



WICKED

Demands

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JORDAN MARIE

Wicked Demands

Jordan Marie

WICKED DEMANDS

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WARNING: This book contains sexual situations, violence, and other adult themes. Recommended for 18 and above.

Editor: Geissa Cecilia

Cover Model: Chris David

Cover Photographer: J. Ashley Converse

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Synopsis

He rescued me when I had nowhere else to turn.

Now, this filthy talking man is demanding payment, but he doesn't want money.

He wants me in his bed, obeying his every command.

All my life, I wanted to be loved. Instead, I was ignored.

My father gave me what I wanted so he could go back to ignoring me.

Once I understood that, life became easier.

When he arranged to marry me off to the son of his biggest ally, I didn't mind.

Marco was the older brother of my best friend and honestly, he made me burn.

I wanted to belong to him.

I wanted in his life, his bed and definitely in his heart.

It didn't quite work out that way.

Marco treated me just like my father did—maybe worse.

Being tolerated by the man you love is a level of pain that I couldn't endure.

So, I left.

The fact Marco didn't fight to keep me was horrifically painful.

When one *really* bad decision lands me in hot water.

I reach out to the only person who has ever cared about me, my best friend Melina.

Too bad, she's also Marco's little sister. Marco rescues me, but he's no white knight.

He's a monster.

Foreword

Dear Reader,

Never did I think that Marco's book was going to go where it did. This by far the biggest book in the series and I hope that you enjoy his journey as much as I did.

This book definitely continues the good/bad/morally gray concept and the whole mafia vibe. So I give this warning yet again:

I am who I am and you should always expect triggers in my books. I deal with sadness, adult issues and I won't shy away from that.

I've enclosed a link to the Wicked Demands Playlist on Spotify to help get you in the mood! Again, these are just songs that helped me get in touch with the characters and I hope it helps you, too!

I've also included just the song list too.

[Wicked Demands Playlist](#)

I Wanna Be Yours — Arctic Monkeys

Big Bad Wolf — Roses and Resolutions

Killing Butterflies — Lewis Blisset

Burning Bridges — Be a Miller

Daylight— David Kushner

Haunted House — Noah Gunderson

Only Love Can Hurt Like This — Paloma Faith

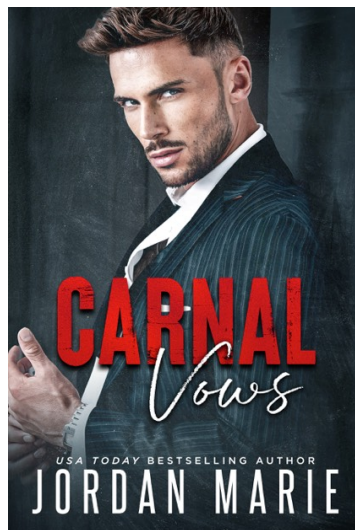
Kingdom of Sin Series

Savage Intent is a standalone mafia romance. Still, you can read the two books that started it all .

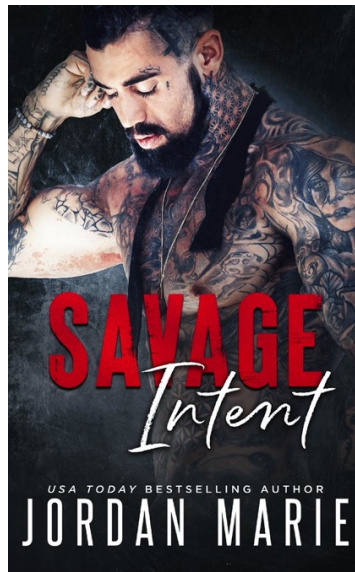
Callan and Zoe



Niko and Emilia



Antonio and Melina



Prologue

Marco

What Feels Like A Lifetime Ago

“So, it’s official?”

Those are the first words I hear as I reach the courtyard and approach the flower garden. I’m struggling with everything that just happened. I want a normal life. Shit, I’ve been in hell so long that normal looks damn tempting. Yet, the deal today will cement the fact I’ll always have a place in the world that my father has made me hate with everything in me. I agreed, because once I have my own position of power and my own money—I will systematically do everything in my power to destroy my father. I will end him—both in business and in life. Then, when I’m done, I will dance naked over his ashes and piss on the bastard.

Still, to even get a chance of doing this, I had to agree to marry a child. With a heavy sigh I look at Helena—the girl that I’ve just become engaged to. I’m way too old for her and this is only the second time I’ve met her. It seems unreal, but in my world, this is the way things are done.

Today is her birthday. *Sixteen.*

She’s the best friend to my sister, Melina, and has been around the family on several occasions. Not as often as Melina wants and that’s mostly because my father doesn’t like people in his home. I’ve not been around when she’s been in my home either. Truthfully, I don’t spend a lot of time with my sister. If my father knew that she was my weakness, her life

and mine would be an even bigger hell than it already is. He'd use Melina against me—more than he already does—just to make me fall in line.

If it wasn't for Melina, I wouldn't be here now. I'd have left my father's reach and forged my own path years ago. My brothers can fend for themselves now. Sebastian and Gio are old enough to take my place and look out for the others. Melina, though, she reminds me of our mother. She's gentle. The bastard broke my mother's spirit. I can't allow him to do the same to my sister.

So, I live a life trapped.

“Marco?” Helena prompts and I turn my attention back to her.

Helena is way too young, but she is beautiful. I like women. I enjoy them, but I never let them close. If I did that, they would become just another weapon my father can use against me. If he thought she could one day mean anything to me, he would go after her. I don't even have to question it. After all, the bastard taught me that lesson when I was sixteen and believed I was in love with the stable groomer's daughter, Paulina. She was a year older than me and my first taste of a woman. I thought I was on top of the world. Until, one day, I came home and went to meet her in the pool house—which had become our normal meeting spot. I opened the door to find Paulina on her knees servicing my father, his spunk being shot all over her face.

My father laughed, looking right at me. I can still hear his words. *“Don't leave son. You can have her now that I'm finished. Hell, I'll pay her extra and she'll take us both on at once.”*

The memory sours inside of me and I push it away, concentrating on the here and now. I need to reassure Helena, but at the same time, I must keep her distant. That's best for her *and* me.

“It's done. We will have a good marriage, Helena,” I vow. I'm going to keep that promise, too. I am not my father. I will respect her.

“We will? I’m afraid I’ll screw it up. I think it’s only fair to warn you, Marco, my father says I’m pretty much a failure at doing what is expected of me.”

I try to hide my smile. Helena is so earnest, the last thing I want to do is to make her think that I don’t take her serious. “I’m kind of new to the husband thing. I think mainly we need two rules between us.”

“Rules?” she asks.

“Yeah. I think, we need to understand that no matter what you and I will always be honest with one another.”

“I can do that.”

“Let’s try that out now. Do you think I’m too old for you, Helena?”

“I’m not sure. Mostly, I like that you’re older,” she whispers softly, her eyes sparkling, cheeks heating with embarrassment. I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much innocence before—not even in my sister.

“What makes you unsure about me then?” I ask, unable to stop myself.

“Do you think I’m too young for you?”

I take a deep breath. Damn if that’s not a loaded question. “You are right now,” I respond, trying to be gentle.

“Oh.”

“But you will get older, and I’ll wait until then. We’ll get to know one another. The physical stuff will come when we’re both ready.”

“What if you’re not attracted to me?” she asks, not quite looking me in the eye.

“You’re beautiful, Helena. I don’t see that being a problem.”

“You don’t?”

“No, baby. I can see the woman in you waiting to be set free. Me being attracted to you won’t be a problem.”

“We already have things in common,” she whispers.

“We do?” I ask, confused because she doesn’t really know me. Shit, most days I’m not positive I know myself.

“Both our fathers are assholes,” she answers. Her beautiful eyes are sad, and lack of spirit in her eyes is disturbing.

“What do you mean?” My heart speeds up. Does Melina know how horrible our father is? *Has she told Helena?*

“Lina told me about your dad and how harsh he is. My father is, too, although he’s only that way if he has to deal with me. I think that’s why he’s sending me off to school.”

“You’ll enjoy it, and Melina will be there,” I point out, breathing a little easier.

If Melina knew how bad our father was, there’s no way Helena would compare hers to the monster. I, for one, am damn glad Melina will be going to boarding school. I won’t have to worry over her half as much. It’s a full-time job trying to shield her from our father’s wrath.

“Yeah, I’m glad about that. I don’t really want to go, though. It’s one of those prissy, all-girl schools. If they try to teach me how to cook and be a wife, I might scream.”

“But you are going to be a wife,” I point out, unable to keep all of my laughter at bay.

“Do you expect me to cook?” she asks, scrunching her nose up.

“You don’t like cooking?”

“Not really. Although, I can make really good cupcakes. My dad even likes those.”

“Cupcakes are my favorite,” I mostly lie.

“They are?”

“Yeah.”

“What flavor?”

“Chocolate.”

“I make really good chocolate ones,” she brags.

“Good to know.”

“You said we needed two rules. What’s the second one?”

“I know you’re old enough now to have boys dying for a taste of you. After today, you’re mine. That means other boys, other *men* are off limits. You keep yourself for me, Helena. I don’t share.”

Her cheeks heat, but she doesn’t look away from me. She holds my gaze and I find that impressive—especially considering her age.

“That should be easy since I’m going to an all-girl’s school,” she points out.

“That means you’re going to be a good girl.”

She blinks, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “I’m not sure we should be talking about this.”

“We have to. The marriage contract is complete. We may not know each other, but what’s done is done. There’s no going back. Marriages have been arranged since the beginning to time. This won’t be what people normally do today when they get married, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be good,” I explain.

Helena nods—clearly uncomfortable.

I can’t say I’m entirely at ease either. Helena may have every promise of being a woman soon, but she’s not one now. I’m uncomfortable with our age difference as it is. Having this conversation is making me feel like a lecherous old man. I sigh and rub the back of my neck.

“I need to hear the words from you, Helena, so I know you understand.

“I won’t cheat on you. I’ll be a good girl,” she sulks. “Although, I’ve always heard good girls are boring.”

“Not when that girl is destined to be mine one day,” I counter.

“Fine, I’ll be good, but only because I really like you, Marco. I always have. That’s the reason when my father told

me he was going to arrange a marriage for me, I asked for him to make it with you.”

“You did what?”

She shrugs. “I don’t want to get married, but if it had to happen, I want it to be with someone I like, someone I even choose.”

“Why in the hell would you pick me? Why not one of my brothers? Elias is closer to your age.”

“He’s not you,” she says staring straight at me, refusing to back down.

Christ, I may be in trouble with this girl.

I shake my head and kiss her forehead. “I want you to be happy, Ena,” I whisper against her soft skin.

“If I’m supposed to be yours, shouldn’t you give me a better kiss than that? I’ve never been kissed before. A fiancé should kiss his woman properly,” she instructs, making me laugh.

“When you’re older and we can both appreciate the kiss, I’ll do that, Ena.”

“No one has ever called me Ena before. I like that you are,” she says quietly.

I stand up and begin walking toward the door. Needing fresh air. There’s a part of me that feels as if I’ve signed my life away today. My father has made that life hell, but at least it was mine to control—at least until today. “We’ll talk soon,” I assure her, but I know I’m lying. I’m going to stay away from her until she gets older. I need time to figure this out and she needs time to mature.

God, does she.

“Hey, Marco?”

I stop at the edge of the patio, so close to my escape that I can taste it, when she calls out and stops me. I turn around and look at the kid who should be more concerned with going to

the movies with her latest crush, than getting engaged to a man who is double her age.

“Yeah?”

“Are you going to be a good boy?”

“What?”

“Well, if I’m not supposed to talk to other guys, then you shouldn’t talk to other girls either,” she reasons.

“You won’t be of age for us to marry for five years, Helena,” I try to explain.

She shrugs. “It’s five years for me, too, and if you think about it, I haven’t even had time to date like you have. Seems to me, that should make five years easier for you.”

“Why am I suddenly getting the feeling you’re going to be a hard woman to deal with, Helena?”

She shrugs. “I like it better when you call me Ena.”

“Precisely why I won’t do it that often. I want you to appreciate the times it happens.”

She rolls her eyes, but crosses her arms at her chest, letting me know silently that she’s not about to be distracted. “You haven’t answered. Are you going to be my good boy?”

“I’m not a boy.”

“So, that means you’re not. That hardly seems fair. If you can date other women, then I can, too. It’s only right.”

“You want to date women?”

“You know what I meant,” she huffs.

I nod because I do. She should be able to date. She’s too damn young for this contract. That doesn’t change the fact it has been signed now and this is my new reality. Helena is going to be mine and she’s got spirit and developing beauty that definitely appeals to me. She wanted this marriage and if I’m going to claim her, I don’t want there to be some asshole out there with a claim on what belongs to me.

Fuck, how did things get so complicated.

“I’ll wait for you, Ena.”

“You promise?” she pushes. One day I will have to teach her not to question me. I shake my head.

“I told you I won’t lie to you. I’ll wait for you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I repeat.

“Marco?”

I’ve already turned to leave again, but her voice stops me. I could be imagining it, but I think I hear panic in her voice.

“Yeah?” I look over my shoulder at her. She does look anxious.

“I’ll see you soon?” It’s a statement, but she makes it sound like a question.

“I’ll be seeing you,” I tell her. *It won’t be soon.* I need Helena to grow up—especially if I’m going to be living like a damn monk while I wait for her.

Shit.

Chapter 1

Helena

Two Weeks Before Helena's Seventeenth Birthday

"He's avoiding me, Melina!" I cry, throwing myself on her bed. I've been at her house for three days and I've not so much as seen Marco one time. "Soon, it will be exactly one year since I've laid eyes on him. *One whole year!*"

"I know, honey."

"He told me that he would be seeing me. Did he mean he'd see me at the wedding altar in five years? What does he want from me?"

Shit. I know I'm whining. I'm pissed though. When I convinced my father to set up the contract with Marco, this was *not* what I had in mind. I don't understand it. I know I'm younger than him. Okay—a lot younger. I didn't see that as a problem. Most of the adults I know the men have younger women. It doesn't bother me. In truth, I've never been attracted to boys my age. Then again, I took one look at Marco the summer before I turned sixteen and other men kind of ceased to exist.

"Helen—"

"Doesn't he want to see me?"

"Marco is... *different.*"

I frown at her. "He's a man who has agreed to marry me. You would think he would at least want to see me! It has been a freaking year, Lina! A year! I could have grown a third eye and horns on my head."

“I think he knows that hasn’t happened,” she laughs. I don’t see anything funny about any of this.

“Oh yeah? I could have gained six hundred pounds!”

“Honey—”

“Don’t honey me. I love you. You know I do, but I do believe your brother is an asshole.”

“All of them are to be honest. I’m not sure why you ever set your sights on Marco to begin with.”

“He’s hot,” I mutter.

“Gross,” Melina says, scrunching up her face in revulsion.

“What? He is!”

“He’s also my brother.”

“So? That’s your bad luck. He’s not mine and the man is smoldering hot. It’s more than that, though. He’s always watching over you. He cares about you, and it shows. Remember that time when you were sick when you were fourteen? I’d never seen any man take care of someone like that,” I murmur, and I hadn’t. I was fifteen going on sixteen. I’m a little over a year older than Melina. I remember watching the way he cared for her, how sweet he was to her, and I was so envious. I know that’s when I fell in love with him. The way he’s ignoring me makes me think any emotion I have at all for the man will be gone before we ever get around to a marriage. I’ve spent my whole life being ignored by my father. The last thing I want is to be ignored by a husband, too.

“Honey, I think you’re overreacting. You and Marco barely know each other, and your father stipulated that the marriage wouldn’t take place until you were completely done with school and twenty-one, right? That’s a whole four years away. There will be plenty of time for the two of you to get to know one another.”

I know she’s right and looking at things objectively, but that doesn’t make me feel one bit better. “I bet you wouldn’t be so calm if your fiancé was ignoring you,” I mutter.

“I’m never getting married. I’ve lived in a house of men and although my brothers—at least most of them—are better than my father, they’re all assholes. I don’t need that in my life. I’ll break away, I’m going to live alone and be my own person.”

“That will change when you meet a guy that makes you feel alive like your brother does to me,” I mutter.

“Don’t gross me out. My brother is *not* hot,” Melina exhales.

“Girl, he’s beyond hot,” I sigh out. “He’s beautiful.”

“He is *not*,” she insists stubbornly.

“Okay, so what is your idea of a hot guy then?”

“Nothing like my brothers. When I find a guy, he will be their opposite. I’m thinking a nice doctor. Someone who looks more at home in scrubs and faded jeans and T-shirt than a suit. Clean cut with a quiet, calm demeanor. Clean cut, definitely.”

“God, Lina that sounds boring as hell.”

“That’s exactly what I want. After living in my house, calm and boring is awesome. The most exciting thing the guy I end up with will do is throw caution to the wind and stay up past his mandatory nine p.m. bedtime to watch the news on television.”

“If Marco goes to bed at nine, he better be coming to bed to turn me on—not the TV,” I grumble, making Melina laugh.

“I’m not going to see him this trip, am I?” I whisper unable to keep the heartbreak out of my voice.

“I don’t think so,” she whispers and it’s the pity in her voice that makes me want to disappear forever. I’ll somehow figure out how to get through this.

One day, I’ll make Marco pay for the pain he keeps inflicting...

One day...



Marco

“I’m not going to see him this trip, am I?”

Guilt hits me harder than I would have thought possible, as my hand tightens on the doorknob to my sister’s room. I’ve been here the entire time Helena has been visiting Melina. I’ve purposefully kept a low profile. My father has laughed his ass off because I didn’t care if I saw my fiancée or not. I played into that. Nothing could be further from the truth. I want to see her and talk to her. I want to get to know her. It’s unusual to be engaged to someone who is too young to truly allow yourself to get closer to her. Still, I’m going to be married to Helena. I should spend more time with her.

Down the hall I hear my father’s laugh and the sound sours my stomach. I slowly release my grip and bring my hand down. I rest my forehead against the door and close my eyes. I don’t want to hurt her, but it’s better to let that happen than to bring her into my father’s line of fire. I’ll make it up to her later. She’s turning seventeen. There’s time for us to get to know one another and do it when my father can’t see me with Helena and doesn’t target her as a weakness—which is what she is.

I walk away with a heavy sigh, feeling as if I’ll never breathe clean air. I’m trapped under my father’s thumb and I’m starting to think I’ll never be free of that bastard. Can I really marry Helena? Can I marry anyone knowing whoever I bring into my life will be in danger of my father’s wide reach?

Fuck...

Chapter 2

Marco

The Week Following Helena's Eighteenth Birthday

“I’m not sure your father’s eye is on the ball on this one, Marco. You know I always try to support him. The board of directors is getting nervous, though. Your father has developed a reputation of bleeding a company dry and tossing it aside when he takes it over. They’re not going to vote to approve the merger knowing your father is at the helm of this one. They’d rather lose the entire company to the Cattafi family.

I school my features. This is my life. Cleaning up shit for my fucking father, hiding the madness that lurks too damn close to the surface. It’d be a fuck of a lot easier to navigate these waters if my damn hands weren’t tied.

“They can try, but I think they’ll find the Cattafi are withdrawing their offer,” I respond.

“I... They... How the fuck did you manage that?”

