting.

“We ate breakfast together this morning,” I reminded him, pointing out that I hadn’t broken one of his house rules.

“You’re still not one-hundred percent,” he said as he walked further into my office, shutting the door behind him.

“I got three of Ryan’s cases assigned to me this morning,” I informed him. “I have a lot of work to catch up on now.”

Nero slid his hands in his pockets as he leaned back against the door. He had a look in his eye that was making me uncomfortable, so I leaned back in my chair, doing my best not to appear nervous. After all, it was always a battle of wills with us, and unlike him, I couldn’t afford to lose any of the battles or the war.

“Do you remember the first time that we ever met?”

I nodded. “It was the night that you and your father came over to sign the marriage betrothal,” I answered. “We’d all had dinner, then had gone about our business.”

“After that, I saw you exactly six times in passing over the years,” he said, and it surprised me that he knew such an irrelevant detail.

“I suppose,” I replied carefully, not sure what to say to that.

“Then two years ago, you were defending one of my men, Silas Candito,” he went on. “Do you remember that?”

I nodded. “He’d gotten arrested for racketeering.”

“It’d been pure happenstance that I had decided to stop by and see how the trial was going,” he said, his voice sounding strangely peaceful. “I had quietly taken a seat in the back, planning on only staying for a brief minute or so.” I almost squirmed because it felt like his chocolate gaze could see right through me. “But then you started your cross-examination of the prosecuting witnesses, and even God himself couldn’t pull

me from that courtroom.” I could feel my chest tighten with how intense he sounded now. “I watched you take control of that courtroom, enthralling every single person in that room with your intelligence, confidence, and beauty. I’d never seen anything so fucking magnificent in all my life.”

I thought back to when I’d overheard Nero and Aurelio talking, and I knew that wherever this was going, it wasn’t good. Nero was talking about something that happened over two years ago, and he’d been betrothed to my sister during that time, though they’d never spent any real time together.

“Since before I could walk, Marco had instilled the importance of a man’s word,” he continued. “Something that I’m sure you can appreciate, considering that you were raised by Renzo Milano.”

“Of course,” I remarked, my voice a little hoarse.

“In all my life, I’ve never broken my word, *il mio cuore*,” he said. “Except for one time.”

No, no, no, no, no.

“After court that day, I went home and stayed up for almost two days trying to figure out how to get out of that marriage contract with your sister,” he finally confessed. “It was the first and only time that I had ever broken my word.”

I didn’t want to hear any more. “Nero-”

“One week after seeing you in that courtroom, I approached Mano Barone and offered him five-million dollars to seduce your sister and get her pregnant.” I closed my eyes, my stomach dropping to my feet. “He took the money, did as I’d asked, then when he had reported back that Fia was officially pregnant with his child, that’s when I went to work on making you mine.” I opened my eyes, and his whiskey-colored gaze was still regarding me closely. “Baby, I’ve been in love with you for over two years, and I would do it all over again in every lifetime that I might ever live.”

“You...you made my father believe that Fia betrayed you-”

“She *did* betray me,” he said, cutting me off. “Yes, I was the one that set the wheels in motion, but none of it would

have been possible if Mano hadn't taken the money, and Fia hadn't broken her promise."

Choices.

"Mano could have said no, Kasen," he pointed out. "He could have reported me to your father, and he could have also said something to Fia. However, he didn't. He had chosen to take the money." I hated how he was right. "As for Fia, she could have turned him down. She could have said something to me, you, your father, my father, your mother...anyone, really. Still, she didn't. She chose to carry on an affair with Mano, and that's why we're here today." He let out a heavy sigh. "Baby, I'm not the only villain in your story."

I stood up, shaking my head. "Then why would you tell Emil Schulz to kill me if you're so damn in love with me?" I challenged, feeling myself getting angry for the millionth time.

"Whether you believe me or not, I know my enemies well, Kasen," he replied. "Just like I know exactly what makes Declan O'Brien and Avgust Kotov tick, I knew exactly what made Emil Schulz tick. I knew that threatening his bloodline would make him second guess what he was doing. Emil was a narcissist. His ego was bigger than his common sense, and I knew that he'd never risk his mortality and legacy on a failed plan."

"He might have," I argued.

"No, he wouldn't have," he countered. "While I'll grant you that there are no guarantees in life, Emil was too self-absorbed to risk his life for you." Before I could argue that some more, he added, "As for your accusation of me not willing to die for you, that's where you're wrong. I would take a bullet for you with no questions asked if I couldn't save us both, *il mio cuore*. However, I wasn't ready to let either of us die for the other so soon. After two years of waiting for you, there was no way in hell that I was going to allow someone to take you from me after only two weeks with you. So, no, I didn't show up there ready to die for you. Instead, I made it so that I could live for you, and so that you could live for me. I want a million years with you, Kasen. I want a million

lifetimes with you, and since that still wouldn't be enough for me, two fucking weeks sure as hell wasn't."