I shrug. I’m not about to tell George—my future father-in-law—that I had to promise everything but a fucking kidney to secure this deal. I won’t explain that I did it all while my father—who should have been working on this deal himself—was drunk off his ass and spending the weekend with some hookers.

“I did it. That’s all you need to worry about.”

“I think I’ll fly out today to let those fucking board of directors know they don’t have any choices except us on the

table.”

I frown, because if he’s leaving my excuse for staying here is gone. Helena just got back yesterday, and it was late, so I barely got a glance of her face. I came here because I wanted to see her. She’s eighteen now. I want time to get to know her—time where I’m not looking over my shoulder because I’m worried my father will figure out, I have another weakness for him to exploit.

“What about Christopher? Can’t you send your son?” I ask. I don’t understand the relationship George has with his son. My brothers and I spend our lives covering everything and doing whatever our father demands. I don’t think I’ve seen George’s son but once in all this time.

George shakes his head. “I have worthless children. Unlike your father, his boys work hard. They understand you have to fight to stay on top. That’s why I’m damn glad you’re being brought into my family, son. I may have weak children, but together you and I will make the Kratos name and the Stratakis name synonymous with power, my boy.”

“Helena isn’t worthless,” I point out. I can’t speak for his son, because I don’t know him, but his daughter has spirit and a vitality for life that I envy.

“She’s a girl,” George says with the wave of a hand. “They have their uses, but keeping one around permanently isn’t worth it. The only good Sasha had was giving me an heir, but her blood was weak and sadly my children inherited traits from her, I’d rather they didn’t.” The man shrugs. “Still, Helena knows her place. She will make you a good wife. You will just need to keep a firm hand.”

I blink. *Christ*. Maybe my old man and George have more in common than I suspected. I open my mouth to speak. I’m not sure what I’d say, I just know Helena needed someone to stand up for her in that moment and even though she’s way too fucking young, she’s mine and it was going to be me to say it. I don’t get the chance, however, because there’s a knock at the door.

“I’m sorry Mr. Kratos. We have a problem.”

“Problem?” he barks at one of his bodyguards.

“Your daughter is sick. The fever from yesterday is still there and she’s been vomiting.”

“Kids. Jesus, I have shit to do. Take her to the clinic and get her some medicine. Have Cecilia deal with her.”

“Cecilia?” I ask, clearing my throat.

“Helena’s nanny,” George explains.

“Isn’t she a little old for a nanny?” *Fuck, my fiancée has a damn nanny?* I already felt old and like a dirty bastard for being engaged to someone when she was sixteen. It has been two years and our age difference still troubles me. I’m slowly coming to terms with it. This is making me think I should just let it go.

“I kept her on because she’s a damn good cook and she can deal with Helena. That’s not a man’s job.”

His words irritate the hell out of me. This is his daughter. She doesn’t have a mother. That means anything to do with her care—especially when she’s sick should be his job. Still, I bite my tongue. Fucking hell, it seems like I spend my life biting my tongue. I marry Helena, I’ll be moving into my own home and I’m taking Melina with me. Then, this shit will be done. I will move swiftly to destroy everything my father has. I would have done it already, but between the men that work for him and two of my own brothers going against me, I’m hoarding money and preparing quietly. I can’t get my ass killed until Melina is in the clear. Hell, it seems I need to add Helena to that list since it’s clear her father doesn’t know her value.

“Cecilia is on vacation this week, Mr. Kratos.”

“Call and tell her to get back. I’m going to be flying out for a meeting shortly and will be gone for a couple days.”

“Her mother died, Mr. Kratos. The funeral is tomorrow. I don’t think she can return until that is over,” the guard explains nervously.

“Tell her to return immediately after then,” George says with an annoyed wave of his hand. “Helena will be fine. She’s probably not even sick. The girl is always demanding attention.”

“Perhaps it would be good to check on her,” I suggest, my voice tight.

“No time! I’m going to go deliver the news and watch the bastards squirm.”

“I’ll check on her before I leave,” I tell him, tightening my hand up into a fist and barely containing the urge to nail the bastard.

As I do that, I’m filled with bitterness. My entire life has been like this. It’s getting to the point where I’m resenting my own sister. Death is better than the life I’m leading where I’m forced to eat shit on a daily basis. This isn’t living and I’m nearing the end of my rope.

Fucking hell.

“What? Oh sure, sure. Whatever you want,” he says and then he’s gone. *He’s leaving me alone with his sick daughter and isn’t even concerned.* I shake my head. I sit there for a bit, stunned. Then, I go to find a bodyguard because I have no idea where Helena is.

Chapter 3

Helena

I'm dying.

I let out a groan, curling up tighter into the fetal position, my arms wrapped tight around my stomach as the cramps take over once more. I close my eyes wishing I felt like walking so I could go get some medicine for the pain. Right now, moving isn't worth it. I close my eyes and pray sleep hits me. Sleeping through this pain would be a miracle, so I figure it is a good use of a prayer. I barely contain another moan when there's a knock on the door. It's probably Clay, one of my new bodyguards. I'm pretty sure he thinks I'm dying. He was hovering over me and driving me a little crazy. I finally told him I had a fever yesterday and again today and I was probably highly contagious. If I hadn't been so miserable, I would have laughed at the way he scurried out of the room. I wouldn't normally lie, but there's no way in hell I'm going to explain to my more-than-slightly hot bodyguard that I started my period yesterday and I'm going to be miserable for the next day or so. I won't even tell my father that. Of course, he didn't even care that I was sick. I decided to test him to see. I told him my fever was this exorbitantly high number—to the point I would be one step away from death. His response was to tell my bodyguard to let me sleep it off because I was just being dramatic. It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. I think, somewhere inside of me, I will always wish my father cared about me.

There's another knock and I let out a sigh. The touch is too soft to be my father. It's definitely Clay.

“Come in,” I mumble, wishing I could just yell and tell him to leave me alone.

“Hey.” I look up as the door swings open slowly. His voice hits me a second before his face comes into focus.

Marco Stratakis.

For two years, I’ve wanted nothing more than to see him—to breathe the same air he did. I used to imagine it so much that my dreams played like mini films in my head. All of these had one major theme, Marco would see me, be instantly captivated, and apologize for ignoring me all this time. Then, he would take me into his arms, tell me he loved me—that he couldn’t live without me. Finally, he would kiss me. It wouldn’t be a kiss on the forehead, like he gave me on my sixteenth birthday. No, this time, his lips would claim mine, his tongue would war with mine and he would devour me.

In none of my daydreams was I lying on the bed, no makeup, my hair a sweaty, matted mess, and cramping because I was bleeding from my vagina and feeling *extremely* gross.

“Marco?” I whisper, hoping I’m just delirious with pain and imagining he’s standing in front of me. While thinking this, my gaze is raking lovingly over his beautiful, chiseled face. He has more gray in his beard and hair than he did two years ago. He looks wild and untamed—despite the dark blue suit and starched white shirt he’s wearing. He also looks as if he hasn’t slept in a month.

“I came in for a business trip and wanted to see you.”

“You did?”

I don’t bother hiding the surprise in my voice. I’m pretty sure you can hear my disbelief too. I can’t help it. Marco has spent two years ignoring me. I can’t believe he has all of the sudden decided to change and remember I’m around.

“Yeah, but I’m getting the feeling you aren’t up for dinner out.”

Damn it! I really want to be up to a dinner out.

“Probably not,” I whisper, disappointment laced deep in each of my words.

“They said you had a fever,” he adds, stepping deeper into the room.

I have a large room. I hate it. It’s all white and gray and that’s because my father is a monochromatic lover. Color is outlawed in the whole house. I once asked for a pink comforter and rug, I thought I may have to call an ambulance to rush him to a hospital. I can usually get what I want out of my father. All I have to do is annoy him and promise to leave him alone if he gives me what I want. It’s not something I do that often. Mostly because when you know someone hates when you enter their space, you do your best to stay out of it. I try not to take it personally because he does my brother the same way. Chris is older than I am and moved out years ago. I rarely see him. He despises our father, but the sad truth is that they’re really a lot alike.

My body jerks as I feel Marco’s touch. Until this second, I didn’t realize I had closed my eyes. When I open them it’s to find Marco staring down at me in concern, the back of his fingers brushing against my forehead. “You don’t feel warm,” he utters.

His touch is whisper soft, but it sends shivers of awareness over me. I let my poor, ragged body enjoy it and close my eyes yet again.

“I don’t have a fever,” I whisper stupidly.

“I think I should take you to the doctor,” he says and when I force my eyes open again, I can see he’s frowning.

“I don’t need to. I’ll be fine in a day or so.”

“You’re not fine now.” He squats down, bringing his face close to mine, and using his hands on my mattress to steady his weight.

“You may have an infection or pneumonia. Let’s get you to my car and I’ll drive you to the hospital.”

His face is so sweet, so soft and kind that I am frozen. I can’t function. I honestly don’t remember anyone ever treating

me so gently. I gasp as I feel his arms go around me. He cradles me against his body as if I was nothing more than a child. “Wh-What are you doing?” I stutter.

“I’m going to carry you to my car, baby,” he answers, his gruff voice quiet enough to make me close my eyes at its sweetness, but rough enough to dance across my nerve endings and make me ache—for entirely different reasons than the fact I’m on my period.

“I don’t need to go to the doctor,” I tell him, trying to make myself function when what I really want to do is curl into Marco and let him take me any place he wants.

Seriously.

I would follow this man to the ends of the earth and back again. I’d go through raging fires, horrific storms, you name it. I wouldn’t care what we’d face, because I’d be with him, and it’d be worth it.

I breathe him in. He reminds me of sandalwood, earthy and warm, with just a hint of something different—like, maybe, the air when it is about to rain. I close my eyes at the joy of being this close to him. It almost overwhelms me.

Why can’t he want me?

“No one wants to go to the doctor, Ena. You were also sick yesterday. You need to go and I’m here. I’m going to take you.”

Ena. I sigh. It had been so long. My mind automatically went back to my birthday two years ago.

“I like it better when you call me Ena.”

“Precisely why I won’t do it that often. I want you to appreciate the times it happens.”

He was right. It’s been so long that when he called me Ena, I didn’t only appreciate it, I immediately turned to mush.

He started walking again and I brought my hand up around his bicep and pressed.

“No, stop.”

“Baby—”

“I’m not sick. I don’t have a fever. I’m just...”

“Just what?” he prompted when I couldn’t figure out how to explain. The last thing I want to do is talk to Marco—the man I’ve been having dreams about for more years than I should have. Marco was my image on what a real man should be—and that was before I should have even been thinking about men at all.

“I’m not sick like that. I’m cramping,” I compromise, trying to ignore the heat that floods my face. I avoid his eyes and stare at his beard instead. I find myself really, *really* wanting to reach out and touch it. I don’t do that.

But, God, I want to.

“That’s even more reason to go. You could have food poisoning.”

I shake my head no, mentally cursing my luck because Marco doesn’t catch on. “It’s not food poisoning.”

“Did you get a medical degree in the two years that we’ve been apart?” he asks, and I finally force myself to look in his eyes. They’re sparkling. *Damn.*

“No. But I know what this is.”

He frowns. “There’s no way you can know that, Ena.”

“I can. It happens every month.”

He stares down at me, looking clueless. I close my eyes. Men really can be dense. I have no idea why I need to be discussing this with a man that I want for my own—the same man who has ignored me since our engagement. Yet, here I am, and I guess it’s because I’m an idiot. Although, at this point, I figure if I don’t clue him in, I will find myself at the hospital emergency care and I’m really not up to that.

“Helen—”

“I’m on my period, Marco.”

“You’re on...”

“And just to say, moving around makes it worse, so if you could put me back down on the bed, it’d be appreciated.”

I’m kind of lying. The heat of Marco’s body against mine is helping the cramps and I’m definitely not chilling now.

I watch as my words penetrate and understanding spreads over Marco’s face. I’m pretty sure that I’m going to die of embarrassment, but if that’s my penance for getting to see how his face relaxes and goes soft while he’s staring at me, for experiencing how tender his expression becomes as he lays me back down on the bed, not to mention the feeling I get as he brushes my hair away from my face with his callused hand—which, by the way, spreads electrical sparks of pleasure skittering over my body—I’d do it again and again. It’d be worth dying of humiliation... *easily*.

“Did you take some medication for the cramping?” he asks, making me blink.

“I’m sorry?”

“For the cramping, Ena. Did you take something for it?”

“Uh...”

“You’re beautiful when you blush, baby, but if we’re going to be married this is something we will deal with. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Now, did you take something for the cramping?”

“It’s in my bathroom on my sink. I uh... it...” I swallow and try to catch my breath. “It was too much effort to walk in and get it,” I finally murmur, feeling lame.

“Right,” he whispers, his face getting tight as he lays me back down on the bed.

“I...”

“Be right back,” he says before I can think of what to say.

“Okay,” I murmur to no one but myself because by the time I get out the word, Marco is already disappearing into my bathroom. I close my eyes and try to steady my breathing, but I do it smiling because the man that I have been more than a little in love with since first watching him brush my best

friend's hair out of her face and bandaging a scrape on her knee is taking care of me and treating me like I'm special.

Like I matter.

It's a heady feeling. It's the best feeling ever. It is as beautiful as I always imagined it would be.

My lips spread into a smile. Things will change now. I'm eighteen. Clearly, Marco cares about me. For the first time since the day I became engaged, I am excited for what will happen next.

I look up as Marco comes back into the room, holding a bottle of pain reliever. He's watching me and he's giving me a tight smile. That doesn't bother me. I don't think Marco is used to smiling. I vow that when we're married, I'm going to find ways to make him smile every day.

"I'm going to go get you a water," he says.

"I could just use the water in the bathroom sink. There are disposable cups—"

"I'll bring you a bottled water. Have you eaten anything today?"

"No," I whisper, my heart forgetting to beat for a second.

"I'll bring you some food, too. Any requests?"

"I'd kill for something salty right now," I answer honestly. His lips twitch and it's not a full smile, but it's an *almost* smile, so I think it counts.

"I'll see what I can do."

Once he's out the door, I lick my lips, forcing myself not to giggle with glee at the joy coursing through me. When my stomach contracts and I'm hit with another wave of cramps, I don't even care. It doesn't matter. This is the best day ever.

The. Best.

Chapter 4

Marco

As I come back into Helena's bedroom, I frown. My gaze glances around taking it all in and I'm not happy—not at all. The reason I'm not happy is probably stupid, but it's there all the same.

Helena's room looks like a guest suite.

There's no personality. There's none of the things you would think a girl would have in her room—even if that girl is eighteen now. My sister has a shit father that I've tried to shield her from and one of the ways me or one of my brothers—besides the two assholes—is to give her a little bit of normalcy. That meant Melina's room had ballerina slipper pink walls—I know the color because I asked Louise—Melina's nanny at the time—to take her shopping and find out what color she wanted her room. I also had her pick out bedcoverings and curtains and I made sure she'd be successful because I gave her my credit card to do it. I went a few steps further and had Louise make sure she got things to hang on the wall, a big fluffy chair and matching ottoman so she could have a reading corner, a lamp for said corner, as well as toys that would make her happy but keep her occupied. I did all of this because there were more times than naught that I needed Melina to stay in her room away from my father's wrath. I knew that was more likely to happen if she had a room she liked, a room she loved. I didn't know how to give her that, but I knew Louise who had three kids of her own and a bunch of grandchildren would. While Melina was off to school that following week and our father took Atlas and Aden to Italy for

a business meeting, me, Sebastian, Gio, and Elias all painted Melina's room and moved her new stuff in.

Helena's room doesn't have any of that. Not even a stuffed animal. It's cold and gray—devoid of any of the light and color that Helena brings to this world. It's lifeless and therefore nothing she should grow up in. I force myself to put my observations away. There's not much I can do to help and in three years she will be moving in with me. So, for now, I need to concentrate on what I can help with and that means giving her medicine so that her stomach stops hurting her and she could eat and rest.

I turn my head to look at Helena. She's still holding her stomach, but there's a smile on her pale pink lips. Her eyes are closed, she looks beautiful and way too innocent. Her long blonde hair needs a wash, but it still shines against her pillow. Her sun-kissed skin glows despite her pain. Her long, lithe legs are too damn tempting, but then even Helena's toes with soft melon colored polish on them are sexy. When she opens her blue eyes, her smile deepens as she looks at me. I resist the physical reaction that I have in response—reminding myself that she may look like a woman and, although she is *technically* legal, Helena is still too young for me. I owe it to her to let her get a couple more years under her belt. If I'm truthful about the whole affair, I'd like to take her home now. I can't do that. My father would torment me with her, and I'd have to kill the bastard—not having enough firepower to cover my ass. That would leave me in jail—or dead—and Aden and Atlas to terrorize everyone that I care about—and that would be Helena and Melina. My brothers would do it, too. They're almost as evil as my father. They're also two of the main reasons that I haven't overthrown the bastard yet. The day *is* coming and if I have to take my brothers down too, I will. I've already started making alliances to support me in my coup. I know I don't have room for error. There's too much at stake. I have to make sure when I do this, I'm successful. That's why I've waited for Melina to get of age.

“That smells good,” she whispers, her voice sweet and quiet. That's another thing that I appreciate about Helena. I've

heard her laughing and joking with Melina and although they get loud, Helena's voice is always understated and calming.

Perfect.

With the hell my life has in it, calming is exactly what I want to fill my home.

"I'm afraid the staff is at a minimum with your father out of town," I mutter, trying to keep my anger out of my voice. *Did the bastard not think his daughter needed care too?* "Still the cook had some rizogalo left over from breakfast. I was afraid that would be too sweet, and you wanted salty, so I remembered your father had the staff serve us tiropita during our meeting. I had her heat a few up. Won't be as good as fresh, but they should hit that salt craving."

"Not sure I'm up to the rice, but tiropita sounds delicious," she confesses, struggling to sit up while I place her tray over her lap.

"First thing is first," I tell her grabbing her pain medication and water. The woman in the kitchen said you prefer water with lemon, but I can always go get you—"

"No, this is perfect. Thank you. I wasn't expecting it." She stops talking as she swallows her pills. Once that is done, she looks up at me tentatively. "Do you want one?" she asks, holding up one of the cheesy concoctions and reaching it toward me.

I shake my head. "I'm good."

"Are you leaving?" she asks, after taking a bite and I shake my head.

"I can stay for a little while to make sure you're okay. Besides, it's past time we should visit."

"I'd like that. I was starting to think you regretted entering into the agreement."

"You're young," I respond, which isn't exactly an answer, but lets her know where my head is.

"I'm old enough to understand. I'm not a child, Marco."

“You are compared to me,” I counter.

“I’m eighteen now. I can buy my own alcohol. If the powers that be say I’m adult enough to do that, I’m pretty sure they are saying I’m old enough to have a husband. You do realize I was at consenting age when I agreed to our marriage.”

She takes a bite, and chews at it like she wishes it was my head. For some reason that makes me want to grin. I don’t, but the urge is there.

“You are a child at fifteen and even sixteen. I don’t care what the laws in Greece say,” I grumble. “You need to experience life.”

“Experience life? I thought you wanted me to be a good girl?” she retorts, finishing her snack and putting the tray on her nightstand.

“There are ways to experience life without having sex, Ena.”

“Is that what you’re doing, Marco? Are you still being a good boy?”

“I’m not a damn dog and I told you I would be faithful. Do you think to call me a liar?”

“I hear things,” she hedges, appearing nervous.

“What things?” I ask, my voice tight. What the fuck has she heard? Was it from my father or from my sister?

“It’s not important. I guess it was silly to think someone your age would wait for someone like me.”

“I’m waiting,” I counter.

“You’re not. It’s okay. It’s not like we have a relationship.”

“Helena,” I growl. “You’re my fiancée. I’m pretty sure that is the epitome of a *relationship*.”

“We haven’t spoken since our engagement. It’s only natural for us to uh... *interact* with others.”

“Interact? If you want to convince me you’re old enough to be in a relationship, Ena, call it what it is. Fucking. Do you think it’s natural for you to fuck another man?” My eyes narrow, my body going solid as I look at her. “Have you let another man touch what belongs to me?” I growl.

My voice is quiet, but my anger vibrates through it. The thought of her letting another man touch what belongs to me burns through me like a wildfire. I try to lock it down. I’ve had fucking years of keeping shit buried and doing what I needed to do, but right now it’s all I can manage not to lash out at Helena. She has no idea she’s playing with fire.

“Uh...”

“Has another man been between your legs?” She’s staring down at her mattress, her fingers tangled in her sheets, but I can’t allow her to get away with that. “Eyes on me, Ena,” I bark, my voice deadly. “Answer me. Has another man been between your legs?”

“Marco—”

“Answer me!”

“Why should I?” she huffs.

I lean into her, my hand moving to tangle into her hair and hold the back of her neck as I bring her in. “Have you let another man fuck you?” I hiss. When she doesn’t answer right away, my fingers tighten and I pull on her golden, sun-kissed, locks.

“You’re hurting me,” she whispers, her eyes wide.

I watch as her teeth come down to capture her bottom lip. Her eyes are dilated and her breathing shifts, making her sound like she was winded. I’m not hurting her. If anything, she likes it. I rake my eyes over her, stopping to stare at her breasts and the way her pebbled nipples press against her pale green tank. I force my gaze up.

“You’re not hurting, baby. You’re turned on,” I respond.

“Marco,” she practically whimpers, her body jerking towards me with my words.

“Now, you’re going to answer me, and I warn you, baby, you already have me upset. The last thing you want to do is lie to me.” I watch her sweet little throat work as she swallows nervously. It’s way too fucking easy to imagine that throat stretching with my cock, her full lips wrapped around me as I slide in and out... *Fuck.*

“Marco...” she repeats, only this time her voice is breathy. “Have you let another man between your legs?”

Her little pink tongue comes out to moisten her lips. “I’ve been at an all-girl’s school under lock and key. There are no boys and the only male there is the creepy grounds keeper who looks like he should be starring in every B-rated slasher flick around, so no,” she finally says.

Some of my anger ekes out, but I’m not satisfied yet. “Did you let some asshole touch you?”

“What?”

“You heard me, Ena. Did some fuck-head touch you.”

“Touch me?” she asks, eyes wide.

“Would you like me to enumerate the areas where you’d let someone touch you and I’d get pissed?”

“Uh... maybe you should,” she says cautiously.

“Then, I can make this clear. Some man puts one hand on you. He’s dead.” She gasps, the sound loud in the room, her breathing even more ragged than before.

“You’re kind of freaking me out...”

“Good. Now I’m going to ask you and you’re going to tell me. Did you protect what’s mine?”

“I... uh... I haven’t let another man near me.”

“Good all your firsts belong to me, baby. I’m going to be the first man between your legs.”

“Marco...”

“The first man you sleep with.”

“Okay,” she says with a woosh of air.

“The first man to get you off,” I add as she bites her lip. “The first man to spank your ass when you need correcting.”

“Correcting?” she squeaks.

“You’ll like it,” he promises. “And then, I’m going to be the first man to show you just how much you like it.”

“You are?” she squeaks.

“I’m going to be the first man to fuck every single part of your body.”

“Uh... huh?” Her cheeks deepen in color. “Isn’t there just... well *you know*.”

I smile. Her innocence draws me in like a moth to the flame and fuck does she make me want to burn.

“I’m going to fuck you there, sweetheart, but I’m also going to fuck your ass.” I pause as I watch her entire body shiver. Her eyes almost glaze over. She likes it. If her body’s reaction is anything to go by, she loves it. *Fucking-A*. “I’m also going to fuck these,” I nearly groan, moving my hand up and cupping one of her tits that definitely overfills my hand. “These are perfect to wrap around my cock, choking it until I come over you and that pretty face of yours.”

“Oh my God,” she whimpers her body moving from a shiver to a tremble.

“You’d let me do that wouldn’t you, Ena. You’d beg me to paint your body with my cum because you want to make Daddy happy.”

I see my words hit her. Helena knows what I’m saying and realizes I’ve let her see a side of me that I don’t share. She may be young, but she’s here with me and if the look on her face and the way her body is trembling is any indication... *she likes it*.

“Daddy...”

My eyes close. It has been so fucking long. I wasn’t lying. I have been waiting for her, even if I made it appear I wasn’t. She asked me to hold off and I did, but I also walked a tightrope to protect her from my father. Hearing her whisper,

the one word that I've wanted from her lips since standing on the other side of my sister's door and listening to her needing me, undoes me.

My control fucking crumbles.

"Tell me you're going to give that to me," I order.

"I will," she confirms, setting my fucking soul free. For the promise of this, I will bleed, fight, lie, cheat, and steal. I will run myself down in the fucking ground, knowing that when I come out of this and my father is six feet under the ground, Helena is mine.

"I'm going to use your mouth, too—be the first man to push your head down and make you swallow my cock down, sweet Ena."

"Oh..." she breathes, her hips rocking against the mattress, pushing out towards me. "I'm going to be the first to kiss your lips, thrust my tongue into..." I stop talking because for the first time since I let my control slip, Helena is avoiding my eyes. Something hideously evil unfurls inside of me. "Look at me." She continues to look down. "Look at me, Ena," I command. Slowly her face comes up to look at me, nibbling on her lip, with a face full of trepidation.

Motherfucker.

"Have you let another man have your mouth, Ena?" When she still doesn't answer, I bring my hand to her chin, and I force her to keep eye contact. "Did you suck another man's cock? Did you give him the pleasure that belongs to only me?"

"No," she cries panicked.

I breathe easier. There were two options. She's shit at hiding her thoughts, so I know she either gave some fucker a blow job or let him kiss her. Both options fill me with rage, but I can live with the kiss. I will probably hunt the bastard down and kill him, but I can punish her and move on. *If she had taken another man's cock?* I don't think either of us are prepared for how that would play out.

"Kissed," I spit the word out.

Her tongue darts out and the tip moistens her lips. That tongue has been in another man's mouth—a mouth it shouldn't have been in because she belongs to me.

"It's not what you're thinking." She stumbles over her words, rushing to reassure me. I hate to tell her, nothing she can say will make this an easy fix. Helena doesn't understand me yet. She's about to get a crash course.

"I'm thinking you let another man stick his tongue in your mouth and now I need to know who he is so I can teach him that touching what belongs to me is bad for his health."

"Uh, what?" she squeaks.

"What's his name?"

"Who?" she responds.

"The man you let kiss you," I growl, my patience wearing thin.

"The only boy I ever kissed was my brother's best friend."

"I'll find him—"

"Why? You're being crazy. I was five and he was seven."

I frown. "That's what you're feeling guilty about?"

"I never said I felt guilty."

"No, but your body language did. You would suck at poker, Helena."

"It's not what you think," she began again.

"That's what you said, but I'm still waiting for you to explain."

She lets out a soft sigh. My hand moves along the side of her neck and I rub my fingers against her pulse point.

"It wasn't a boy I kissed," she mutters, looking down at her fingers that are currently picking at imaginary objects on her sheets.

"What does that mean?"

She shrugs, her cheeks going deep red. “There weren’t any boys at school. We were seventeen, you had just blown me off. Melina and I were tired of all the girls talking about their boyfriends. The girls in the dorm across the hall had been dating one another for a while. We were drinking. One thing led to another...”

“Are you fucking telling me you made out with my sister?”

“*No!*”

“Helena,” I bark.

“There was no make out session. We just kissed to see what we were missing.”

I hold my head down and pinch the bridge of my nose. “My sister got to my fiancée’s mouth before me. What the fuck am I supposed to do with that?”

“Nothing. It was silly. Melina literally got sick. To this day I’m not sure if it was the margaritas because we had way too many of them, or the kiss. You should know it was probably the kiss. I doubt I’m any good at it.”

“If you tell me that you liked kissing my sister, we *will* have issues.”

“I didn’t, but don’t tell Melina. She thinks I thought it was awesome. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.”

“Jesus Christ...”

“It’s kind of your fault. I was supposed to see you when I was at your house, and you completely ignored me. I don’t want to marry a man who ignores me. I get enough of that from my father now. I should warn you now. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life begging for attention, Marco. If you’re going to do that, I’m asking you to let me go.”

“You’re warning me?” I growl.

I see her recoil back and she should. She should be afraid.

Chapter 5

Helena

I really should learn when to keep my mouth shut. Things were going so well. Marco was definitely seeing me as a woman and what do I do? I fuck it up. Now, he's pissed. I can see it written all over his face.

“Um...”

“*I'm* warning you, I'm not like anyone you've ever met, Ena. I make my own rules. I agreed to your terms when we became engaged. Now, you're going to hear *my* terms.”

“You have terms?” I'm captivated by the stormy look on his face. Emotion is swirling in his eyes—dark, intense, and completely beautiful.

“I do and since this may be our last shot to talk freely until our wedding, you're going to listen to them and you're going to give me what I need.”

“Marco...”

“Now is my turn to talk and your turn to listen,” he says, shaking his head.

I swallow. I want to demand he listen to me. I long to tell him how much I've needed him in my life. How much I care about him, how I always have. I want him to know that even if Melina doesn't realize it, I do. I see everything he does to shield her and how hard he works to make sure her and his brothers are safe. That I see it all—even if no one else does. There are a million things I want to tell him. Most of all I want to tell him that I know I'm younger, but that doesn't mean I don't know how my body reacts to him, how deeply I want

him and that I've wanted him that way for a *very* long time—longer than I should have, but that doesn't change the truth.

I don't do any of that. Instead, I nod. "Okay."

"I've got shit going on in my life. I have enemies who would use the women in my life against me. I've been protecting my sister against that. I can't allow myself to get closer to you until I can neutralize that threat. I can't allow you to be used against me, Helena. I will *not* bring you into a situation where you could be harmed. That's not happening."

"And I'm just supposed to be okay with the fact that the man I'm supposed to spend the rest of my life with ignores me?"

"You will have to accept that our engagement needs to be like this. I can't let outside forces think you matter to me."

"I don't understand. My father says that your family is one of the most powerful in Greece."

His face gets harder. "I am not my family. When I take you as my wife, it will be when I am standing on my own and in a position to protect what belongs to me."

"Why even decide to marry me, then?"

"I didn't get a choice. My father made the arrangement just as well as yours, Ena."

It's a simple statement, but it cuts. It's clear from his words, from the way he's looking at me and from his tone that he wouldn't have agreed to our engagement if given the choice. I lower my eyes, because suddenly looking at him is painful. Marco doesn't seem to notice. I know this because he keeps talking and suddenly, I wish that I could just escape this entire conversation.

"I knew by agreeing I was also giving myself a deadline. By the time our wedding was to take place, I needed to take charge of my life. That's the only way that I could allow myself to claim you. That means, by then I needed to make sure my sister was safe and then I could *finally* fucking make my move. I've been working toward that in the background. I'm getting closer, but I'm not there yet, baby. Soon, I'll make

a place of safety for both you and Melina. I've been setting that up and I'm close. I can't lie. It's going fucking slow, but I'm doing it."

"How much longer will it take you?" I ask and I know I don't keep the frustration out of my voice. I think it's impossible at this point.

He shrugs as if his answer doesn't dictate my whole future. "However long it takes."

However long it takes?

What kind of answer is that? He honestly expects me to accept it, too. It's written on his face. I shake my head no. I don't know if it's to deny him, or just to clear my head. His features go tight, and he frowns at me. I bite my lip. I recall how sweet he was to Melina and the way he says he has to protect her and keep her safe. Then, I remember the way he makes me feel alive and has *always* done that. Yet, along with that, I know in my heart that I can't live a life where I'm forgotten again. My father is really good at that. He's not mean to me and in his way I'm sure he loves me. Yet, if Marco treats me like my father, I think it will probably kill me. I would die inside more and more every day.

"I can't," I whisper.

I'm talking more to myself than to him. Regret and hurt are curling inside of me and I can taste the bitterness it brings. I spoke so softly that I wasn't sure Marco could even hear me. In truth, I was speaking mostly to myself. Still, his eyebrows raise and his face shifts so that his features literally harden right before my eyes, I know he did. I can also tell he's not happy at all.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't think I could take an indefinite amount of time before getting to know you. We're engaged. I don't see why we can't spend time with one another. I don't think it's too much to ask for either. In fact, I think it's perfectly normal."

"I'm not a normal man," he counters. Then, his face gets closer, filling my vision as he bends to me. "I never will be."

This is what I need and you're going to give it to me Helena."

I shake my head to deny him, and he curves his hand around my neck to stop my denial.

"You are and do you know why?" he literally purrs.

I swallow nervously. "Wh-why?" I stumble, gushing the words out over my suddenly ragged breathing.

"Because you want to please me and to give me what I want."

My heart thunders in my chest. Each beat is almost painful. My body feels as if it is slowly coming alive, electricity surging through my nerve endings. "What..." I have to stop and catch my breath. "What will you give me?"

His full lips are right in front of me. So close that I can see small lines in them. They spread into a smile. The smile doesn't look as happy as it does wicked.

Completely and utterly wicked.

"Are you asking me to fuck you, Ena?"

My body does an all over shiver. There's a sharp thrust of hunger that knifes through me and it seems to center between my legs. I bite my lip to hold back my moan from the pleasure that sends careening through me.

I don't think I fully succeed.

"W-w-we can't. I... I'm on my period," I whisper, embarrassment making my face heat.

I wouldn't have thought it was possible. I really wouldn't have. Not until I've seen it with my own eyes. Somehow—again impossibly—Marco's face gets even more wicked. Then, before I can take a breath his lips are on mine.

His hand on my neck becomes forceful as he holds me exactly where he wants me. He tugs on my hair and as I exhale from the sting of pain, his tongue pushes into my mouth. My gasp becomes a moan as his tongue tangles with mine and the taste of his kiss explodes around me. I lose myself. My hands go around him, my nails digging into his back as I try to hold

him closer. His tongue forages through my mouth teasing and tasting me.

Nothing could have prepared me for Marco's kiss. Like this. *Nothing*. It is unlike anything I could have imagined and it's so much better than I could have dreamed. It also seems to go on forever and by the time he pulls back, my body feels like I'm holding onto a livewire. My lungs are burning, I'm gasping for breath, and my hips are rocking as I clench my inner muscles. My nipples are tight and almost painful. I didn't know it was possible to be this aroused.

I feel his lips move along the column of my neck and I angle it in the opposite direction to give him easier access. I tremble as his tongue licks an invisible path along my neck and higher up, until he's licking along my earlobe, teasing me as his tongue darts along the shell of my ear.

"You taste like candy, baby. So fucking sweet you make my dick ache," he whispers, his hot breath against my ear causes my entire body to tremble.

"Marco..."

I don't even recognize my own voice. It's breathless and there's so much desire woven in the way I said his name, it's raw and needy.

"I have good news, Ena," he whispers, moving so his face is filling my vision once more and he's staring directly into my eyes.

"Good news?"

"You're a fucking great kisser," he praises. A startled giggle breaks out and I stare at Marco's smiling face and pray I'm not dreaming...

Chapter 6

Helena

I can't stop the happiness that bubbles out of me. Marco is here. He's here! He's taking care of me, *and* he thinks I'm a good kisser. I've dreamed and waited for so long that I can hardly believe this is real.

Marco pulls me back into him and my fingers tangle into his shirt, holding onto him, unsure of what is happening, just knowing I don't want to let him go. I force myself to look up into his eyes. They're dark, but they have these blue flecks in them that shine bright, and they always capture my attention. I don't think I've ever seen anything like them and I'm pretty sure that I could stare into his eyes for the rest of my life and never get bored.

"Maybe I should remind you that you belong to me," he practically purrs.

Blood is rushing through me. The sound is throbbing in my ears and I apparently dropped my gaze down, because now I'm staring at Marco's lips as he speaks. I can hear him, but I'm hypnotized, unable to respond or move because I'm too busy watching the way his lips move as he speaks. Before I can stop myself—not that I would have to be honest—I lean up and press my lips to his full, beautiful ones.

"Jesus," Marco hisses against mine.

I stiffen, realizing what I've done. I start to pull away, but his hand is at my neck and he's holding me in place. Then his tongue is thrusting into my mouth. I let him lead me and lose myself to his demanding kiss and the way his tongue slides

against mine, the way he ravages my mouth and the way his hand flattens against my stomach. I never imagined kissing had a taste. Of course, I didn't have any experience. I couldn't really count Melina because that wasn't even fun. Plus, when I kissed her, it tasted like Cheetos and cheap beer, because well, we were munching and drinking while watching movies. Marco's kiss tastes dark, stormy, and delicious. It's a taste that I could become addicted to—and might already be.

His mouth moves from mine, traveling down my neck and causing me to shiver all over.

“What do you need, sweetheart.”

“I... I don't know... Just you...” I feel stupid as I answer. I know he's used to women who are worldly and experienced. *Women that are the complete opposite of me.* “I'm sorry,” I whisper, dropping my head down and feeling embarrassed.

“Eyes on me, baby.” I force myself to look at him. “What are you sorry about?”

“This is all new to me. I want to please you, I just I guess I don't know how to do that.”

His lips stretch into a small smile, the blue spots in his eyes become more alive and his face relaxes. The change is small, but I notice everything about him.

“Fuck, Ena, sweetheart you please me. You're the one bright spot in my damn life.”

“I am?” I gasp. The weight of what he just confessed settles inside of me and warms me completely—even filling the dark spots that have frozen over. The spots no one knows about—not even Melina.

“You doubt me?” he asks. I shake my head. The last thing I want to do is offend him.

“I believe you if you say it's true. It's just you've spent so long ignoring me and I know you avoided me during the times that I visited Melina. So...”

“I need you to listen to me, Ena.”

“Okay,” I exhale, my heart pounding.

“My life is complicated. I’m working to make my world safe for my sister and for my new wife. It’s not easy, and I have to make sure that while I’m doing it, I don’t let others know they can use you against me.”

“But—”

“Give this to me, Helena. I need it from you. Give me your trust.”

“I’d be lying if I said I’m not scared, Marco. I just...”

“Just what,” he says, putting pressure on my chin so I’m forced to look at him again.

“I’m afraid you’re telling me all this just so you don’t hurt my feelings and that you really, just don’t want me. I mean, I had my father contract yours. I knew I wanted you. I knew it would always be you. You were trapped.”

“I know you don’t have experience, sweetheart, but I don’t think you’re paying attention.”

I blink. “Huh?”