I bit my lip as tears started forming behind my eyes. I didn't know what to say to that. I didn't know what to do with his confession. I felt like he just put his life in my hands and that it was up to me on what to do with it now. I felt like his confessions were too heavy for me to carry. If what he'd said was true, then this marriage was substantially a lot more than I had bargained for.

When the first tear fell, Nero stood right in front of me, his hands cupping my face. "You can do anything you want, except cry," he said. "Baby, I can handle anything else in the world, but not you crying." His thumbs started wiping away the wetness. "Don't do this to me, Kasen."

"I...I don't...I don't know what to say," I admitted. "I don't know...what to do with all that."

"You don't have to do anything with it," he replied softly. "I just want you to believe me when I tell you that I love you, *il mio cuore.*" My chest thumped painfully. "*I fucking love you.*"

I had to ask. After everything that he'd just said, I just had to ask. "Would you have married my sister if Mano had said no?"

"Never," he answered. "I'd always been ready to go back on my word for you, Kasen."

Chapter 37

Nero~

Kasen pulled back, and I should have known that it wasn't going to be that easy. I had fallen in love with her for a reason, and it felt like a double-edged sword whenever I was on the receiving end of her fire. No matter how she felt about my confession, there was no way that she wasn't still angry over what her life was now. We'd only been together for a little over two weeks and being married to me was putting an obvious strain on her; I could see it in her eyes.

"I honestly don't know what I'm supposed to say to all that, Nero," she said truthfully. "Even if I did believe that you did all of this out of love, love doesn't excuse how you manipulated this entire situation, no matter Fia's and Mano's choices." Her hazel eyes searched mine. "Everything feels like some huge...I don't know. I want to say that all this is based on a lie, but I honestly don't think that you've ever lied to me." She shook her head. "And if you have, would I even know it?"

"I've never lied to you, *il mio cuore*," I told her. "I might have held some things back because I knew how you felt about marrying me, but I've never lied to you."

She closed her eyes as she let out a troubled sigh. "You called me that like it was no big deal," she said. "Even before I married you."

"That's because it's true," I said. "You're my heart. You have been since that day in court."

Kasen opened her eyes to look up at me again. "Love doesn't happen like that, Nero."

"The fuck it doesn't," I huffed. "I'm proof that it does."

"I don't know what I'm feeling," she admitted. "I'm so damn angry. I'm angry at everything, and you most of all. You made up this elaborate plan to marry me, and you didn't even care what that would do to my life. It's practically unrecognizable, and if that weren't enough, Fia's pregnant

with a child that's never going to know its father, and all because you saw something you wanted, and because you're Nero Sartori, you went after it."

"If you're expecting an apology, you're not getting one," I replied honestly. "Like I said earlier, I'd do it all over again if it got me the same results."

Finally, she asked, "Why are you telling me this? Why tell me any of it? I mean, who else knows besides Mano?"

"Only me and Aurelio are aware of what I did," I answered.

"Then why tell me, Nero?" she repeated. "With Mano dead, I never would have known."

No matter what I said, it was going to be the wrong thing. I was smart enough to know that this was a lose/lose situation, and I was also smart enough to know that Kasen had everything that she needed to go to her father and demand a divorce. Knowing Renzo, he'd go to my father and demand satisfaction, leaving Marco very little choice in the matter. If Kasen wanted to, she could ruin me. All she had to do was tell Renzo or Marco how I had purposely broken my word, and then my reputation would be in tatters. Elio would become the Sartori Underboss as expected.

Nevertheless, I told her the truth. "Because you never would have believed that I love you if I hadn't." I cupped Kasen's face in my hands again. "What you believe about me is more important to me than being the Sartori Underboss." Her eyes widened. "What you believe about this marriage is more important to me than my reputation. How you *feel* about me is more important to me than my word."

"Nero..." she whispered as her hands came up to wrap around my wrists.

"I love you, Kasen Sartori," I said. "I've always loved you, and whether you believe me or not doesn't change that fact. You became my entire life without even realizing it. Nonetheless, now that you know, I think you need to really think hard about what that means."

“Only you would turn a profession of love into a threat,” she remarked evenly.

“Kasen?”

“What?”

“I love you,” I repeated. “However, with that being said, I will see you dead before I ever let you leave me.” That fire in her eyes came back. “I will not be without you, Kasen. I absolutely refuse.”

“You were doing so well right before you threatened my life, Nero,” she replied coolly, letting go of my wrists.

Removing my hands from her face, I grabbed her by the hips, then deposited her on top of her desk, her ringing desk phone going unanswered. It was after-hours, so as far as I was concerned, whoever was calling could wait until I was done ironing things out with my wife. Besides, it wasn't like she could be any angrier with me at the moment.

“What are you doing?” she asked breathlessly, no doubt recalling the last time that I placed her on top of her desk.

“Doing whatever the fuck necessary to make you love me,” I told her as my hand slid up in between her legs.

“You can't control me with sex,” she lied.

“Watch me,” I challenged as my fingers already made their way inside the lace gusset of her panties and I grabbed her neck with my other hand. “I wasn't kidding when I said that I have no problem keeping you barefoot and pregnant, *il mio cuore*.”