He reaches over slowly disengages my hand from his shirt. I watch as he does it. One finger, two...three...four... It’s silly. If I hadn’t been in some kind of a Marco trance, I would have released his shirt on my own, but I just didn’t have the cognitive function to pull that off. I watch as he wraps his fingers over mine and brings it down. I bite my lip as he guides me between his legs. I forget to breathe when he presses down so that my palm is flat against the hard edge of his arousal. Of their own volition, my fingers curl so that I can embrace his erection. He’s so hard that despite his slacks being in the way, it almost feels like they’re not there. I can even make out the ridges of his cock.

“Eyes, baby,” he says, and I don’t think it’s my imagination that his voice is hoarser now. I take a deep breath and let it shudder through me as I force my gaze back to Marco. The look on his face is intense and it sends a wave of heat through me that settles between my legs.

“Are you using tampons?”

I blink. My body recoils and I'm pretty sure I might die of humiliation. "Uh..."

"You are," he says.

I don't know what he saw on my face that would confirm that. Then again, I'm not even sure why we're having this conversation. What I do know is that I wish we weren't. He stands up from the chair by my bed and before I can question him, he grabs both my hands and pulls me up to stand beside him.

"Uh..." Seriously, I need to quit uttering that one sound. It's not even a word. Marco is going to think I'm still a kid! *What is wrong with me?*

"I'm not going to allow myself to fuck you until you're mine completely."

"Marco—"

"That means I can't take you like I would like."

"I mean, I *know* that. I'm on my period."

There's a shift on his face and his eyes burn more intensely. I don't know how to read it, but that heat he's been building inside of me turns into molten lava and it's moving through me quickly and spreading like wildfire. It's so strong that I swear to God, I think my knees might buckle.

"I'm not one of those, Ena."

"One of those?" I scrunch my face up and though I know it's not a good look, I still do it because it happens every single time that I get confused. One could say that right now, I'm definitely confused.

"One of those men who will leave you alone while you're having your period. You're mine. Your body is mine, your pussy is mine. I'm the only man that gets it. I've made that clear, but you should also know I will fuck you whenever I want. I don't give the first fuck when you're on your period."

Um... *Yikes*. I should be turned off. Periods are totally gross, and no one wants their boyfriend to see them like that—although Marco isn't exactly a boyfriend, he's all man. So, in

this case, I didn't want my man to see me like that. *My Man*. This time a different heat filled me. This was one made of dreams coming true, of happiness and joy.

“But...”

“Right now, I want to strip you bare, carry you into the shower, pin you against the wall and fuck you so hard we crack the tile.”

Oh my God! I want to scream, *Okay, sure! Let's do that! I'm down*. I don't because I'm a little scared. I mean, I am a virgin and breaking tile freaks me out just a little bit.

“Uh...” *Damn it! There's that sound again!*

“Since, once I have my cock in you, I'm not going to allow you to be away from me, that can't happen tonight.”

Well, shit. Now, I'm past being scared and straight to being disappointed.

“Okay,” I mutter, noting that I don't really keep the disappointment out of my voice. “I don't really think that's possible anyway.”

“It's possible,” he counters.

“I'm messy,” I whisper avoiding his eyes.

“Let me rephrase my answer. It's not only possible, it's *going* to happen, just not until I make sure I'm around to keep you, honey.”

“Around?” I ask.

“To get clear and protect you, things will be dangerous. I can't claim you until that's done. You're going to give me the time I need to do that and I'm warning you, honey. It's not going to be easy on you or me for that matter. As much as I would like to, I can't let others see what you mean to me—at least not until it's safe.”

“This is all pretty confusing,” I mutter.

“I get that. Trust me, I've been living this life for a while.”

“I mean something to you?”

“You’re my fiancée,” he counters, as if that explained it all.

I don’t physically react, but his words do bring me back to earth. I *know* what that means. It’s not love, it’s ownership. I belong to him, so he doesn’t want others around me. It’s not much, but I’ll work with it. Maybe in time he could grow to care about me. I decide to bury all these thoughts and concentrate on the one question which I didn’t understand.

“Why are we having this conversation?”

“Just because I can’t fuck you, doesn’t mean I can’t make you come.”

“Uh...” *Shit*. I really do need to start trying to talk even when I’m freaked out.

“Now, I need you to strip and show me what is mine.”

“Strip?” I squeak.

“Strip.”

Strip... Okay I can do this. Can’t I? I’ve wanted Marco Stratakis for what seems like forever. I’ve pleased myself while dreaming of him—and it should be said that although my experience is limited to the extreme, those dreams were down and dirty. I did things in them that I’m not even sure was done in reality. *I still wanted to try them*. The problem is—that even though you dream about doing them—actually doing them is terrifying!

“Helena.”

I look to find a very serious Marco watching me—only he’s moved. He’s no longer standing beside me. Somewhere in my panicked haze, I didn’t even notice! He’s sitting back in his chair, legs apart, hands on the armrests and his eyes are locked on me.

“Uh... yes?” *At least I added a real word this time*.

“Strip,” he orders again.

I manage to swallow down my nerves and push down the shorts I’m wearing. It would have been nice if I could have

worn something other than cotton shorts and a worn tee. Alas, I didn't plan on seducing Marco—or even knew I would have the opportunity—so, I was stuck. I also didn't know anything about how to be sexy. I swear, if I can manage to make this look good enough Marco doesn't end our engagement, I'm going to spend the next two years learning to be as polished and sexy as a runway model. I'll turn myself into a woman who looks good on Marco's arm. Once I step out of those and kick them to the side, I take a moment to realize my heart is about to pound out of my chest.

“The top.”

My head jerks up as I look at him. His dark command hangs between us. I roll my lips together and swallow, praying I get this right. I gather my tank in my hands and do my best to ignore the way I'm trembling as I pull it over my head. Automatically, I bring my arm across my breasts to hide them. I know I still have my panties on, but I don't think I have the courage to get take those off. With his next words, I realize Marco must have understood that.

“Lay back on the bed, baby.” His voice isn't much more than a whispered praise. The tone of his voice, however, is gruff and it sounds beautiful.

Glad for the small reprieve I do what he says and lay my head back on my pillow, my arm still firmly pressed against my breasts. I do my best to concentrate on my breathing and calm my heart—which is currently threatening to beat out of my chest. I hear movement and my gaze goes back to the chair where Marco is. He's rising out of it, his gaze focused on me.

“Do you know what pleases me most right now?”

“What?” I puff out.

“You didn't even try to deny me. You give me what I want. Do you know why that is, Helena?”

“Because I... uh...” *Damn it! I was doing so good.*

“Say it. Give me the words.” His demand is spoken softly, his voice silky in texture, but there's no disguising that it is still an order.

“I want to please you, too.”

“Good girl. I will tell you that I had other plans tonight.”

“You did?”

“I was going to have you strip and make yourself cum while I watched and stroked my cock.”

“Oh...” The thought of him watching as I did that, him stroking his cock while watching me makes my body tremble and a white-hot surge of electricity zap through me, centering in my core.

His thumb reaches down and brushes against my cheek. “You like that idea,” he responds, and I nod because I do. I like it so much that I’m wet, and my clit is practically throbbing. I’m not experienced, but I figure a man like Marco could tell how excited I am. So, really, there’s no point in lying.

“Yes,” I answer. “It’s just...”

“Just what, baby? You’re safe with me. You don’t know me very well yet, but I promise you and your body are safe with me.”

“I’m nervous.”

“I can tell by the way you’re hiding your body from me. It will take time, but we will work you through that in time.”

“We will?”

“Definitely, but for now. I’m going to ask you to relax and just let me make you feel good.”

“I’ll try, but just saying, that might not be easy. I’ve been dreaming about this for a while. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

He leans down and kisses my forehead. My eyelids feel heavy and as they flutter closed, he kisses those too. I feel the tip of his nose brush across my cheek and then to my ear. His lips caress the shell of my ear as he speaks. “That is something you will never do, Ena. Never, you’re a shining star and your light is the brightest thing in my life. You’re clean, pure, and

priceless. Hell, you shine so bright, I'm starting to think you can heal the darkness inside of me."

"I don't think you're dark. I think you're beautiful." Don't ask me why I said that. It's just there's this expression on his face that makes me believe he's in pain. I want to fix it, erase the hurt that is shadowed in his beautiful eyes.

"I'm not, but you make me want to make sure that all you know is beauty and that begins now."

He begins kissing along my neck, his teeth raking against my skin. I keep my eyes closed, getting lost in the sensations that are bombarding me one after another. My legs and hips move restlessly against the bed as I can feel something building inside of me that I don't truly understand. I mean, I *know*. I'm eighteen, but I don't *truly* know. I've been sheltered and locked away in an all-girl's school.

When his lips brush against my arm, I don't mean to, but I stiffen.

"Shh, it's okay," he purrs, dragging his lips gently over me until he reaches the back of my hand.

I can feel his lips and the tip of his tongue slide against my skin. His hot breath tickles against my cleavage. Every now and then his lips brush against the exposed swell of my breasts, as he moves along a previously unknown path. He's teasing me, I know. My breath is coming in uneven puffs of air that I have to force from my lungs. My body feels like I'm walking on a tightrope.

"Marco," I cry as I feel him sucking one of my fingers into his mouth, his rough, calloused hand flattening out against my stomach. His tongue swirls around my finger as he releases it. My hips push up toward him as I feel the tip of his finger brush along the waistband of my panties. His other hand captures my wrist as he pulls my hand away, completely exposing my breasts to him.

"Don't hide yourself from me, Ena. Trust me when I tell you sweetheart, I want every inch of you."

His words are spoken so somberly that I don't even question. I force my body to relax and the smile on his beautiful lips is more than enough reward.

"That's my good girl." I bite my lip because I love that. I find I want to be his good girl. *I need it.* "You are, too, aren't you, Helena?"

"Yes," I answer at once.

He shakes his head. "Remember the lesson earlier, Ena. Answer me like I need you to."

I try to remember. I swear I do, but all I can think about is the feel of his fingers brushing along the side of my neck, his warm breath against my ear and the way the cooler air in the room sends awareness through me, raising goosebumps across my skin and teasing my nipples. I can't keep my eyes open. I'm overwhelmed, drowning in sensations. They snap open immediately though when I feel the rough pads of his thumb and finger wrap around my nipple and pinch it.

I cry out, the sharp pain zapping through me and the cry finishes into a moan as my hips begin to rock.

"You have to remember what I teach you, Ena. It's important. I'm showing you what I like—just like your body is going to show me exactly what you like." His words feel wicked as his breath tickles my nipple and another whimper escapes. He leans in yet again, his fine, manicured beard tickling my skin and this time my entire body arches as I push my breasts out towards him. "Daddy."

It's one word, but it makes my eyes open and go wide as I look up at him. The intensity on his face brands me, marking me in a way that I don't think I'll ever recover. I don't think it matters, because as long as this man is mine, I'll never want to.

I've lost track of what he's saying, but instinctively I know what he's asking of me, and I want to give it to him. *No.* That's not it. *I need to.*

"Please, Daddy."

I don't know what I'm begging for, I just know I need it.

“Fuck,” I hear him hiss and then his mouth is on me, sucking on my nipple, drawing it in his mouth.

It’s good. It’s so spectacular that it’s mind blowing. Of their own volition, my hands slide up to capture his head and pull him closer, intent on doing nothing more than keeping his mouth on my breasts. He lets out a growl, pulling away just as my fingers try to curl into his hair. He stands up and I can see the desire on his face. It’d be impossible to miss. Marco’s eyes capture mine as his hand moves up to undo his tie. I start to get worried and bring my hands down, but he immediately shakes his head.

“Don’t you dare,” he orders.

I stop moving. “Okay.”

Briefly I wonder if I kept the sound of panic out of my voice. My heart seems to be pounding so loudly that I have no idea. That only gets worse when Marco takes one of his hands and wraps his fingers around both of my wrists, using that hold to yank my hands up over my head.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“I can’t let you touch me. I want you too much. I have to carefully control what happens here. If I don’t, I will claim you completely and I’m not free to do that yet.”

“Oh,” I respond. “Will you always, I mean...” I trail off because I’m not sure what I want to ask.

“Lesson number two, Ena. For me, you calling me Daddy isn’t for shits and giggles. It’s not so much a kink as it is just who I am. I need complete control in the bedroom. I’ve spent too much of my fucking life without it. You are mine, you wanted that and now, baby, what you need to understand is I want it too. This means, you will give this to me. You will give yourself over to me, feel safe in doing that and know that I will always give you what you need, too. So, to answer your question, yes. You can touch me, but it will be when I *let* you.”

He explains all this while wrapping his tie around my wrists and tying me to the post on my headboard. I can’t say I’m scared. If anything, I’m more turned on. Still, there are

things I don't completely understand. I bite my bottom lip, worrying it as I decide if I should ask my questions.

"Ask, baby," he encourages as if he knows exactly what I'm asking.

"Do you expect me to call... I mean, outside um, around people do I—"

"No, baby. You can be who you are outside our bedroom. What we do is just between us, and it will stay that way. I'm a private person. Although, being who I am, I'm still going to be a man you need to listen to in public. I will protect you at all costs—even from yourself. It is who I am."

I don't tell him that some of this I already knew. It would probably piss him off that Melina heard him messing around with one of the staff at their home. She told me about it and I'm pretty sure she did that to try and talk me out of asking my father to offer me in marriage to Marco. She didn't discourage me. If anything, it made me want him more. Melina didn't mention her brother liked to be called Daddy. We were young and more naïve than should be legal, so maybe she just didn't realize. She did say she could hear Marco spanking the woman and *punishing* her. It scared Melina. It *excited* me.

All thoughts are gone when Marco is done with the question-and-answer portion of tonight. I know this because his hands are at my hips, his touch nearly branding me as he holds my thighs.

"Princess?" he asks, and I hear the laughter in his voice, and I want to die. *Shit!*

"Uh..."

Okay, I know I used that word-non-word again. In my defense, it's hard to use real words when you realize that you are about to finally get your fiancé to give you an orgasm. Add to it that not only are you not wearing sexy underwear *and, on your period*, but instead, you're wearing your hot pink panties that your best friend got you as a joke. They're comfortable sure. Plus, they're thicker on the bottom in case the tampon

lets me down. They also have a glittery white crown on them and underneath that are the words, “Princess Panties.”

Yes, I’m wearing my princess panties made for when you’re on your period. *Shoot me now.*

“I like that,” he murmurs, not realizing that while he’s staring at my panties, I’m dying of embarrassment and will probably explode into a cloud of dust soon.

“You do?” I finally ask when it appears that I’m not going to be that lucky. I force myself to look up at him. There’s humor on his face, but there’s also tenderness. It’s beautiful. I don’t think anyone has ever looked at me with that kind of expression before in my life and even if they did...

I catch my breath. God. Even if they did, the look feels so huge, so monumental, that it would pale in comparison to the way Marco is looking down on me.

“I do. You’re going to be my princess,” he declares, causing the breath to freeze inside my lungs, leaving me unable to exhale. I just stare at him, trying to ignore the tears that burn, trying to slip out.

I don’t know how to respond and before I can, his mouth is on mine. I wasn’t watching, I was looking anywhere but at Marco because I was dying of embarrassment. So, I didn’t realize he was going to kiss me. This kiss is different. This kiss is filled with hunger and a barely controlled sense of urgency. It should scare me—*it doesn’t*. Instead, I open myself to him automatically, arching my back, pressing my body up into him and pulling on my hands, trying to get them free so I can touch him. That doesn’t work but as Marco bites my lip, I find I don’t care. A shuddery breath rolls through me at the sting of pain that’s mixed with pleasure hits. Then, he’s sucking at my lip, his tongue moving against the area to soothe his bite.

My head presses back into the pillow, my body still pushing upwards, trying to reach him as he hovers over me. His hand slides behind the back of my neck as he holds me in place. Then, his tongue invades my mouth, and he consumes me. This kiss is on the verge of violent it’s so explosive. I lose

my worry on if I'm doing it right, because clearly, Marco is hungry for me. I must not be a total failure. He leads, I follow, and I do that gladly. I hold on, trying to give as good as I'm getting, not stopping even when my lungs burn with the need to intake air.

When he breaks away, his lips move along the side of my face, his beard tickling my skin as my legs move restlessly. My hips are rocking, searching for more as he moves his lips along the side of my neck. He nips at the tender skin there, too. His tongue touching and caressing his bites there too. I can do nothing but moan, wishing I could touch him. My muscles are clenching, especially the ones between my legs. I'm so desperate I'm trying to ride the tampon inside of me. *I'm desperate*. I'm not sure how the desire ramped up this quickly—this explosively—but right now, I don't care. I just need more.

“Marco,” I half moan, half beg. “Please.”

His hand moves back to one of my breasts. I breathe a sigh of relief. I need this. I want it. *I don't get it*. His fingers grab hold of the swollen nipple and twists it, sending a small measure of pain coursing through me that causes my pussy to spasm. *Spasm*. It has never happened and it feels so good there are no words.

“Daddy,” he growls against my ear.

“Please, Daddy,” I breathe, realizing my mistake at once. “Make this ache stop,” I plead, body rocking aimlessly. Everything he is doing is so much more than I ever knew existed, but I need more.

So. Much. More.

Marco groans, the sound full of hunger and I listen to it, realizing that I'm the one that has brought him to this point. He could have any woman he wanted and I'm the one here. I'm the one that he's pleasuring. *Me*.

“That's my good girl,” he praises.

My eyes close. God, yes. I want to be his good girl. I want to be everything to him. I always have and I know I always

will. *Always.*

He kisses a path down my chest until his lips find my nipple and he latches on. My head goes up to see him, but the pleasure is so intense that I slam it back down on the pillow. My body quakes as he continues to stoke the fire inside me. I feel his hand spanning across my stomach, and I whimper, “Daddy.”

He lets out a growl and I know he liked me begging him because his fingers push into my panties. He lifts up, his eyes raging with desire that’s so consuming it looks like his eyes are glowing with it. He reaches up, undoing his tie and suddenly my hands are free. I start to reach for him but stop when he shakes his head no. He begins taking off his jacket and next his shirt. I’m silent as he releases button after button, revealing his chest.

All the girls I know from school—including Melina—talk about guys with smooth chests, no hair and the six pack that is rock hard, along with that delicious V, like all the sexiest models have that are on the internet and in magazines.

Marco is not that. There’s hair on his chest. It’s not a jungle of it, just a smattering of it that is heavier between his pecs. It’s dark with some gray mixed in. It gets finer, but still present as my gaze follows down his stomach and around his belly button. There are no finely chiseled abs, his stomach is not toned, but there’s no flab either. It’s muscle, just not defined and I find that I like that even more, too. Marco’s muscles come naturally, working every day on whatever he has to get done, not by working out in a gym for hours to achieve perfection. There’s nothing wrong with the second option, I suppose. It’s just, I definitely prefer the first. *Definitely.* He does have the clearly defined V. I can see it and the way it disappears in his slacks. I watch as he pulls his shirt off. Taking in the tattoos that move along his arms and the one on his chest. God... *he’s beautiful.*

“Can I touch you, Daddy?”

I’m young, inexperienced, and definitely—at least up until this moment—naïve. I get that. I never, as in, not in a million

years, thought I would like calling a man daddy. I've heard about it. I've been sheltered, but there is internet and after we learned to circumvent the safety firewalls the school put up, we trolled the net. The thought never appealed to me. Not once. It's different with Marco. It's clear he gets off on it and every single time I call him daddy, my body reacts to it, too. It turns out, I not only like it—*I love it*.