“Nero...” she whimpered when my fingers skated over her clit.

Leaning down, my breath was hot on her neck when I said, “Or maybe I'll just punish you instead.”

“How?” she choked out, her hips already moving, trying to get my fingers to cooperate.

“Maybe I won't fuck that tight ass of yours anymore,” I threatened, and her thighs tightened around my legs. “Since

I'll be trying to get you pregnant, maybe I'll just save all my cum for that pretty cunt of yours." My wife let out a low mewling sound, making my dick hard as fuck. "How does that sound, baby? How does it feel to know that I won't be stretching out that stubborn hole anymore? Especially, since I know how much of a slut you've become for it."

Before Kasen could slap me or beg me to fuck her, I slid two fingers inside her pussy, the wet sounds filling my ears, the smell of her hot cunt filling my nostrils. Everything about this woman was so fucking perfect, and I didn't care if Rafael got an earful as he waited outside of her office. I also planned on fucking her ass just to prove my fucking point. Though wrong on so many levels, if sex was the only way that I could make her come to heel, then that's what I was going to use.

As soon as I slid a third finger inside her, her desk phone started ringing again, but I didn't let her answer it. Whoever it was could leave a fucking message.

"Nero..." she moaned, her legs opening wider for me.

"Tell me what you want and it's yours, baby," I promised. "If you want my fingers, they're yours. If you want my tongue, I'll drop to my knees. If you want my cock, just tell me where you want it and I'll fuck you until you're screaming so loud that Rafael rushes in here to save you."

"Oh, God..." she panted. "Oh, God..."

"That door isn't locked, *il mio cuore*," I reminded her. "Anyone could walk in right now and see your husband finger fucking your wet pussy."

"Nero...please...oh, God...please..." she begged, her hips practically hanging off the desk in an invitation for me to fuck her.

"Please, what?" I teased as I curled my fingers inside her. "Please fuck your mouth, your pussy, or your ass?" I tightened my hand around her neck, my lips next to her ear. "Because I *really* want to fuck you up the ass again, baby."

Her body clenched around my fingers as her cell phone started ringing, and there was no way that I was going to stop

for whoever was calling. I was going to make her cum on my fingers before I fucked the soul out of her, and she was going to let me.

“Nero, don’t stop...” she moaned. “Please...don’t stop...”

My thumb reached up to play with her clit, and as soon as it did, Kasen was cumming all over my hand, looking so fucking beautiful as she did. Her face was flushed, her body was trembling, and her cries were like music to my ears. By the time that I was done with this woman, she wasn’t going to be able to walk into this room without always thinking of me.

“Baby...” I whispered in her ear. “So fucking beautiful.”

Before she could say anything, her cellphone started ringing again, and when it started ringing again after being ignored for the second time, Kasen’s high quickly faded into nothing.

Pulling my fingers out of her pussy, she quickly reached across her desk to grab her phone, and she looked troubled when she said, “It’s my mother.”

Because I was depraved, I licked my fingers clean of her cream before I fixed her panties, then helped her off her desk. Though my dick was rock-hard, I knew that nothing more was going to happen until she found out what her mother wanted.

As soon as Kasen answered the call, I was close enough to be able to hear my mother-in-law screeching into the phone. Sonya Milano was something else, and God bless Renzo for living with her.

At any rate, playtime was over when Kasen looked up at me, then said, “Fia’s in the hospital.”

Chapter 38

Kasen~

As I rode up the elevator to the seventh floor, my mind was a jumbled mess. When my mother had called to tell me that Fia was in the hospital, I hadn't known what to make of it because she'd sounded so hateful. However, as soon as she mentioned that Fia had been asking for me, everything had begun to make sense. In Fia's time of need, it was my mother that should be at her side, not me. My mother was taking it personally that Fia would ask for me, and a part of me didn't blame her. Fia belonged to her, and I belonged to my father, and that's how things had always been.

There's also the fact that I didn't know whether I should be grateful for the interruption or not. I had been brazen in claiming that Nero couldn't control me with sex, but he had made me out to be a liar way before I had cum on his fingers. If my mother had not kept calling, I would have let him screw me over my desk again, not caring that Rafael had been sitting just outside. Not to mention the fact that I also kept risking my job every single time that my husband visited me at work.

I felt Nero's arm wrap around my waist, pulling me closer to him, so that he could place a kiss on the top of my head. "Quit thinking so hard, *il mio cuore*."

"I'm just not looking forward to dealing with my mother," I told him honestly. "We've never gotten along the best."

"Well, you're not here for Sonya," he reminded me. "You're here for Fia."

"But does she deserve it?" I questioned, feeling torn between the love that I had for my sister and her entitlement.

Nero reached underneath my chin with his other hand, lifting it. "This isn't about what she deserves, Kasen," he said. "This is about *your* conscience. You can't put a price on being able to live with yourself, baby. You can also walk out of that hospital room any time you want if Fia becomes difficult."

I nodded, letting out a deep breath. He was right, of course. I knew that my father wasn't here, so I had no doubt that Fia and my mother were already feeling some type of way about that. Even though my father's actions weren't my responsibility, Fia was still my sister.

When the elevator doors opened, Nero escorted me into the hallway, and immediately to the left, I could see my mother pacing the corridor quite a few feet away. When she had called to tell me that Fia was in the hospital, she hadn't mentioned why. She'd been more concerned with why Fia had been asking for me, and making sure to remind me that *she* was the one that Fia should be leaning on, not me.

As I started walking over, Nero grabbed my good arm, stopping me. "I'll be heading back downstairs to wait for Aurelio," he said. "Call me when you're ready to go." When I'd gotten the call from my mother, Nero had called Aurelio to meet him at the hospital, then he had ordered Rafael to follow us, instructing him to wait outside and keep a look out while I visited my sister.

Nero placed another kiss on the top of my head before walking me down the hallway to go see Fia. As soon as my mother saw us coming her way, her back straightened, and she was staring us down like we were peasants daring to speak to royalty.

"I have no idea why she wants to talk to you-"

"I don't care, Mammi," I told her, causing her to gasp and Nero to chuckle.

Ignoring the woman, I walked into my sister's room, and Fia looked tiny tucked in the middle of the hospital bed. My first thought was that she might have tried to kill herself because she was looking awfully frail, but that didn't align with her personality. Sister or no sister, Fia was too self-absorbed to commit suicide. As uncharitable the thought, it was true.

"Fia?" I watched her roll over, sitting up in the bed as soon as she spotted me. "I'm here."

“Thank you for coming,” she said as I walked up to her bed, her face looking haunted.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Mammi wouldn’t tell me anything.”

Fia snorted, but instead of it sounding like a sneer, it sounded sad. “I’m not surprised.”

“Are you okay?” I asked gently, still unsure because I had no idea what was going on. “Do you need anything?”

Her blue eyes stared up at me lifelessly as she said, “I lost the baby.” My stomach churned, my heart leaping in my throat. “I...I was taking a late nap, and when I woke up...I was bleeding.”

“Oh, God,” I finally breathed quietly. “I’m so sorry, Fia.”

“It’s my fault, you know,” she remarked roughly. “I did this.”

“Fia, that’s not true-”

“No, Kasen,” she bit out, cutting me off. “It *is* my fault.”

Not wanting to upset her more than she already was, I asked, “Why do you say that?”

“Because instead of doing the right thing and putting this baby first, I continued to throw a tantrum, refusing to eat or take care of myself.” I had no idea what to say to that. “Instead of taking care of the only piece of Mano that I had left, I acted like a spoiled fucking brat, angry at everyone and everything.” Tears started forming in her eyes. “I threw a fit, determined to punish everyone for my problems, and it cost me my child.”

“Fia-”

“Please don’t, Kasen,” she choked out. “Please don’t tell me how this isn’t my fault, or how God has a plan that I need to trust.”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, still unsure what to say.

Fia let out a shaky breath. “You know, I’ve always been jealous of you,” she finally admitted. “The way that Papa loved you was unfair.” She let out another sigh. “And, yeah,

Mammi made me her favorite, which wasn't exactly fair to you, either. Still, you know what?"

"What?" I asked quietly.

"Nothing had me hating you as much as I did when Mano had confessed to me about Nero paying him to seduce me, so that he could get out of the betrothal contract to marry you."

My head jerked at that. "He told you?"

Fia nodded. "I had just finished telling him that I was pregnant, and I guess he couldn't take it anymore. He had confessed to falling in love with me, and his conscience wouldn't allow him to marry me without telling me the truth." A solitary tear fell, but she quickly brushed it away. "He hadn't planned on falling in love with me, but he did. Despite how it had all come to be, we were in love, Kasen." She started wringing her hands together in her lap. "I loved him."

"I'm so sorry, Fia," I said, and found that I really meant it. It was obvious that she did love Mano.

"Anyway, when Mano told me how Nero had done the unthinkable just to be able to marry you, all I saw was another important man in my life picking you over me. First, our father, and then the man that I was supposed to have married. I'd been so damn jealous of you."

"Why are you telling me all this, Fia?"

"Because I'm a horrible person, and I don't want to be that way anymore," she sobbed quietly. "Because my spoiled, selfish, inconsiderate ways cost me my child and the man that I loved, and I don't want to be that person anymore." Her blue eyes glowed with her rueful tears. "You have a husband that went against everything that he knew was right just to have you, and I want to be that worthy one day."

"Fia, I am not anything special-

"That's where you're wrong, Kasen," she argued. "If you weren't special, you never would have been clever enough to force Papa's hand about becoming a lawyer. Even at a young age, you'd been born for this life." Fia shrugged. "I guess no one knew just how much until Nero noticed it."

While Fia had her faults, I also had a few of my own. “Well, I’m sorry that I didn’t do more to be the sister that you needed growing up. Even though I’m four years older than you are, I still could have put in more effort into being a better big sister. It just...it seemed easier to just let you be Mammi’s favorite, and I felt comfortable being Papa’s favorite.”

“Can I ask you something?” she asked softly.