He smiles at me, and the pleasure on his face makes me feel alive. “Not yet. If you touch me, I won't be able to stop myself from fucking you raw right here and now, burying my cock in you so deep you taste me.”

My body freezes and then jerks. I lift up on my elbows because I want that. I want that so much the thought of not having it makes me want to cry. “I want you too,” I confess, although I'm pretty sure he could read that in the way I'm looking at him.

“I can't, baby. When I take you like that I'm planting my cum in your womb. I won't stop until you're pregnant and my child is growing inside you.”

I blink. “I don't think I'm ready for that,” I tell him. I'm not. One day, when I'm older, I'm more than okay with it, but definitely not now. I don't say that out loud. I don't want to disappoint him. Okay, I agreed to giving him control in the bedroom and I like it. I'm still going to be my own person outside of there and he kind of agreed that's how this goes. I get the feeling, however, Marco is bossy and controlling everywhere. While I like that, I'm more independent. I've had to be. I'm not about to let that ruin this moment. We'll have time. Marco will do what he needs to do there with his father. I know that's who he is talking about. The man is evil. Melina doesn't see it. Marco shields her. I see it, though. I've seen it when I was there. It was evident in the way he looked at me, in the way he spoke and definitely in the way he talked to his sons—*especially Marco*.

“Eyes on me, Princess.”

My cheeks fill with color because I know where that nickname comes from. “Do not let your thoughts go anywhere

but on you and me when we're together. Understand?"

I immediately know I've disappointed him, and I don't want that either. Not here when it is just the two of us. Not when he's trying to give me pleasure and definitely not when he's giving me a part of him.

"I'm sorry." I start to add Daddy on there, but for some reason I don't. I can't tell you why, but it doesn't feel right. I'm pretty sure I've made the right decision when he smiles at me.

He doesn't speak. He takes my right hand and then begins sucking on the fingers, swirling his tongue on them. It feels erotic and it's beautiful to watch. So, even though I'm confused, I don't stop him. He brings my hand down and while controlling my fingers, he places it on my breast. He quickly does the same with my other hand and then looks at me.

"Play with your nipples, Ena. I want to watch you teasing them while my face is buried in your pussy."

Holy crap.

"I... um..." *Damn it.* "I'm on my—"

"We'll leave your tampon in, but you're going to come on my tongue, baby. Understand?"

I nod my head. I don't really. All of this is new, but I want it, so I wisely agree.

"Now, play with them, but keep your eyes on me. I want to see your face as I'm giving you pleasure. I want to watch you as you climax."

Oh God.

"Okay."

I may agree, but my movements are stilted. I feel embarrassed and I don't know how to overcome that. I mean, I know how to play with my breasts. When you want sex but don't have anyone in your life that you want it from, you learn self-pleasure quickly. Still, this is all new. I make small movements, hopefully doing enough not to upset Marco. I

watch as he pulls my panties down. I bite my lip and resist the urge to cover myself.

“Fuck,” he hisses under his breath and for a minute I panic, afraid I’ve done something wrong—or that he doesn’t like what he sees.

“Um...” *If ever there was a place for ‘um’ it would be here.*

“You’re bare,” he purrs. “All except for this one small strip.” As he speaks, his fingers lightly touch it, brushing against the fine hair that I left. It sends chills over my body, but these are the good kind of chills, the ones that make you weak in the knees.

“Please,” I whimper when his fingers move to caress against my seam. He’s so close, but not where I need him the most.

He hitches his hands under my knees and then moves me so that I’m angled to the side of the bed. My legs are pulled apart and his body is between them. He doesn’t look up. Instead, his strong hands pull the lips of my pussy apart and he just stares, taking me in.

“Who does this pussy belong to, Princess?”

“You,” I whisper.

His gaze comes to me and there’s a wicked glint in his eyes. “Who does your pussy belong to?” he asks again as his fingers press between the lips of my pussy.

My muscles clench as I wiggle under his touch.

“You,” I respond again.

His eyes deepen in color. I wonder if I’m seeing things and then, I know I’m not because his hand flattens out, lifts and slaps down on my pussy. I blink not sure what just happened. Pleasure is slamming through me. I feel my body reacting, my body feels as if it’s on fire.

“Please,” I whimper, not sure what I’m begging for, only knowing that Marco can give it to me.

In response, he spans my pussy again and this time it feels so good I buck under him, trying to get his hand to come back so I can ride it.

“Who does this pussy belong to, Princess?” he asks again.

“You, Daddy,” I confess.

My breath is coming in short gasps, so desperate for him that I can barely think.

“That’s my girl. Now you get a reward,” he croons.

I bite down on my lip moaning as I feel his fingers sliding through my wet folds. That feels good, really good. I watch as he leans down and then his tongue moves against my clit. He sucks it into his mouth and my eyes nearly roll back in my head as I feel that. So hot, wet, and when he increases the pressure, it makes my entire body spasm. His hands move under my ass, lifting me up as his fingers sink into my skin with a biting force that makes me moan.

“Oh God,” I groan as his face presses against my center, his mouth and tongue torturing my clit until I think I might go insane.

“Pinch your nipples, let me see you play with them,” he growls.

I’m too far gone for embarrassment now. I do exactly as he orders.

“That’s my baby,” he hums against my clit as his tongue flattens, lashing the throbbing mound of flesh before sucking it back into his mouth.

I’m going to come. I can feel it building. I keep working my breasts, doing exactly as he ordered and, with his help, I’m grinding my pussy against his face. My eyes close as sensation after sensation crashes over me in waves.

“I can...” I stop to take another ragged breath. “Feel it.”

“That’s it, Ena. Come for Daddy.” His words are like a snarl, and that is sexy because I know he’s barely holding onto his control, too. After saying that, he bites down on my clit. With that short burst of pain, I’m lost. My climax crashes

through me with the force of a hurricane. I stiffen my body and then let it go. “Look at me!” he demands.

My eyes snap open and I tilt my head to see Marco, my ass lifted up so that my pussy is right there at his face. His fingers are massaging my clit. He looks ferocious—a man possessed. He’s also beautiful. “You’re mine now, Helena. You’re never leaving me. You will wait for me. *Say it.*”

“I’m yours, Daddy.”

“And,” he prompts.

“I’ll wait for you.”

“That’s my good girl. I think you deserve another reward.”

Before I can respond his mouth is attacking me again, stimulating my clit once more.

“Can I touch you?” I ask, and then, hoping it will make him relent, “Please, Daddy.”

He looks up at me. “Just my head. Keep your hands there and nowhere else,” he relents.

It’s not everything I wanted, but I’ll take it for now. My fingers curl into hair as I grind up against his mouth again and this time I hold on as all too quickly he has me coming again. I hold onto him and ride it out and I do it knowing that I will never want anyone else. Marco is the one.

He’s everything.

Chapter 7

Marco

Helena is breathing hard, her eyes closed. The taste of her sweet cunt is still on my tongue. It takes everything I have not to claim her. I can't do it. I will admit that I find myself wishing I had brought a condom. I didn't. The first time I take her pussy, I will do it with nothing between us. I'm not emptying my seed into latex. It's not happening. So, I will wait. I back up, my eyes still on her as I reach behind me and grab my shirt. I pull it back on. It's stupid, but I don't want her to see the scars on my back. I can't handle her taking in the brands my father put on me. I leave it unbuttoned, kick off my shoes and climb up on her bed.

"I don't want you to put your clothes back on," she murmurs, opening her eyes to look at me.

"I have to leave soon," I tell her. "Plus, I don't want the staff to come in and find me undressed with you."

Christ. I'm lying to her. I don't give a fuck who walks in. Helena is naked and lying on the bed, her lips swollen and red marks from my beard all over her body. It'd take a fool not to know what has happened and I don't care. She's mine. She may have chosen me, but I'm keeping her. It's that simple. Now, I have even more reason to make the moves required against my father. Fuck, caution. I need to end him. I need to take control of my life...

And claim my woman.

God, she surprised me tonight. She's so receptive and she gave me everything I could have wanted and more. She's

perfect for me.

“Can’t you stay a little longer?” she begs, her beautiful eyes pleading with me.

“I’ll hold you until you fall asleep,” I compromise. “I have to get back to my father’s and let him know how today’s meeting went.” I don’t mention I’m also plotting new ways to end his sorry life and contain Atlas and Aden. That last part is what concerns me the most. They hate all of us. They live to carry out my father’s sadistic orders. They especially hate Melina, having bought into my father’s poison that she’s just like our mother, weak and pathetic. I remember our mother. She wasn’t. She was everything good and that bastard made it impossible for her. She had no real life, no happiness, no choices.

“Take me back with you, Marco. I don’t want to be here without you. I never did, but after what we just shared, I don’t think I can. I don’t want to go back to the way it was. I need to be with you.”

“I want that as much as you do, Princess. I’m pretty sure I want it more. I can’t right now, but I promise you that I will work harder to make it happen.”

She grabs hold of the sides of my shirt, her head burying into my chest. I feel her sweet lips caress my skin. “How am I supposed to live without being able to touch you? Without having you touch me?” she groans against my skin, her words muffled.

“It will be hard for me, too. I will do my best to stay in touch. Just know no matter my silence, I’m doing it to protect you, not to pull away. We’re just learning one another, but I need you to hear me and to understand.”

“Understand?” she asks, burying her nose against the hair between my pecs and breathing me in. God, she’s sweet. No defenses, no bullshit, and no games.

Intoxicating.

“You gave yourself to me tonight. To me that’s as good as a vow. You wait for me, Ena. I may be forced to be distant

while I make life with me safe for you, but you hold onto my promise that I want you and I'm not letting you go."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"I don't either," I admit. "But for now, that's the way it has to be."

"Will you try to see me? At least some?" she bargains, making me smile. She bites her lips and there's mischief in her eyes as she looks up at me. "Please, Daddy?"

I laugh. She's learning fast. I should punish her for trying to get her way and playing dirty, but I like it too much.

"I will try," I cave.

"I'll wait for you," she promises kissing my chest, and then lets out a large yawn. "I'm sorry," she mumbles behind her hand as she hides her mouth. "I think you wore me out, well that and the pills always makes me sleepy."

"Sleep, baby. I'll hold you."

"I want that," she whispers., burrowing in deeper, one hand against my heart and the other on my side, her fingers bunched up in my shirt.

My eyes close. I've never had this. Never had someone in my bed, holding onto me like I was their lifeline—like I mattered. The fact that it's Helena, makes it better. Now that I've had a taste of her, I know I won't rest until she's mine.

One way or another...



Helena

I wake up slowly. My entire body humming and feeling sated in a way that I've never felt. My room is still dark and when I look over at the window, I can see it's still night. I turn to snuggle up against Marco but find nothing but an empty bed. My hand flattens against his pillow. It's cold to the touch. He's

gone and has been for a while. Disappointment fills me. I wanted more time with him. I needed it. What if this was just a dream and he never comes back? I sit up in bed, realizing I'm naked with the sheet pulled up over me.

Not a dream.

I sigh. Without turning on the light I slide out of bed and head to my bathroom. I don't need a light. It's not like I'm allowed to have clutter anywhere and I've got the path that leads from my bed to the bathroom memorized. I get to the bathroom and turn on the light. I wince immediately, my eyes snapping shut, before slowly opening, and adjusting to the brightness. I spend the next few minutes cleaning up and using the restroom. With just what Marco did to me tonight my female bits are definitely tender. Putting a new tampon in even feels different.

I smile as the memories drift over me. Waiting for him is going to be impossibly hard, but it will be worth it. Tonight proved that. I walk to my closet that is on the far wall in my bathroom, walk inside and pull out one of the drawers in the cabinet that is situated in the center. I reach inside and pull on a black t-shirt that falls down to my hips. Once it slides down over me, I hug myself with a goofy smile on my face.

What would Marco say when he finds out I sleep in his old t-shirt every night? He didn't give it to me. Nope. I had Melina steal it. When she first got it, it smelled just like him. It doesn't at all now, but I still love it because I know it once covered his body. I shake my hair loose and run a brush through it. Then, I brush my teeth and freshen my deodorant. Feeling happy, but alone, I go back into my bedroom. The light from the bathroom splashes in the room and that's when I see it. There's a giant teddy bear sitting in the chair by my bed. It's the most beautiful caramel colored bear with blue eyes and when I say giant, I mean he is *huge*. I walk over to him and lift it up. I can barely get my eyes around it. If I were to put it on the floor it would hit my stomach easily.

Huge!

I give it a hug and as I turn to put it back in the chair I freeze. There's a pink envelope lying on the cushion. I guess Theodore—my new name for him—was hiding the card. I grab it and put Theodore back down. Then sit on the bed cross-legged. I eagerly rip open the envelope, then take out the card to read it.

My beautiful bride-to-be,

Today was your birthday, but you gave me the biggest gift. I decided to give you something to hug at night while we both wait until the time that we can be together. I already miss you so much I ache.

Be my good girl,

M

I read the note over and over. Then, I read it again. I'll keep this bear forever and then, one day give it to our daughter. I fall asleep holding his note in my hands and my head on Theodore's stomach and I do it, smiling.

I belong to him now.

Chapter 8

Marco

Two Years Later

“Who the fuck do you think you are, making deals behind my back?” my father growls. His fist plows into my ribs. The ribs have been hammered, but dear ole’ father’s fist isn’t what has delivered the damage. I know there are a few cracked, broken, or hell, whatever is worse than that. No, the damage came from my brothers, Aden and Atlas. They showed up before I got out of bed at three in the morning. I fought them off and definitely did my fair amount of damage on them. I was pretty sure I could have taken them, but I should have learned my brothers don’t play fair. Atlas, slammed me over the head with a baseball bat from behind. Before I could figure anything out, the world went black. I only know what it was because I came to, chained, hanging from the ceiling and each of them taking turns hitting me with the bat. They targeted my ribs, my stomach—shit, anywhere they could.

Then, an hour or so later, my father showed up to take over. Honestly, it could have been longer. Time holds no meaning when you’re pretty sure you’re going to die. Shit, I welcome death. I’m ready to give up at this point. I had this big plan, and it was supposed to be in place six months ago. Tomorrow I was to take my fiancée away for the weekend and finally start living my life. Instead, my major ally dicked me around and I’ve been scrambling to find support to overthrow my father. I thought I found it in Toban Cirillo. Cirilo wanted to see my father dead, almost as much as I did—or at least I thought. He was sending the men and I was providing the firepower. I had a deal brokered that would fill the Stratakis

bank accounts if I was at the helm of them. Cirillo wanted a cut. I was going to give it to him. It seemed like a great plan—until it all went to shit. Someone sold me out. I don't know who, but I'm thinking Cirillo double crossed me. I may or may not live long enough to find out.

“My son! My own blood. I had you as my second. I was poised to give you the world and you think you can stab me in the back!” he roars. My head falls down. It's partly because I'm running out of strength to hold it up, but it's also because I'm sick of looking at his face.

“Answer me!” he growls.

I remain silent.

“Maybe you've addled his brains with your blows,” he rumbles, looking at Atlas.

It's a tossup as to if Atlas is meaner than Aden or if it is the other way around. All I know is that they have hearts as dark as the night—if they even have a heart.

And that's a big if.

I keep my head lolling and looking down. If I'm to die here, so be it. I would rather not see it coming and there's no way I can fight it since I'm chained. At least Melina will turn twenty-one soon. Sebastian and Gio will look out for her until then. Elias keeps to himself, but I think he will watch out for her too. My only regret is Helena. If I had known my goal would end in failure, I would have tasted her, I would have spoiled her and enjoyed every second of it. I suppose things are better this way. She will find a man who will give her what she needs.

The thought is bittersweet, but I push away the burn it causes. Things are as they are. It's not like I can change them. I've never been able to change them.

“It doesn't matter, father. Are you killing him?”

“No. He did no less than I would have done in his shoes. Still, he must learn he can't fuck me over. He has his place. He just needs to learn it.”

“What do we do?” This time it’s Aden who asks.

“Leave him chained. We will remind him of what happens when he displeases me. It’s been a while since he has felt the sting of the whip.”

“I think you should brand him,” Atlas counters, yet another reminder that he is as rotten as my father.

“The idea has merit, but with Marco, it’s never about him. It’s about the things he cares about.” My father draws out his words as if he’s thinking it over. My muscles tighten. I want to respond, to scream at him to just finish me off already. It’s useless though, I can’t even find the energy to hold my fucking head up. I manage a grunt. *A fucking grunt.* That’s all I have in me.

“Melina?” Aden says with a laugh. “He’s so protective over her. I can’t figure it out. She’s useless.”

“Too much of her mother’s blood running in her system,” my father agrees. “But I’m in the process of brokering a wedding for her. It would be bad if her skin was marred.”

“Who then?” Atlas asks, and the glee in his voice at the thought of torturing someone else turns my stomach. These two need to be killed just as much as my father. I should have done it, but I haven’t found my way around the fact that they’re my brothers. It’s a weakness that has cost me. Today’s not even the first time it cost me—it’s just the biggest apparently.

“Did Zervas say what kind of deal Marco was making with his father?” Aden asks.

I file away that information, not that it will do me any good. I’ll be dead soon. I know how my father works. He’s not going to keep anyone alive who has been plotting to kill him. Not even me, or rather, *especially* me.

“Only that he told his father he had deals lined up that will triple our wealth and would cut Toban in, if he provided extra firepower. Marco must learn everything must be cleared through me. He cannot play me!”

I would laugh if I could. Obviously Zervas has been listening into my conversations with his father. Too bad Zervas is the biggest fuckup around and doesn't know what we were discussing. He has my father believing that we were talking about just another business deal. Toban is right. His son, Zervas, is a waste of air on most days. Toban has already sent him to America to handle minor property there. It was mostly to get rid of him, but I'm sure Zervas hasn't cottoned onto that yet. Still, his screw up here, will help me. Father thinks I was just making business deals, not plotting his murder. He will view that as me working and putting my name first in the Stratakis business. That's a betrayal, but one he will allow me to survive. The same could not be said if he discovered my true intentions.

Right now, I'm not sure if it is relief or disappointment I feel. Death is preferable to breathing the same filthy air as him.

"Why would we need firepower? We have an army at our fingers. The Stratakis name is the most feared in all of Greece."

"Because I have plans to move outside of Greece. Our country is precious, and we rule it, but it is small. There are larger fish to fry. Mark my words, boys. You can't be the best if you're not always reaching for more. Don't get satisfied with what you have. It's the biggest form of weakness there is."

"Yes, Father," they say in unison.

I close my eyes and wait. As my mind quiets, I find I'm praying for death. I should have known my father wouldn't even give me that favor.

"Bring Elias. Marco has been getting closer to him. He needs to learn this lesson as well so that he doesn't get any bright ideas."

I hear them all shuffle out and the cell door close. Elias can't handle much more. He's been close to the edge since my father's last beating of him. There are days I worry he will become like the twins and make no mistake, Aden and Atlas

are the worst evil possible. My father has reasons behind everything he does. The reasons stem from a madness that's like a cancer in his brain, but the twins don't need a reason. They just like causing pain. They live for it. It is also their drug of choice.

I close my eyes. There's nothing I can do right now to help Elias. I'm just as helpless as he is. I'll beg father to take his anger out on me. I'll find some way to protect my brother as much as I can. Once I'm sure that's done, I'll go back to praying for death...

Chapter 9

Marco

“You’re insane, Marco. Jesus. You can’t even sit up. What in the hell are you doing?”

I look over at Gio and frown. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re attempting to get dressed,” he huffs. “I *know* this can’t be true, though. It’d be insane for you to get dressed considering your entire backside is nothing but raw flesh!”

I ignore him. He’s right of course. I managed to pull up enough energy to draw their twisted fun away from Elias and back to me. It worked. Elias was in rough shape, but Father and the twins had most of their fun with me, using their whips, belts, and knives. I only passed out twice, and I knew from experience that it could have been much worse.

“I’m fine. I need to do this. Tomorrow is Helena’s birthday. I was supposed to take her away for the weekend and we were announcing our engagement. The least I can do is send her flowers, a present and a small note.”

“Fuck, Marco. Why don’t you just admit it?”

“Admit what?” I ask Gio, looking at him because I know if I don’t, he won’t ever leave. I need to be alone. The pain is excruciating. I won’t give into it, I will fight with everything I still have in me, but with every minute that passes, I know I’m close to blacking out. I just need to get something to Helena first. *I have to.*

“You need to let her go. You’re never going to have a normal life. None of us are. The last thing we need is to bring another woman into this house. Protecting Melina has nearly killed us all. We can’t allow someone else that is fragile to get close to this monster we call a father. Cut her loose, brother. Let her go.”

“I can’t,” I growl. My hands are shaking from the pain my outburst causes. I hide my trembling arm under the conference table.

“Why not? You barely know this girl and she’s Melina’s age. You have nothing in common. I don’t understand your obstinacy in this.”

I close my eyes and look up at him. “Father wants this alliance with Helena’s father. I was chosen at Helena’s request. If I bow out, who do you think George Kratos and my father will choose for Helena?”

“Atlas,” Gio says, and he doesn’t even think twice about it.

“Exactly.”

“So, that’s why,” he says.

“Pardon?” I ask, not understanding what he’s saying trying to concentrate on withstanding the pain.

“That’s why you agreed to marry Helena. You are once again sacrificing yourself to protect a woman, and this woman isn’t even our sister.”

I frown. He’s both right and wrong. In the beginning, that was the reason. After spending even a small amount of time with her, I knew I wanted to be her man. After having her in my arms and the taste of her on my tongue? There’s no way I will allow another man near her—especially Atlas. He would destroy her and take great pleasure in doing it.

“It doesn’t matter,” I finally say, not ready to divulge how I feel about Helena. “I’m doing what must be done.”

“There’s just one thing I want to ask you, Marco.”

“If I let you, will you leave so I can make my calls?”

He nods.

“Fine, get it over with.”

“You keep sacrificing yourself to keep everyone else safe. What is everyone going to do when it kills you?”

I ignore him and pick up the phone. That question doesn't deserve an answer. I hear Gio's breath whoosh out of his body in a frustrated breath. I ignore that, too.



Helena

Two Years.

Two freaking years!

Marco Stratakis has played me again. He keeps playing me and I keep letting him. No wonder he thinks of me like a child. I'm as stupid as one when it comes to him. I buy every damn line he tells me.

I look over at the teddy bear on my bed. I've taken great care of it—the best really. Hell, I even slept with the damn thing every night. That ends tonight and for two reasons. First, I'm sick of spending my life dreaming about a life with Marco. It's a life that I'm sure will never happen. My eyes go to my bed. Secondly, the bear is nothing but shredded fur and stuffing. It's lying on my bed, a horrible mess because of a teddy bear homicide—one committed with *extreme* malice. I let out a breath, trying to calm down.

Malice, if I didn't feel so devastated, I'd laugh. I've obviously watched too many police procedural television shows. I'm just so upset. Marco has sent me notes and calls here or there. He's come back to visit here and there. The problem is, we're never alone. Each of those visits his father has been with him. I know his father is hateful and more than a little scary. I've seen it on my visits to Melina's home. I don't know the dynamic between him and Marco, but to say Marco

has been stilted and very distant with me on those visits, would be an understatement.

I've not seen Marco's nearly enough the last two years. Sadly, his pathetic effort was still enough to keep me hanging on. That proves I'm stupid. In my defense, while he was visiting, there would be moments when Marco would squeeze my hand under the table at dinner, or when he would kiss my temple as a goodbye but doing it as he carefully whispered for me to continue waiting for him. Times like that, kept me from thinking my dreams of a future with Marco was hopeless.

Today proves it *is* completely hopeless.

It's also our unofficial deadline. I'm twenty. *Twenty!* He promised to be here for my birthday. He promised today was the day the distance would end.

He. Promised.

Incidentally, this is also the day I admit Marco's promises are as worthless as my love for him. I'm done. Today, instead of showing up to take me away for the weekend for my birthday, he sent me a huge bouquet of flowers and a note saying he couldn't be here, but he would be out in a couple of weeks. That's it. No explanation, nothing else at all. I guess he thought I'd be okay with it.

I am not.

What I am, is fed up. Contract or no contract, I'm not waiting on that asshole anymore. We are supposed to be married in a year. He'll probably be called away then, too. So, no more waiting for Marco Stratakis.

I deserve better.

I haven't even allowed myself to cry. That man has claimed enough of my tears. I don't have any left. I can't afford to. With that silent declaration, I use the back of my finger to swipe away the tear that has escaped the corner of my eye. Okay, fine. So, *that* was the final tear.

Chapter 10

Marco

One Week After Marco's Father's Death

(End of Savage Intent Book 2 of the Series)

“Explain to me again why I can’t go home?” Helena snaps.

I look at the woman who haunts my dreams. She’s so mad her eyes are all but spitting fire. Her blonde hair is long and loose and it billows in the evening breeze. I’m sitting out on the terrace, looking over the Stratakis property and trying to figure out what I’m going to do. With the death of Aden, Atlas, and my father, it feels as if a weight has been lifted off of me. Now, I’m running the Stratakis empire under the DeLuca name and umbrella. Antonio DeLuca is a strange man. He’s hard and savage but laid back about it. There’s also a gentleness about him that I’ve never seen in someone in his position. Sure, that is only evident when he is with my sister, but still, it’s there.

After my father arranged a marriage for Melina, I knew I had to make a move. I didn’t have a choice. It didn’t matter if I had support or not. I had to end the bastard or die trying. He basically sold my sister to a perverse old man who got his jollies off of trafficking women. Sure, he did it for money, but he was so twisted up inside, he did it mostly because he had the power and enjoyed playing God. That’s how I found Killian O’Leary. He was the enemy of this bastard, and I knew he would help me. Since my sister had begun a relationship with DeLuca, and that alliance grew in a big way. That leaves me where I’m at now. In my forties, with more freedom than I’ve had in my entire life. I’m being monitored by some of

DeLuca's men, but hell, that doesn't bother me. In his place, I'd be doing the same damn thing.

I'm pretty sure he thought I'd be pissed to be working under the DeLuca name. What he doesn't realize is I'd fucking change my name to DeLuca if it was an option. As much as Melina's new husband is a pain in my ass, I like and respect him.

"Marco, are you listening to me?"

"Baby, you're screaming. It'd be hard not to listen to you."

"I told you to stop calling me baby."

"Not going to happen," I mutter, taking a sip of my coffee.

"I need to get home. My father will want to see for himself that I'm okay."

I look up at her, shaking my head. It has been like this constantly. She's hurt and pissed, and I know she has every right, there's just not a damn thing I can do about it. I can't go back and fix the past. I'm not a fan of it myself. This is what we have, and both of us are going to have to move forward.

"Sweetheart, your father is a minimal step up from the bastard that spawned me. He barely knows you're around when you are there."

Her body jerks with my words and I grimace. Christ. I know I hurt her. I seem to do that a lot. I thrust my hand into my hair and try to rein in my impatience.

"You're such an asshole, Marco."

"I know," I answer with a sigh. "It's been years, Ena. *Fucking years*. Don't you think we owe it to one another to try and see what we have between us before our marriage?"

"We're not getting married."

"We are," I counter.

"We're not. I waited for you. You can't say I didn't. I bought everything you sold me, hook, line, and sinker."

“Damn it, Ena! I didn’t sell you anything. I had my hands full here. It’s not my fault I couldn’t be present.”

“From what Melina says, I’m beginning to understand that, but that’s part of the problem, Marco. I’m hearing it from *her*, not from the man who is supposed to soon be my husband.”

“It will take some adjustment from both of us, but things will get better.”

“Um, no. You’ve had me holding on for four years. If I go through with this marriage—and that’s a very big if—it will only happen if there is communication from you at all times.”

I smile, but it’s not a joyful one. I shake my head at her. “Princess, the contract is signed. The wedding is agreed to. You are going to be my wife. You’re going to share my bed and you need to get used to that fact right now, because I’m telling you, I’m not going to let you go.”

“There’s a clause in the contract. My father can agree to terminate it at any time if he feels that said marriage is detrimental to my health.”

“Jesus, Ena. What are you planning on doing, lying to George and tell him that I hit you? That I leave you in fear of your life? I won’t have it. You go spreading that shit on me, baby, you won’t like how I retaliate. After the fucked-up shit that’s finally coming out about my father, I won’t allow anyone to think that he and I are cut from the same cloth.”

Her face goes white as she takes a couple steps away from me. She begins shaking her head.

“I would never do something like that, Marco,” she whispers. “This just proves that you don’t know me at all.”

“And you don’t know me. That is why you are here. It’s time, Helena. Hell, it’s past time. We need to see what is between us. You said you chose me. You orchestrated all of this when you were sixteen. I did not. Yet, I’m here and I will admit that I want you. So, this is going to happen.”

“If I disagree?”

I shrug.

“I’ll stay for a week. If I don’t see any changes, then I will speak to my father and this contract will be voided.”

“The contract will stand,” I counter.

“I realize you may be getting drunk on power, what with your new position and all, but even you don’t have the power to make me change my mind on this, Marco.”

I stand up and walk over to her. Her eyes dilate and she takes a step back before she can stop herself. I watch her reaction with a mild curiosity. She really doesn’t know me. I’d never raise my hand to her, I would simply get her agreement in other, much more pleasure-filled endeavors. *She’ll learn.*

I reach out, flattening my hand against the inside of her neck and use that hold to pull her to me. She stumbles a couple of steps against the marbled floor, but as her body careens into mine, I take her weight and steady her. “You want me, Ena. You can’t deny that.”

“I can. It has been two years since you touched me, Marco. How pathetic would I have to be to still want a man who so easily forgets my existence?”

“I never forgot you, baby. There’s not a man alive who could forget you.”

Her breath hitches in her chest. It’s the most positive sign I’ve seen from her, and it’s definitely welcomed. “M...” She stops, moistens her lips by rubbing them together, then takes a shaky breath and starts again. “Marco, there has to be more to a relationship than attraction.”

“In time, there will be.”

“I don’t think you understand. I want a man who cares about me.”

“If you don’t think I care, Ena, you haven’t been paying attention.”

She sighs. When she looks back up at me. Her blue eyes look troubled. I have no way of knowing what she’s thinking but there’s a war going on inside that pretty head of hers.

“I’ll stay a week,” she mumbles, but it’s clear she’s agreeing grudgingly.

I lean down and kiss her forehead. “We will have dinner in Athens tonight, just the two of us. I need a break from this damn house, and I would like to talk to you without my brothers’ prying ears close by.”

“I’d like that, too.”

“Good. Be ready at six and I’ll meet you downstairs in the foyer.”

“Okay.”

I give her a squeeze and then release her, stepping back. She turns to leave, taking a couple steps before she stops and turns back to look at me.

“Helena?” I prompt when she just continues to stare but says nothing.

“Right now, I don’t like you very much, Marco.”

“Baby—”

“Like not at all, mostly,” she adds. I snap my mouth shut and wait. There’s not much I can say anyway. “Still, I think you should know, you’re nothing like him.” My body grows tight and still, I say nothing. “He was a monster. You, on the other hand, have spent your life trying to protect your family. You’re nothing like him.”

“Helena...”

Her face is flushed with embarrassment and she’s trying to avoid my eyes. “I’ll be ready at six,” she whispers and then walks away.

I let her go because I’m not sure what to say anyway, except to tell her she’s wrong.

I am a monster. I’m just planning on keeping that hidden from her.

Chapter 11

Helena

I look at the mirror again and can't stop my panic. I'm going to dinner alone with Marco tonight. Finally, after all this time, we're doing something normal—something *all* couples do. Sure, it's just dinner, but it means more than that to me. I'm still not entirely convinced that I shouldn't just head home tonight and leave Marco in my past. In fact, that might be the smartest thing I ever do. I haven't done that, because even though I gave up on Marco, there's this hope inside of me that says I'm wrong.

That's just further proof I'm foolish, but I can't help it.

I step back and continue looking in the mirror. I'm wearing a deep purple pants suit. It's fitted and tailored to adhere to my body perfectly. The top is a long-sleeved jacket with a cross button waist and I don't have a shirt underneath. I do have on a sexy, lacy bra in a color that matches the purple suit, and it makes me feel feminine and beautiful all at the same time. I pulled my hair and secured it at my nape in a chignon style, but with more curls in the bottom so it looks contained and yet playful at the same time. I added in my diamond tear drop earrings. My shoes are Manolo satin pumps—purple to match my outfit—with this gorgeous diamond encrusted buckle on them. My hands look bare. I thought of wearing my engagement ring. I haven't worn it since Marco didn't show for my twentieth birthday. If I put it on tonight, it's like waving a white flag. Marco would take that to mean all is well when it's definitely not. For that reason alone, I leave it in the nightstand of my room here.

I frown as I look around the room. It's beautiful. There's no denying that. Still, it's done in pink and black. That's a color combination that I liked when I was a teenager, but it's a little glaring now. Plus, it's weird that a guest room would be so loud. Those are usually more neutral. Heck, my father's whole house is neutral. This bed even has a giant canopy on it. It's unlike any guest room I've ever seen.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. It's not my place to question the décor of Marco's home—even if it is weird. With one last look, I walk to the chest and grab my glittery rhinestone clutch and head out. I shouldn't be nervous about tonight. It's not me who has things to prove when it comes to this relationship. Still, I can admit I am.

I force my steps to be slow and even as I walk down the hallway and then down the grand marbled staircase that would bring me to the foyer. This house is dripping in money. The decorating is so ostentatious that at times I can't believe it. The mirrors in the halls are draped on each side and are covered in a multi-colored bed of jewels. Rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and more cover the frame of the mirrors. They probably cost millions but are clearly the ugliest things I've ever seen in my life. Instead of looking refined and property of the rich—which I'm sure was the intention—they look cheap, tawdry and like a kindergartener made them on his or her first day of school.

It's that bad.

I heard Marco talking with his brothers. I know they're contemplating tearing this house down and rebuilding. That seems extreme, but if he ever asked, I'd have to tell him that I agree. I hate this place as it is now. There's also a darkness inside that goes straight through me. I have no idea how Melina grew up in this house yet is so sweet and giving. It would seem to me that the coldness in this house would have frozen her clean through. When I make it to the bottom of the foyer, it shouldn't surprise me, but it's empty. Marco is nowhere to be found.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and barely contain my sigh.

“Stupid, stupid, *stupid*,” I hiss under my breath.

I’m never going to learn. Never. There’s just something wrong with me. That has to be it. I’m about to turn around and march back upstairs. I need to wash my face and go to sleep and rest till the morning. After that, I will get up, pack, and leave.

“Helena,” Marco says, coming out of a darkened corner—which means he saw and heard everything. *Shit*.

“I thought you were a no show,” I mutter as he walks over to me. He’s wearing a black suit with a white shirt, and he looks divine. God, I’ve always thought it, but Marco is really the most beautiful man that God ever put on the earth. He also doesn’t age. He ferments like a fine wine and just gets better and better.

It should be illegal.

“Nope, I was standing here waiting for my date to appear, and I have to say, Princess, you are more than worth the wait.”

Damn. That’s a good line.

I may not survive this date. I’m even blushing. Marco leans down and my heart stutters in my chest. I thought he would kiss my lips, but instead he kisses my temple. “Did you know that purple is my favorite color?”

I did. I absolutely did know that.

I don’t answer truthfully. Instead, I shake my head silently in disagreement. “I didn’t.”

Something flashes in Marco’s eyes. Does he know I’m lying? Does it even matter?

“Well, even if it wasn’t,” he murmurs, “after tonight, it would be.”

I smile before I can stop myself. It’s a beautiful compliment. “Th-thank you.”

He puts his hand to the small of my back and leads me to the door. “Although, it must be said, as beautiful as you are tonight, I prefer you in a dress.” I stiffen, opening my mouth to

snap at him, tell him to go fuck himself, or just make a smartass comment, but I don't get the chance before he's speaking again. "Of course, that's just because it'd be easier to push it up past your hips and bury my head between your legs," he continues as we walk outside. I stumble with his words, not quite believing he just said that out loud. I look up at the steward who is holding the door open for us. He clearly heard what Marco said, but he's refusing to look at me and I'm glad.

"Maybe it's for that reason, I'm wearing pants," I mutter back. "More protection."

Marco laughs, and I have to admit, he has a really great laugh. "You don't need protection from me, Helena."

"So you say."

The chauffer is holding the door open to the limo. I slide in with practiced ease. I need to get control of myself. It would appear my date is planning on keeping me on my toes. Once I'm settled, Marco gets in too. The once roomy feeling cab is almost claustrophobic now.

I have a feeling it's going to be a long night.

Chapter 12

Marco

Two things occur to me as we walk into the restaurant in Athens. First, Helena is beautiful every day, but tonight she is breathtaking. Christ, just watching the way her ass moves in those pants makes my cock ache. Secondly, I should have rented the fucking place out because every son of a bitch in here is eye-fucking her. I'll be lucky if I haven't killed half the men in the restaurant before the night is over.

We make it to our table by the back wall as instructed. Two bodyguards flank around us and settle against the wall behind us. I ignore the waiter and pull out Helena's chair on my own. Once she sits, I lean down, putting my finger under her chin and pulling her face up so that she's looking at me. I press our lips together. It's quick, closed mouth, and nowhere near how I want to kiss her, but it sends a message to the fuck-heads around us that she's mine and it gets Helena used to my touch.

When I get Helena settled, I feel her eyes on me. I smile. She looks dazed, and I hope that bodes well for us tonight. It's already better than having her yell that she's going home. I need to make her realize that she is home. I'm learning as much as she is. I've spent my life trained to care for Melina and not get very close. The same is doubly true for Helena since our engagement. I'm finding women are very complicated creatures.

I sit down across from her, but it's almost against my will. I want to be closer to her. I frown. Needs that I never knew I had—never allowed myself to have—boil to the surface. It's a strange feeling, because after years of living my life in a cage,

I'm free. For the first time in my life, I'm free and I want to let my wants and needs free too. I don't want to hold back.

She's perusing through the menu while I contemplate my new reality. I can't say how long we're like this. Time seems to slow as I sift through my thoughts. I don't suppose I've allowed myself to think about the fact that I'm free of my father's torment yet. Tonight, the truth seems monumental, however. Especially with Helena sitting across from me.

Dare I show her the man I really am? I've given her glimpses. Can I allow myself to let go of the restraints that I've kept myself in just to make sure those close to me survived?

"Have I displeased you?" Helena asks, jolting me from my thoughts. She puts her menu down and stares at me.

"Why would you say that?" I ask.