“Of course.”

“Are you happy with Nero?”

I wanted to tell her the truth. I wanted to admit that I wasn’t, but the answer wasn’t that simple. With everything that had happened, and with everything that was still going on, I hadn’t had any time to try my hand at some genuine happiness with him. Even with all that Nero made me feel in the bedroom, that wasn’t happiness; that was passion, lust. The truth of the matter was that I was confused. I was terribly confused about how I felt right now, and while I feared that I might be just a little in love with my husband, love and happiness were two very different things.

So, instead of trying to articulate my jumbled feelings into words, I said, “At the end of it all, it was still an arranged marriage, Fia. Two weeks isn’t nearly enough to find happiness just yet. I’m still trying to balance my career with being married to the Sartori Underboss.”

After a quiet moment between us, Fia finally said, “I’m sorry, Kasen. I’m sorry for everything.”

“So am I,” I replied. “Nevertheless, how about we work on being better sisters, instead of wallowing in the apologies.”

My sister smiled softly at that. “I’d like that very much.”

Chapter 39

Nero~

The day was over, and both Aurelio and Rafael had been sent home. Kasen had ended up spending two hours at the hospital, and it was already close to ten o'clock as we walked through the front doors of the house. As much as I wanted to order my wife to call in sick tomorrow, I knew that she wouldn't.

"Kasen?"

She stopped on the first step leading up to the second floor, then looked back down at me. "What?"

"Come with me for a second," I ordered. "I want to show you something."

"Now? It can't wait?"

I shook my head. "No, it can't."

"Nero, I'm tired," she complained.

"I know, baby," I replied, though not letting up. "It'll just take a quick second."

Letting out a heavy sigh, she grabbed my outstretched hand, then followed me across the living room, through the back hallway, past the library, past my office, then down the hallway near the solarium. When we reached the engraved double doors, Kasen just looked at me. Even though she had a run of the entire house, the bedroom, kitchen, and my office were the only rooms that she was familiar with.

I pulled a key out from the pocket of my jacket. Aurelio had given it to me when he'd met me at the hospital, assuring me that everything was in order. With everything that had happened this past weekend, I had actually forgotten all about the room until Aurelio had reminded me.

"What's this?" she asked as I handed her the key.

"It's the only key to this room," I answered.

Her brows furrowed. "Why are you giving it to me?"

I jerked my head towards the doors. “Open the doors and find out.”

Shaking her head, she unlocked the doors, and her feet stopped right inside when she got a look at the room. With bookshelves lining each side wall from floor to ceiling and a gliding ladder positioned on both sides of the room, the entire place looked like what you might imagine a law library to be. However, in the center of the back room, just a few feet below the ceiling, was a window that was big enough to let in the natural light, but small and high enough that nothing would happen to Kasen if anyone were to shoot through the window, Granted the glass was bulletproof, but still.

Below the window was a large Pollock painting, the colors black and silver over white, a touch of dark blue peeking out in certain areas. There were two huge potted plants in the back of each corner for decorative purposes, and since Kasen would have the only key to this room, it'd be up to her to water the damn things.

Off to the left was a small, oak, rectangular conference table, though it really wasn't practical for actual conference meetings. With only one matching oak chair to accompany it, it was mainly for her to place her paperwork or books on. There was also a small table directly behind her desk, underneath the window and the painting, and that was purely for decorative purposes also. All those pictures of her family that she had taken to her work office, she could bring them back and set them up on that table. The cabinets on the bottom were faux, camouflaging a mini-refrigerator and snack shelves.

In the middle of the room was a huge, tasteful, Ziricote wooden desk with all the trimmings. While I knew that Kasen already had a laptop, I had still gotten her a desktop computer just in case something happened to her laptop. The room also had its own landline apart from the house phone, and all the desk accessories matched perfectly.

The final touch was the matching armchairs positioned in front of her desk, though we both knew that she'd never have clients over here. Our home was off-limits to anyone that

wasn't family, and the entire room had been remodeled by Sartori men, Aurelio overseeing the entire project. It was a beautiful room, and I really owed Aurelio a raise for what he'd been able to accomplish on top of all the shit that had been going on.

With her feet working again, Kasen walked further into the room, taking everything in. The room was as luxurious as my own office, though the feminine attributes made it clear who this room belonged to. If Kasen was going to work around the clock, then she was going to do it at home. I was done playing Mr. Nice Guy when it came to her career.

I waited patiently as Kasen explored the room, checking the spines on all the books, noting the painting, running her fingers across the top of the desk.

Christ, she was beautiful.

When she finally turned around to look at me, I couldn't read her face. I had no idea if she loved it or if she hated it. I just knew that I couldn't have her living at her office anymore. Breakfast or dinner wasn't good enough for me anymore. I wanted more than what she'd been giving me, and it was time to take control of this prideful, stubborn, combative, absolutely stunning woman.

"It's beautiful," she finally said.

"Yes, it is," I agreed. "However, Aurelio is the one that deserves all the credit."

She gave me a terse nod. "I'll be sure to thank him."