"You're staring at me rather..." She pauses as she struggles to find the word and then adds, "Intently."

"Intently?" I laugh.

"That sounded better than angrily, or like you wanted to choke the life out of me."

I frown, not liking that an idea like that entered her mind. "I would never touch you like that, baby."

"Then, what was that look for?" she asks.

"I don't like you being over there. It's too far away from me."

She blinks. Then, her gaze moves around the room. She takes in the sleek and modern décor that is a mixture of stark black and splashes of gold. Expense and opulence drips and oozes around us. It's supposed to, however, because this restaurant caters to the rich and the famous. I hate the place, quite honestly. My father loved it. I'm not sure why I chose it. Perhaps it was habit. It was most likely because I figured this was the type of place that Helena was used to and I wanted to show her she could still have the life she imagined with me. Idly, I wonder what she would think if I confessed that I'd rather be at the house with just the two of us. Hell, maybe a

hotel with room service. There are too many memories at the house and the darkness there still chokes me.

Slowly her attention comes back to me and once again, I push my thoughts aside. “It’s a small table, Marco. Probably the smallest they have in this restaurant.”

“It’s too much distance, Helena.”

She stares at me, her face stunned. Then, she does the last thing I ever expected. She throws her head back and laughs. It’s not a small laugh either. No, it flows from her freely and the sound of it makes my lips twitch with the need to smile. “I’m not sure I understand the irony in this completely, but the fact that you barely wanted to be near me since our engagement and now look as if you want to throttle someone just because I’m sitting a couple feet from you, is something I can’t help but find hilarious.”

“I, on the other hand, don’t find it funny at all. There are a lot of things that you and I need to understand about one another, Helena. It will come in time.”

“Maybe,” she allows. “If we have that time.”

“I do believe you’re trying to bait me, sweetheart. It’s not going to work.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Keep it up and you will be,” I counter, not buying her innocent act for one minute. A man comes to take our order and once that’s done, she frowns at me.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you’re supposed to be sweet and gentle with a woman if you’re trying to win her over?”

“I’m not a sweet and gentle kind of man.”

“It doesn’t take a sweet and gentle man to be that way with his woman. I doubt anyone would look at Antonio and say he was either of those things, but with Melina, he is.”

“Is there a reason you’re paying so much attention to my brother-in-law?” I ask, because her face goes soft and although I love when that happens, I’ve just discovered that I do *not* like it when she’s talking about another man.

She lets out a gasp and narrows her eyes at me in a way that broadcasts her anger. Once again, I fight against smiling at that, too. Seriously, I know I've spent my life under my father's thumb to protect the ones I cared about. It has buried inside of me like a poison. I feel weak—too fucking weak—for letting that happen. Yet not once have I ever allowed the outside world to view me as weak. I spent my time making sure I was the creature that bumped in the night and made them piss their pants. The fact that Helena has no qualms about facing off with me, perplexes me and excites me all at the same time.

“Don't be crass. I paid attention because I love my friend. It makes me happy that her and Antonio are the way they are because it is beautiful, and Melina deserves that beauty.”

“What do you deserve, Helena?”

I don't know why I ask. Perhaps I shouldn't have, but if she answers honestly, maybe I could give her what she needs to be happy.

I could hide the ugliness of who I am.

She shrugs instead of answering. “I would like to find someone who doesn't push me away and forget I exist. I'm not sure that will ever happen.”

One of the staff brings a chilled bottle of wine and two glasses. I look up, annoyed with the interruption. “Leave it,” I instruct. “I'll take over.”

“Yes, Mr. Stratakis.”

I grimace. That name. *That fucking name again.*

“Marco?”

When I force my attention to her, I can tell she's staring at me very alert. I can't handle the distance anymore. She doesn't know—has no way of knowing—but I am finding I only feel alive when she is near me. “Come here, Helena.”

Her forehead crinkles in confusion as she continues watching me. “I am here.”

“Come to me,” I tell her, pushing away from the table just enough that she can tell what I want.

She looks around the room and a light pink hue rises on her cheeks. Shaking her head negatively, her eyes dilated, she finally looks at me. “Marco, I don’t think—”

“Come to me, now, Ena.”

She studies me for a moment or two. I wait to see if she’s going to deny me. I won’t like it and that will cut this dinner short. Still, if that’s her call, it is better the two of us sort this out now rather than later. Helena lets out a breath. The sound is audible and very dramatic as she stands and walks over to me.

“What on earth has—”

The rest of her words end on a gasp as I put my hands on her hips and pull her down into my lap. Her leg bumps the table—jarring it—but I get her settled and with her here, I finally feel as if I’m breathing once more.

She’s tense in my arms, as I bring my nose against the inside of her neck and then closer to her ear. “Relax, baby. I have you,” I murmur, one hand wrapped around her back to support her as she’s sitting sideways from the table. I use my free hand to move up and down her leg, trying to calm her, but also needing to touch her before I lose myself to the darkness inside.

“Marco.”

That’s it. That’s all she says. Her eyes are studying me. She’s trying to figure out what is going on in my head. I can’t let her do that. I don’t want my ugliness to taint her. Helena is special. She’s soft and sweet and I need to protect that—even from myself. Before she can question me further, I kiss her. I do it, quickly realizing that I’m even more fucked up than I realized, but I can keep it under control if Helena is with me. She holds herself stiffly, but I wear her down and her tongue soon tangles and wraps around mine. I swallow down her groan and take control of our kiss.

She's liquid fire in my hands and I'm never going to get enough.

Never.

Chapter 13

Helena

I'm losing my mind and you can call me insane, but right now in the middle of the most elite restaurant in Athens, surrounded by a hundred people that are literally a who's who list in Greece, I'm not sure I care.

That's because Marco Stratakis is kissing me. He's kissing me like he did that night two years ago in my room. He's kissing me like he means it and most of all, he's kissing me as if he doesn't care where we're at or how many people are watching. That in and of itself is a drug and I could become addicted to it. No one has ever made me feel like I'm important enough for them to ignore the world around us, but right now, that's exactly what Marco is doing.

When we break apart, I can't tell you how long we had been kissing. I know that my lungs are burning. My lips are bruised with the ferocity of his kiss and heat has filled my entire body, but my face feels as if it is on fire. My breathing is also coming in short gasps as if I had just run a marathon.

I lick my lips as I try to calm my brain and gather my senses. *It could definitely be said that Marco had just kissed me senseless.* Then again, anytime Marco gets around me, I tend to lose all ability to think at all.

Marco's beautiful eyes are glowing down at me. It's weird, I always thought they were a brown, but the flecks of blue I see are getting brighter and brighter and it's breathtaking.

"As much as I like the way you kiss, I'm not sure this is the kind of place where we should be doing what we're

doing,” I whisper. My voice is filled with desire, and it has a deep smokiness to it that sounds foreign even to my own ears.

“Ask me if I give a fuck, baby,” he practically growls—although, his voice is quiet. As with everything when it comes to Marco, there is an edge to it, however. That edge sends vibrations of hunger careening through my body and settling between my legs.

Oh God...

“Still, we should probably endeavor to act with a little decorum,” I mutter, trying to sound like my nanny. It should be noted that my nanny always acted as if there was a stick permanently stuck up her ass and this impeded her ability to laugh, smile, or even be nice. Still, right now, I think it would be wise to remember a little bit of what she tried to teach me. I start to lift off of Marco’s lap and his hold on me tightens.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he purrs, looking as if he is daring me to disagree.

Uh oh... “Marco, maybe we—”

I stop talking as he deftly moves me so that my ass is moved to his other leg. Then he shifts so that he’s pouring a glass of wine. I should argue some more, but for obvious reasons, I’m finding I want the wine, so I don’t. Lord knows I need something to calm my nerves.

I start to lift my hand to take the wine, but he shakes his head. “I got this sweetheart.” My heart beats faster as he brings the glass closer and presses it against my lips. I feel funny inside, this nervousness enveloping my stomach, butterflies going crazy, my heart running away with me, and I feel completely lost. Still, I take a sip and pull away. He puts the glass down and stares down at me.

“You’re a very confusing man,” I breathe and it’s the God’s honest truth.

“Trust me, I know. Still, you will adapt.”

“Uh... I will?” This time my words come out as a squeak.

“We both will. Isn’t that what marriage is about, Helena?”

“I don’t really know. I’ve never been married.”

He grins with my words, and his grin is deadly because it has the ability to destroy every single brain cell I have.

“Neither have I, so I guess I’ll just have to feel my way through this.”

I bite my lip because his words make his intent *extremely* clear. If that wasn’t enough. His hand moves up my thigh. His fingers drape over the inside of my leg until his thumb is pushing into my thigh and his index and middle finger are brushing against my center. I feel wet between my legs, know it’s pooling in my panties and against my skin and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.

“Marco.”

Wow. Was that my voice sounding like that?

I thought before I sounded different, but now my voice sounds as if I’d just had a three hour work out with my vibrator and was still hungry for more.

“I like that, sweetheart.”

“What?” I ask confused.

“The way you say my name when you’re turned on. I’ve missed it.”

Oh God.

“That’s because you gave us a taste of what we both wanted and then you pulled a Marco, ending that,” I snap, finding my anger again and holding onto it for dear life.

“Pulled a Marco?” he asks mildly, cocking an eyebrow up as he brings my wine glass back to my lips.

“I can do that myself, you know,” I huff.

“I know. I like doing it. Now, what is this pulled a Marco?”

“Disappeared again. It’s your modus operandi. You give me just enough to keep me hanging on, hoping things will get better and then, they get worse.” I should have stopped there. I

know I should have, but instead, I open my mouth to keep explaining. *Stupid me.* “In doing this, you also continually prove I’m an idiot, because I keep falling for it. I keep doing it, hoping I see what I saw when I was little,” I mutter.

“What did you see, Ena?”

Shit. *Stupid, stupid, me.*

“It’s not important. Can I go back to my seat now. People are staring at us and our food will be out soon.”

“I want you where you are. I’ll feed you.”

He’ll feed me? Have I entered a twilight zone?

“I’d rather feed myself,” I counter.

“We’re in a public restaurant, Marco.” Telling him something he already knows.

“So?”

So? “Do you see other people in here feeding their dates, Marco?”

“I haven’t looked. As always when you are around, sweetheart, everyone else disappears.”

Damn it. I hate when he delivers lines like that. Mostly because I know they’re lines, but I like them—*a lot.*

“Then, look around,” I invited with a wave of my hand. “Everyone is staring at us. There are rules you should follow in public, Marco.”

His face lost its playfulness—and yes, that’s exactly the type of expression he had since he began holding me. Then, he sighed and what he did left me speechless. I wasn’t sure, but I think I was speechless, because for the first time ever, I got the complete truth out of Marco Stratakis.

“Helena, I’ve spent twenty-two years of my life, living under my father’s thumb, eating shit, obeying every fucking thing he said. I did that to protect my sister. Now that the motherfucker is feeding the worms and my sister is safe, I’m done with following the rules. I don’t care who makes the rules, I’m not abiding by them. What I am going to do is do

whatever the fuck I want—*when* I want. Right now, that means, I'm holding my woman, I'm feeding her and I'm doing that while she's in my arms because it makes me happy."

Wow.

Okay there's a lot to take in with that. I just don't know how to process it. What I did know is I liked Marco calling me his woman. That goes in the definite positive column. On that note, it seemed everything he said was because *he* wanted it. I mean, it was hot, but definitely kind of in the vicinity of the negative column.

With that in mind, I found I needed that answer. I brought my hand up to touch his cheek and I let the pad of my thumb brush against the skin there. "Is it always about you, Marco?"

He frowns. "What are you asking, sweetheart?"

"What if it's something I want?"

"What do you want?"

"Well, for starters, I think I'd be more comfortable sitting in my chair instead of your lap. While we're in a restaurant."

"I'd be willing to barter," he murmurs.

Something about the way he's looking at me, makes me feel warm all over. I clear my throat. "Barter?"

"If I let you go to your seat for dinner instead of getting the pleasure of feeding you, then when we get home, you sleep in my bed."

My body jerks. Of everything he could have said, that was *not* what I was expecting.

"You did not just say that."

"I did. The choice is yours, sweetheart."

"We are not sleeping together. I barely know you," I argue, even though there was a big part of me that wanted to say yes—*craved* to be in his bed. Still, there's a reason I wanted out of this marriage. I didn't want to be the woman who was ignored by her husband. The more I saw Melina with her Antonio, the more I knew what I wanted. I wanted a man who

would stop at nothing to save me. I don't want a man who knows I've been kidnapped, gets on the plane, and barely pays attention to me. I know his sister had been in danger and his brother was shot, but still, if I was important to him, shouldn't he have come to me?

“What are you thinking, Helena?”

“I'm not ready for what you're asking. With the history we have, I'm not sure I ever will be. I don't really know you, Marco.”

His eyes close and I get the distinct impression that I've hurt him. That leaves me feeling funny and definitely not in a good way. “Imagine how it feels to be me, Helena. All these years, I've not been allowed to be who I am to the point, I'm not even sure I know.”

Before I can think about it, I lean down and put my forehead against him, and I close my eyes as my hand seeks out his and I hold it tightly. I don't know what to say, but I have to at least offer him silent support.

Luckily, I didn't have to say anything because our food arrived. He gave me a look, telling me to decide. I had a feeling that I knew what he was hoping I'd choose, but that was *not* going to happen. I settled back in his lap and sighed. “I hope you're prepared, because I'm hungry,” I warn him. He laughs and shakes his head.

In the end, I spent the rest of the night in the most expensive restaurant in Athens, sitting in Marco's lap and having him feed me dinner. I felt everyone staring at me, but I found I was having such a great night, I didn't care.

Chapter 14

Marco

“Someone sure is smiling this morning,” Elias says, coming out on the terrace where I’m sitting with the pastries the cook brought out for breakfast. He still uses a cane to get around. He came close to dying—closer than I can handle thinking about.

I roll my eyes. “What are you doing here? I thought you, Gio, and Sebastian were checking into a hotel while we started the remodeling?” I ask.

I sound like an asshole—which admittedly I am. Still, after my date with Helena last night, I wanted to be alone with her for breakfast. I smile as I think about last night. Having her in my arms last night soothed parts inside me that have been raw and bleeding for a fuck of a long time. We had fun together. I have never had fun in my life, but Helena laughed, we spoke without fighting, and—most importantly—I know she was feeling the same thing I felt. The two of us fit. We kissed in the limo on the ride home. I could tell she was nervous. If I pushed it, I could have had her. Part of me regrets that I didn’t do that last night. Hell, today, I still can’t say why I called an end to the night. I just know that when Helena and I finally come together, I want her to be completely sure. I don’t want to leave room for her to have regrets. I need this from her, because once I allow myself to claim her, I’m not letting her out of my bed. She will be there every night and will not be returning home. *Fuck no.* She will be mine—*completely.*

“Earth to Marco. Come in please,” Elias says, and I flip him off.

“I have a lot of work today,” I grumble, even though we both know work is *not* what is on my mind. “Is there a reason why you are busting my balls this early?”

“It’s fun,” Elias says, making me shake my head.

Of all my brothers, my father left deeper scars on him. To even see him joke like he is right now, is good. Any other day, I would celebrate it. Yet, today, I want time with Helena alone. As if just the mere thought could make her appear, I hear the clicking of her heels hit the tile. I turn my gaze toward the door expectantly. Hunger has me in its grips when I look at my fiancée. She was beautiful last night, beyond beautiful. Today she is wearing a pale green jump suit that clings to her body. It’s casual, but on her would look good no matter where she was or what she was doing. Her hair is sleek and straight and pulled high on her head in a flowing ponytail. Her steps slow as she gets to the table where Elias and I are sitting. She gives me a tentative smile that is full of nerves. Before I can order her to come to me and give me her lips, she looks at Elias. Her face immediately softens and jealousy fires through me with the force of a desert sandstorm.

“Elias! I was wondering if I would get to see you while I was here.”

“After the nightmare you lived through, I didn’t figure you’d want to see me again, Helen.” My mouth tightens when I hear him shorten her name the way my sister does.

“If it weren’t for you, I’m not sure I’d be here, so of course I want to see you. Did you think I stayed at the hospital with you that first night just to enjoy the smell of bleach?”

“I’m afraid I don’t remember much about my stay in the hospital,” Elias says, and his body is tense. He doesn’t like to look back and fuck, I can’t say as I blame him. I don’t want to either. Still, I don’t like that Helena stayed by his side, or that she’s so comfortable with him. I *especially* don’t like that he shortened her damn name.

She leans down and puts her hand on his and gives it a squeeze. “I get this is a bad subject for you. So, I’m done after

this, I just wanted to tell you I'm grateful," she whispers and then, kisses his damn cheek.

What the actual fuck?

"Helena."

Her name is pulled from me, my tone deep and angry as I try to rein in my reaction to watching her around my brother. I need to get control. The problem is, I never have that much control around my woman—and she is mine—even if she doesn't realize it. I don't like that she gives him her sweetness—a side of her that I have to fight to receive. I don't like that she touches him. It tears through me with a bitterness that I can't handle. It doesn't escape my attention that Elias is more her age, too. That means seeing all of that I'm already angry enough to tear my own brother apart. But when she puts her lips on him?

No fucking way. No. Fucking. Way.

She crooks her neck to look over her shoulder at me with a bland smile. *Bland.* "Yes?"

"Come here."

Her brow crinkles and one delicate eyebrow arches. Her smile is now tight. I can also see the irritation on her face. Too bad for her that I've passed irritated and just fucking pissed.

"I am here," she responds.

I push out from the small table and pat my thigh to indicate my lap. "Come here."

Her eyes go round and whatever smile she has is now disintegrated. She whirls around on me, hands going to her hips, legs spread apart so that her stance looks as if she's preparing for battle. She has no idea that I love battling with her. She tastes much sweeter when I'm victorious.

"You did not just do that," she hisses.

"Get your ass over here, Ena."

Her body physically jerks and her gorgeous eyes spit fire at me. "I told you this once before, Marco, but I'm starting to

think you're just too damn thick headed to grasp it, so I'm going to tell you once more. I am not a damn dog."

"God, don't I know that," I respond. "A dog would be loyal and have better sense than to upset their master continuously and invite their displeasure."

"I...uh... *loyal?*" Her mouth opens and the words are forced out, her cheeks deepening in color to a blazing red hue. "Invite my *master's* displeasure?"

I shrug.

"My *fucking* master?" she cries.

Elias stands up. "I think I'll just be going." He shakes his head at me. I don't pull my eyes from Helena, but I do address my brother.

"Wash your hand and your face and if you ever let my woman touch you again, you'll answer to me."

"I... you... *are you fucking delusional?*" Helena demands, her voice now reaching the screeching mark. Oddly enough, that doesn't bother me either.

"And the next time you, my lovely fiancée, put my brother in this situation, you will not be able to sit down for a week."

"I put... are you seriously threatening to spank me?"

"I'm not threatening it. I'm telling you it's going to happen, but it can be for your pleasure or your punishment. Pissing me off and touching another man is definitely courting punishment, Helena. We haven't had much time together, so this is your warning. Don't do it again. You won't like how I retaliate."

She blinks, clearly studying my face. I let her. I have nothing to hide—not anymore. Again, the freedom I've finally gained courses through me.

"You are," she whispers. "You are delusional."

"And you still don't have your ass over here."