"Does that mean that you're planning on using it?" I asked. "Otherwise, there's no real need to thank him, I'd think."

Kasen cocked her head. "Are you saying that I have a choice?"

I slid my hands into the pockets of my slacks, wishing that I had a cigarette. "No, baby."

Then she surprised me by saying, "I don't want to be unhappy, Nero. I'm only thirty-two, and the thought of being unhappy for the rest of my life sounds exhausting."

“What would make you happy?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

She let out a broken laugh. “I don’t even know anymore.”

“Baby...” I sighed.

“Two weeks ago, my job was all the happiness that I needed,” she went on. “There’d been nothing missing from my life. The long hours, the tough cases, the demanding clients... God, it’d all been like my drug. Even the cases that I’ve lost hadn’t ruined the experience for me.” Kasen leaned back against the desk. “I’d had it all, Nero.” Her hazel eyes were open and honest. “I’d felt free. Even being Renzo Milano’s daughter, I had still felt free.”

“And now?”

“Now? Now I’m married to a man that I hardly know,” she answered. “Now I have a bodyguard following me wherever I go. Now, instead of just defending criminals, I have become one. Hell, I’m a goddamn *murderer* now.” She let out another broken laugh. “I have Mob bosses wanting to meet me, everyone at work wary of my last name, my mother hates me more than usual, and I still can’t get that picture of you and that woman on our wedding night out of my head, because I don’t know you well enough to know what love means for you.” My wife shook her head slowly. “If you had asked me that question a week ago, I would have answered a divorce. Now? I don’t know. I don’t know, and do you want to know why I don’t know?”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know how I feel about *you*,” she said.

I pulled my hands out of my pockets as I walked towards her. “I think that you do,” I countered. “I think that you do, and that’s what’s bothering you so much.”

“Maybe it’s just good sex,” she posed, arching a brow.

“Maybe you’re in denial because you’re terrified to trust me,” I countered.

“Maybe you haven’t earned that trust,” she shot back.

“I slaughtered an entire bloodline for you,” I reminded her. “I’ve earned it, baby.”

“Nero?”

“Yeah, *il mio cuore?*”

“I can work through almost anything, except cheating,” she said, making her one demand. “If you can’t give me that, then I can’t give you anything more than my body.”

I stopped when I was standing right in front of her. “You’re out of your fucking mind if you think that I can love you the way that I do, want you the way that I do, be obsessed with you the way that I am, and still want other women.” I crowded her, my hands on her hips. “No one has ever been able to capture me the way that you have, and I will go to my grave knowing *only you* from now on, Kasen.”

“I mean it, Nero,” she said, still scared to believe me. “I will leave you, and if that means you killing me, then so be it. I was willing to die for my beliefs once already, I have no problem walking away from you if I feel like I need to. Like you said, you can’t put a price on being able to live with yourself, and I’m too good to be another disrespected Mafia wife.”

“Baby, if I ever touch another woman, I will hand you the gun myself, and you can kill me with it,” I vowed. “I give you my fucking word, because that’s how sure I am of how much I fucking love you.”

Kasen let out a deep breath. “It feels like it’s too much, Nero.”

“Baby, it’ll never be enough,” I told her, meaning every fucking word.

Chapter 40

Kasen~

In a perfect world, Nero would kiss me right now and everything would turn out happily ever after. However, we didn't live in a perfect world, and my life still felt like a chaotic mess. If it wasn't enough that I still needed to process Emil kidnapping me, Ryan's death, and Declan O'Brien, now I needed to figure out how to navigate this new development between me and my sister. Though I was happy about it, change didn't happen overnight, and because of her own personal issues, I couldn't see my mother being happy about me and Fia reconciling.

Then there was Nero's confession that I still had to work through. While what he'd done had been incredibly wrong and had cost a man his life, the idea that Nero Sartori had wanted me bad enough to orchestrate such a thing felt...surreal. Knowing that my father would never have gone back on his word to let me live my life as I'd wanted, Nero had devised a plan to make it happen anyway.

I stared up at him as he professed his love for me, and that was another thing that felt unreal. With the way that Nero carried himself, with everything that he represented, and with the way that he took control of my body, it sounded weird to hear him say the words so easily. I always imagined that he'd be the type of guy that wouldn't feel the need to say it. Granted, I had also come into this marriage believing that this had been a business arrangement, so what did I know?

When Nero's hands gripped my hips to plant me on top of the desk, I already knew what was coming. It was like taking me over my desk was a kink for him. Maybe it was his way of taking ownership of how he had allowed me to keep my job. Whatever the reason, I couldn't deny how hot the move was. It was inherently sexy when a man sat you on top of something, then forced your legs open by stepping in between your thighs. At least, *I* thought that it was sexy. In fact, sexy enough to make me lose all common sense most of the time.

“You can’t control me with sex,” I said, repeating the lie from earlier.

“We both know that’s a lie, *il mio cuore*,” he chuckled darkly as his hands reached up to start unbuttoning my blouse. “The only time that you’re compliant is when I have my dick buried deep in your pussy, and if that’s the only way that I can get you to quit fucking fighting with me, then I’m going to be stretching your cunt out every fucking chance I get.”

My body clenched.

After Nero pushed my shirt off my shoulders, he started removing his jacket before pulling his gun out from the back of his waistband, and I had no idea why I found the move so damn sexy. Despite how I’d grown up and my profession, violence wasn’t supposed to be my thing. However, I leaked whenever Nero removed his gun before touching me; there was something just so powerful in that simple movement.

As soon as he placed his gun on the far corner of the desk, Nero leaned down, placed both of his hands on either side of my hips, caging me in. With his lips against the skin of my neck, he asked, “Are you going to let me break in your new desk, *il mio cuore*?”

“Do I have a choice?” I countered breathlessly, provoking him just because I could.

“You always have a choice when it comes to sex, Kasen,” he said seriously as he placed a soft kiss on my neck. “You can choose to let me fuck you like we both know you want me to, or you can choose to make us both suffer. The choice is always yours, baby.”

I’d meant what I’d said earlier; I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life unhappy. I could either give this marriage a real chance, or I could make us both miserable by fighting something that I really had no control over in the end. I was married to Nero, and even if he didn’t love me, there was no way that he was ever going to let me go. He could say what he wanted about me being more important than anything else in his life, but he was still the Sartori Underboss, and allowing his wife to leave him wasn’t a good look, no matter the reason.

Good, bad, or indifferent, appearances needed to be kept up in this life, and Nero Sartori wasn't one to be trifled with.

There was also no denying how good Nero made me feel whenever we were like this. Was it a weakness? I wasn't sure yet. I just knew that he was very good at what he did, and that he never failed to deliver. He took my mind and body to places that they'd never been before, and it was a real kick in the chest to acknowledge that I cared about nothing else whenever Nero was deep inside me. I could act brave all I wanted to, but one look, one touch, one promise of what was to come was enough to weaken my resolve. No one liked admitting when they were wrong, and I was no different. Still, there was no arguing that the man standing before me was not the man that I'd thought that I was marrying.

This one loved me.

“Nero?”

“Yeah, *il mio cuore?*” he replied as his lips kissed my bare shoulder.

“Kiss me,” I ordered, causing him to pull back, so that he could look down at me. “Kiss me, but not like you're trying to make a point.”

“Baby...”

“Kiss me like I'm your wife,” I told him. “Kiss me like you've earned the right to kiss me as my husband.” My hands reached up to start unbuttoning his shirt. “Fuck me like I'm your whore, but kiss me like I'm the love of your life. If you can do that, then I'll quit looking at you like you're my enemy.” I pushed his shirt off his broad shoulders. “I'll start looking at you like you're my husband.”

“Not good enough,” he said as he shrugged his shirt off. “I want your love, Kasen. I want your fucking everything; nothing less.”

“Kiss me like you love me, and I'll give myself to you like I love you,” I said, agreeing to his demands.

Nero's hands grabbed my face. “I *do* love you,” he growled fiercely. “And you love me.”

Before I could deny or admit it, Nero's lips were on mine, his hands holding my face like I was the most precious thing in the world to him. His full lips slanted over mine, and when his tongue peeked out to coax my lips open, it was the most erotic kiss that I had ever experienced. As soon as his tongue swept into my mouth, my hands were going for his belt, and he didn't stop kissing me, even when I took his thick length into my hand. It wasn't until I couldn't take it anymore that I broke off the kiss.

"I need you," I panted desperately.

"And I love you," he panted back, his hand reaching behind my back to remove my bra. "I love you so fucking much, Kasen."

As soon as my bra fell from my body, Nero was pushing at my chest, laying me across the desk. I closed my eyes as I felt his hand reach between my legs, ripping my panties off with one hard tug. Like a whore, I placed both of my feet on the edge of the desk, spreading myself wide for him. I also didn't care how wet I was.

"Baby, the door is wide fucking open," he said as he used his thumbs to spread my pussy lips apart to get a good look at just how soaked I was.

"I don't care," I moaned. Even if the house guards and staff could hear us, they'd never dare walk in here or peek inside. It'd be their lives if they did.

I felt the head of Nero's cock running through my folds as he asked, "You want everyone to hear how good I fuck you?"

"Yes," I whimpered shamelessly.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he hissed. "Fuck, you're such a fucking good girl for me."

"Nero...please..." I begged, sure to regret my recklessness when I had to face everyone in the morning. "Please..." In one hard thrust, Nero was buried to the hilt, and it felt like a hit of heroin hitting my bloodstream. "Oh, God..."

Grabbing onto my hips, Nero started fucking me hard and rough on the desk. "Scream my fucking name, baby," he

grunted. "Let everyone know who you belong to."

"You," I cried out, not caring that he hadn't even asked. "I belong to you."

"And I belong to you," he swore, hitting the deepest parts of me. "Everything that I am belongs to you, Kasen."

It could have been minutes, hours, or days; I wasn't sure. However, no matter how many times I came for him, Nero didn't let up. He took me on the desk, the table, the floor, and up against the bookshelves. He made sure that we christened the entire room, and all the while with the door opened, the entire household hearing every dirty word and every cry of his name.

Finally, as he had me back on the desk, bent over like a used slut, he groaned, "I'm going to cum, baby."

"Nero..." I choked out, my voice hoarse from all the screaming. "Oh, God...please..."

"Tell me that you love me," he demanded. "Tell me that you love me, or I'll keep you up all fucking night, baby." His words didn't sound like a threat at all. "*Tell me.*"

"I love you," I cried out as I felt him thicken inside me. "God...please..."

"Even God can't save you from me, *il mio cuore*," he said right before cumming deep inside me.

Little did he know that I no longer felt like I needed to be saved.

Epilogue

Nero – (One Year Later)~

A knock at my door had me lifting my head, and my chest tightened like it always did whenever my wife walked into a room. One year later, she still took my breath away whenever I saw her, and one year later, I still couldn't get enough of her.

I glanced at my watch, surprised to see that it was only five o'clock. "You're home early."

Even though she had her office, Kasen still put in a lot of hours at work, though she did her best to work from home when she could. However, I never realized how much coddling her clients needed, so she spent a lot of time at Milton doing that very thing. Luckily for The Milton Group, Kasen was good enough at her job to overlook Rafael's permanent presence in her life. He was a perpetual fixture in the offices, and no one batted an eyelash at him anymore. The courtroom was the only place that he wasn't allowed, but most of the courthouse guards knew that Kasen was my wife since she went by Sartori now, so she was looked out for because everyone knew the repercussions if anything were to ever happen to my wife on their watch. Hell, even Elio acknowledged her importance and acted accordingly now.

As for everything else, things were as peaceful as could be expected. Business was good, and O'Brien and Kotov were more than busy with their new territories, keeping everything nice and civil between the remaining three families. Declan O'Brien still mentioned my wife whenever we spoke, but as long as he kept his distance, I couldn't really blame him for still feeling dazzled by her. After all, she had me still insane with wanting her, and I slept beside her every fucking night.

"Are you busy?"

I leaned back in my chair, smirking at her. "You know better than that, *il mio cuore*. I'm never too busy for you, and you know that."

Kasen shut the door behind her before walking further into the room. "I have something to tell you," she said, and I hated

that my wife had a great poker face. Yeah, it probably helped her tremendously in the courtroom, but between us, it drove me fucking crazy.

“I hope it’s that you’re going to let me eat your pussy on my desk before dinner,” I replied wolfishly.

“If you’re lucky,” she countered, her lips curled in a sassy grin.

“Oh, I’m lucky, baby,” I chuckled. “Luckier than most.”

When Kasen was finally standing right in front of me, I grabbed her hips, then positioned her over on my lap, her skirt riding up as she straddled my dick, the sonofabitch already getting hard. I could fuck this woman five times a day, and it still would never be enough. I was addicted to her in the worst way, and if it weren’t for the fact that her career meant so much to her, I’d keep her chained to our bed.

As Kasen’s arms wrapped around my neck, so that her hands could play with the back of my hair, my lips were already on her neck, not giving a fuck about dinner. I cared about nothing else whenever she was in my arms, and there were times when it really was a struggle to leave her. I’d never been hooked on another human being before, and it was a true dependency. If Kasen knew the truth, she’d be a bit frightened by how much I loved and needed her.

“Nero?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I’m pregnant,” she announced, and I closed my eyes, my forehead resting against her chest.

Pregnant.

When I finally looked up at her, I asked, “Are we happy about it?” Even though Fia was doing better, and she and Kasen had a better relationship, the news wasn’t going to be easy for her. A year later, Fia was still mourning Mano and their child, so while I was fucking ecstatic, I would play this however Kasen wanted to.

She gave me a soft smile. “Yeah, we’re happy,” she answered, my lungs working again.

“I love you, Kasen,” I told her. “I hope you know that now.”

My wife nodded. “I do,” she assured me. “I love you, and I hope that *you* know that now.”

“I do,” I replied. “I’m also going to do whatever I need to in order for you to be able to have it all, *il mio cuore*. You won’t have to give up your career unless you want to.”

“And what if I want to?” she asked, her hazel eyes looking serious.

“I want whatever it is that you want, baby,” I said, feeling the words down to my soul.

The End.

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The first acknowledgment will always be my husband. There aren't enough words to express my gratitude for having this man in my life. There is a little bit of him in every hero that I dream up, and I can't thank God enough for bringing him into my life.

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Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who's purchased, read, reviewed, shared, and supported me and my writing. Thank you so much for helping make this dream a reality and a happy, fun one at that. I cannot say thank you enough.

About the Author

M.E. Clayton works full-time and writes as a hobby only. She is an avid reader, and with much self-doubt but more positive feedback and encouragement from her friends and family, she took a chance at writing, and the Seven Deadly Sins Series was born. Writing is a hobby she is now very passionate about. When she's not working, writing, or reading, she is spending time with her family or friends. If you care to learn more, you can read about her by visiting the following:

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