She shakes her head no. "I'm not going to come there. You're crazy. I'm not getting in your lap every single damn

time I enter a room. I shouldn't have last night. It seemed important to you, and I used to dream of being in your arms, so I let it go. You can't expect that every day, Marco."

"Helena—"

"No," she responds cutting me off. "You can't treat me like a dog you are bringing to heel. I'm not an animal. I did nothing wrong here. I owe Elias. I was terrified that day. His actions saved us and honestly, he did more than you did that day to make sure I was safe. So, I will touch him, I will kiss him, and I will fucking well be his friend, because he took care of me that day when my own fiancé couldn't be bothered!"

"I put guards on you, Helena," I growl.

"Gee, thanks Marco. How fucking swell of you. I appreciate it. You know what you did *not* do? You didn't hold me. You didn't kiss me, treat me with care. Did you see Antonio with your sister? You are my fucking fiancé, and you couldn't be bothered to carry me off the plane and hold me while I cried!"

"I saw to your safety. I couldn't take time out for more than that. I had to make sure my father was stopped. If I hadn't done that, your life would still be in danger and so would my sister's. I did what I had to do for the good of those I cared most about. It's what I've *always* done. I won't explain myself to you any more than that."

"You—"

I hold up my hand while continuing to talk, refusing to let her get a word in. "And if you insist on saying fucking one more time, I will come over there, push you down on your knees and thrust my cock in that dirty mouth of yours and see just how dirty you can be," I growl.

Her mouth drops open, and she stares at me before snapping it shut. She continues to glare. We have a silent standoff as I wait to see what she does next.

"Try it, Marco. I dare you. I tell you what, I'll even open for your cock, but the minute—the very minute—you try to put it in my mouth, I'll bite down and pull so hard you'll be

lucky if you have anything left but a fucking nub by the time I'm done."

"Helena—"

"And yes, I said fucking again. It's my favorite word. Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck!* As in go *fuck* yourself," she snarls, letting her anger out completely and trying to burn me with it.

"Am I interrupting something?" Gio asks as he comes outside. He looks between Helena and I, and keeps his gaze on me, as if searching for an answer to a question he hasn't asked—and better not. "I can come back. I just wanted to go over the contractor estimates we received this morning."

"You're fine," Helena responds, pulling her gaze from me. "Marco and I are *finished*."

I get the message she's trying to send, but I'm not about to let her get away with him. I stand up and march to her. She starts to back away and I know she's two steps away from running, but I shake my head no and for her sake, I hope she heeds my silent warning.

"Give me a minute," I tell Gio, not bothering to look at him.

As I reach Helena she backs up. I advance one step and she takes two back. That's probably a smart play for her—too bad it's way too late. Our silent dance continues until she's stopped because her back is against the glass of the terrace door. I slap a hand down on the door, at each side of her face. I get my body close so that I'm effectively caging her in. I push in alongside her. My hard cock presses against the softness of her belly and the silky fabric of her clothes. She gasps, her body jerking. I grin, but it's not of joy, it's dark, and I allow her a small glimpse of the monster that is going to own her body soon—own every *delectable* inch.

"Marco—"

"Your time to talk is over now, Helena. You told me what you wanted to say, you got your words out and now," I murmur, reaching out to curl the sweet blonde ponytail of her hair and wrap it around my hand. I yank it, causing her to cry

out, one she tries to stifle by biting into her lip. I run my nose along the side of her face, enjoying the minty freshness of her breath that is now coming out in small shaky puffs of air. “You belong to me. You have since *you* chose *me* and asked your father to arrange this marriage. I was reluctant, because I had a lot of shit on my plate, baby.”

“Marco—”

I let my lips brush against hers, my eyes still open and pinned to hers. “Silence. I told you, *I’m* talking.”

“O...okay.”

“I had a lot of shit on my plate and that shit was dark, so fucking dark the stink of it still remains on my hands and places I can’t even see, Princess.”

“I know.”

I pull back slightly to look at her, a cold smile stretching my lips. It’s likely she does know parts of it now. She’s my sister’s best friend and trusted confidant. It stands to reason that Melina has told her some. There’s no way she knows all of it. She can’t. I made sure that Melina was shielded from the worst of the shit, and I know DeLuca does the same. She sadly knows how horrible her father was—how could she not since he sold her to a sex trafficker and scarred her. Still, even she doesn’t know the half of it. That’s the gift myself, Sebastian, Gio, and Elias gave her and it’s one I’d give again.

“Okay,” she murmurs, swallowing, but still maintaining eye contact.

“I told you when you were eighteen and I loathe repeating myself, but for you I will allow it—at least this time. You belong to me. You are mine. You don’t touch other men—”

“But—”

“Not even in passing. You do not give them your softness—that is mine, baby. *All mine.*”

“Marco—”

“You may think you know, Princess, but trust me when I tell you, you do *not*. You may not like the plays I’ve made to

keep you out of my bastard father's reach, but they were my plays to make. *You* forced my hand pushing your father to make this deal, so, I did what I had to do. Helena, hear me, I'd do the same shit again and again. I wouldn't choose differently. In fact, after tasting you, I was even more determined to keep you clean of that shit. Now, I don't know what kind of distorted image you have of me in your head—"

"Marco, please—"

"Let me assure you that I am even more fucked-up than you could imagine, little one. Yet, I did what I needed to do so I could have more of your sweetness when it was done. Now, it's done and I'm taking your sweet, Ena. It's mine and *only* mine. Do you understand?"

She rubs her lips together, swallowing and the action makes my dick ache. I lean in deeper to move my lips against her tender throat.

"Oh God," she whispers.

That's no fear in her voice now. Well, there may be a trace of fear, but I hear something else. She's *hungry*.

"Are you wet for me, Princess?"

"Your brother can hear us," she whispers, hiding her face in my chest.

"Look at me," I order. I expect her to disobey me. I'm surprised when she doesn't. She looks at me and her eyes are locked on mine. I get the uncomfortable feeling that she is seeing more than I mean for her to. It's regretful this early on, but it can't be helped. She has to learn. "Are you wet?"

"I don't think this is the time or place to discuss any of this," she censures.

"I could always take you back to your room and tear off your clothes and find out for myself," I warn. "So, you have a choice. You can tell me now or I learn as I fuck you."

"God, you really are an asshole," she mutters.

That makes me grin. She stares at me and some of the anger leaves her face. She drops her head down against my

chest, her fingers curling into the sides of my shirt.

“You’re not answering me.”

“God,” she huffs. “Fine. I’m wet, Marco. I was wet when I went to bed, and I’m still wet today. In fact, I was so wet this morning that if you hadn’t been an asshole, you might have had a very different morning—one that included me on my knees.”

“The morning is still young,” I respond, liking the idea of her being on her knees in front of me so much that my cock twitches in my pants. She lifts her head to look at me.

“Does that mean you’re going to put off the meeting with your brother to spend time with me and apologize for making me sound like a dog earlier?” she asks, and I swear the look on her face is daring me to agree. I’m about to say yes when my cell rings. I reach into the pocket of my pants and see it’s the contractor who is supposed to start closing out the tunnels today.

“I need to take this,” I tell her, hating the shuttered look that comes over her face. Her gaze drops down and I hold her chin, forcing her to bring her eyes back to mine. “It’s the contractor about the tunnels under the house. I need to talk with him and make sure this house is impenetrable. My father’s death is bringing people out of the woodwork that wish to take over Stratakis holdings. They don’t know DeLuca and because of that, his name doesn’t affect some of the bigger players in Greece. I need a safe home, to make sure you are safe.”

“Why don’t you just tear it all down and rebuild,” she says, echoing what my brothers and DeLuca have been urging me to do since before my father’s corpse was cold.

“Where would you stay while all this was being done, Helena?” I ask.

“They make hotels, Marco. Or I could go back to my father’s.”

“Absolutely not. I like us being under one roof. I’ve waited too long for that. I’m not waiting any longer.”

“We are just starting to get to know one another. There’s every chance in the world that you won’t like me when you get to know me. I mean, much more of this macho crap that makes it sound like you are thinking of me like a family pet, and I might decide I don’t like you.”

“Oh, you like me. In fact, I think you secretly want me to take complete control of you, Ena.”

“No one likes giving up *complete* control, Marco.”

While we were talking the phone had stopped. Now, it begins ringing again, and I sigh.

Fucking hell!

“It’s okay, Marco. Take your time. I have some stuff to do today,” she says. She slaps her palm against my chest and pulls away.

As she takes her first step, I grab her hand and roughly pull her back to me. I lean in and claim her mouth, thrusting my tongue inside determined to show her just how much I need and want her. I wage a war in her mouth, our tongues fighting, and I don’t stop until she gives me what I need to survive a few hours without her.

Chapter 15

Helena

If I looked the word confusing up in the dictionary, I'm pretty sure Marco's picture would be right there. I'm standing out on the balcony in my room here at his house, my gaze zeroed in on the moon. It's full tonight and bathing the darkness with a soft light that reminds me even when life is a mess, there is beauty. I'm lonely tonight. It's ironic, because honestly, I've been lonely most of my life. I've never felt it more than I do right now, however.

I've spent the day alone. That's nothing new, but somehow after my date with Marco and our conversation this morning, I thought he'd at least try to see me throughout the day. Part of me feels as if I'm being childish. I know Marco has a lot on his plate. He's also working for Antonio now and has responsibilities. All that plus the fact he's trying to redo this house is a lot. Still, I've spent my life being ignored. Last night, after I gave up and let Marco have his way by sitting in his lap while he fed me, it was a great night. The best I've ever had really. We laughed—well, okay, *I* laughed. Marco had a dry wit that I enjoyed. He touched my hair, talked to me as if I mattered and for a while, he made me feel almost as beautiful as he did that night long ago in my bedroom.

That meant, this morning I had high hopes, and they were dashed. First, by him being an asshole, and then second, by once again having him push me in the background while he put business first. Something is settling inside me and it's something I don't like. Instinctively, I know that if I stay with Marco, that it won't change. This will be my life. I don't think I can handle that, not even with the beauty that was last night.

Maybe I'm being stupid trying to find a fairytale where they don't exist. It's just I see Melina with her Antonio. That man would move mountains for her, and he has been that way from day one. He hunted her down and rescued her on what was to be her wedding day to a monster. He moved heaven and earth to save her when we were kidnapped by her brothers and one of my guards. The love between them is so beautiful and real it's breathtaking.

I want that.

I want it in a way that I can taste it. The need for it has grown down inside of me, in the darkest regions imaginable and just the hint that I might find it caused a blaring sunlight to expose it, ripping me open from the inside.

And Marco did give me a taste of it last night.

He didn't want me away from him. He had me in his lap in a busy, five-star restaurant for Athens' elite. It wasn't my scene. I can live it, but I prefer not to. I'm more of a curl on the sofa, snuggle in and watch a movie kind of girl. I mean, sure, sometimes a girl likes to dress up and go out, but eating at a restaurant where even the staff seems to have sticks in their asses as they walk is not my thing. Still, that's what he gave me and since he gave me all of his attention, it was beautiful.

Now after the promise that was yesterday, today has been the complete opposite. I even ate dinner alone. This, sadly, is nothing new. I've had more dinners alone than I've had with other people. It's just, I thought it would be different now.

And it's not. I'm lonely.

"What are you thinking, gazing at the moon that way, Princess?"

I jerk as I hear Marco's voice. I don't turn around. I feel tears too close to the surface and I need to get those under control.

"Just that it's beautiful," I mostly lie.

My eyes close from the bittersweet pain that hits me when Marco stands behind me. His arms go around my waist, and he

pulls be back into his warm, hard body. Immediately, I feel his beard tickle my skin as he buries his head between my shoulder and my neck, kissing me right where my pulse is jumping crazily. His scent envelopes me and I bite my lip to keep from sighing out loud. I do angle my neck to give him more room. It's probably a weakness, but I can't help it. I've been in love with Marco since I saw him interact with Melina. I didn't know what love was then, I just wanted him for my own protector. As I got older those feelings changed. Other girls had crushes on boys they knew or famous stars. It wasn't that way for me.

No, for me it was always Marco.

Always.

“Have you had a good day, baby?”

No... “I missed you at dinner,” I confess, instead of giving the truthful answer.

“Fucking work. It's going to cost more to rework this house than it would to rebuild a new one.”

“You hate this house, Marco. Just tear it down and start over. “

“Now you are sounding like DeLuca and Melina,” he says. There might be the slightest bit of humor in his tone, but mostly he sounds tired.

He turns me to face him and like I always seem to do, I go where he puts me. “Why are you fighting to keep a house you hate?”

“It's built, it'd be stupid to pump money in a new one,” he reasons.

These I thought were very valid. I wouldn't demolish it either, but then, I don't have the memories he has of this place. I struggle to keep my mind on what we are talking about when his hands move along my sides, his fingers spanning across my ribcage. His beautiful gaze on mine and his attention centered on my lips.

“Um...” It pains me to admit it, but I still use that not-a-word-but-kind-of-a-word sound when I’m near Marco. What can I say? Being close to him zaps my braincells. “What do your brothers think you should do with it?”

“They want to be the ones to pour gasoline on it and strike a match,” he says, his thumb brushing against the underswell of my breast as he answers, his gaze on my face.

“Then, why keep fighting it. None of you truly want to live in a home that your father made a prison for you. Destroy it and build what you want.”

“Would you prefer that?”

I blink, shake my head, and force myself to hold his gaze. “I don’t think it matters what I’d want in this scenario, Marco.”

“Then, you would be wrong. This is going to be your home,” he says. “If I’m to be the head of this household, then you, Helena, will also be that because you will be my wife. What you want is very much in question.”

“The question of us getting married hasn’t been decided yet,” I point out and instantly get his ire. I can see it his eyes and the shift that comes over his face that makes his features harder.

“Bullshit. You are marrying me. It has been years and we both are drawn to one another just like we were years ago in your bedroom, Ena. You can’t deny that.”

“I don’t, but I also know there’s more required between a man and a wife than just being attracted to someone. There has to be more if it is to last.”

“What more?” he asks, making me sigh.

“I’m the wrong person to ask, Marco. I’ve been alone most of my life. I just know there needs to be more.”

“Then, Princess, I’m going to find a way to give you more.”

“I can’t be trusted around you.”

“Now, why would you say that?”

“I should hate you for the pain you’ve caused. At the very least, I should scream at you, not look for your kisses.”

“Are you looking for my kiss now, baby?”

“No.”

“You’re not?” he asks sounding surprised.

“No, because I know you’re going to kiss me whether I want it or not.”

His hand moves along the side of my neck as he tilts my head, forcing me to look him in the eye—instead of his neck like I was doing. “You want to kiss me, Ena.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“You do,” he counters.

“I don’t think I do,” I repeat.

“Why not?”

“Because if you kiss me, it will just confuse me. Then, when this all goes to hell, it will hurt even more to leave you.”

He shakes his head. “You aren’t leaving me.”

“I won’t be able to stay. You’ll make it impossible, or I’ll finally find my brain when I’m around you.”

“Okay, that’s that,” he grumbles and before I realize what he’s doing he steps back, leans down, and puts an arm under my knees and picks me up, cradling me to his chest.

“What are you doing?” I squeak, putting my arms around his neck to steady myself. I did this while ignoring how good it feels to be in his arms.

“No more full moons for you, Princess,” he mutters. Then, he starts walking through the room.

I half expected him to take me to my bed. I kind of *wanted* him to take me to my bed. He didn’t do that. He just kept walking out of the room and then turned left. He kept walking and didn’t stop until he was all the way at the end of a very long hall. I had stayed with Melina—not a lot, but

occasionally. On those visits, I didn't meander through the house discovering the place. I didn't because it would have been rude as a guest. I also didn't because Melina informed me she wasn't allowed to do that. She was supposed to stay in her room and if not her room the kitchen, the dining room, or the main room by the entrance were the only areas she could. If she got special permission from her father, she was allowed to go to the library. That's it. That scared me for several reasons. My father wasn't a great father. His parenting approach could only be described as an out of sight, out of mind kind of thing. He wasn't scary mean like Melina's. For instance, other than his office there wasn't a room in my house that was off limits. If he was in his office, I could go talk to him. Mostly the conversation was stilted because my father didn't truly enjoy talking to me, but it did happen. It not only scared me because of that, but it scared me because breaking those rules petrified Melina. I saw it in her eyes, in the deep panic I saw on her face every single time her father's voice would raise and let it be known that he wasn't happy. I hated it for her. I hated it for all of them, but especially her. Melina has the kindest heart of anyone I've ever met. She deserved happiness and beauty, not fear. I knew that Marco tried to shield her from that and the kindness he showed her was one of the many things I always admired about him.

"Open the door baby," Marco instructs as he stops at the last room in the hall.

"Are you going to tell me what you're doing?" I mutter, but I do it opening the door. See? My brain is completely devoid of commonsense when I'm around him.

When the door opens, it's pretty evident that this is Marco's room. It looks exactly like mine. When I say that, I mean it's a mirror image—right down to the same bed linens and curtains. I don't know what I expected, but after being in Melina's room, I guess I thought it would have personal touches. *It doesn't.*

"I'm bringing you to my bed. Where I should have from the beginning," he grumbles as he lowers me so that I can stand on my own.

“Why bother?” I ask.

“Because you are my fiancée and my woman. Plus, I want you in my bed. I would have thought that was pretty evident.”

“I meant, why bother switching rooms. The one I am staying in is exactly like this.”

“No, it’s not. My clothes are in this one. I’ll have one of the house staff move yours here tomorrow.”

It takes a little effort, but with his words, I come out of my stupor.

“You want my clothes in here?”

“We’re engaged, Helena and we’re going to be married. As soon as I get this damn house sorted, I’m whisking you away. We can go anywhere you want. Melina, my brothers, and Antonio can meet us, and we’ll get married and then you and I will enjoy a very long, very private honeymoon.”

“I... Um...” *God, I hate the way he turns me into a blithering idiot.*

“Helena, if you want me to give you more, then you need to do the same with me.”

“Marco, I’m not ready to sleep with you.”

“We don’t have to have sex yet, I’m a patient man—”

“You’re about as patient as you are happy-go-lucky.”

“Happy-go-lucky?” he repeats.

“Exactly. As in, you aren’t that at all. You do not have a sunny disposition, Marco. You have a permanently put-out disposition.”

I watch as his lips twitch, definitely trying to fight a smile. I would enjoy that show if I wasn’t panicking wondering if Marco seriously thought I would sleep with him, despite the fact we haven’t so much as kissed in over two years—last night and this morning don’t count. I don’t know why they don’t, I just know they don’t—*they can’t*.

“That’s not me, baby.”

“It is, baby,” I insist.

“Okay, it is who I am when I’m around others and I have work breathing down my neck. It’s not who I am when I am alone and it’s just the two of us. We haven’t had enough time to experience how we are together. We will and that starts now. You want more, Princess? I’m giving you more.”

“I’m starting to regret telling you that.”

“Too late.”

“I’m seeing that,” I complain with a sigh.

“Get ready for bed, Ena. Use one of my shirts to sleep in, but no panties.”

“Marco!”

“I mean it. You will never wear panties in our bed. I will agree not to fuck you until you’re ready, but I won’t give on this.”

“Fine, then you have to be in our bed without a shirt.”

“Not happening.”

“Let me get this right,” I huff. “You expect me to come to bed not wearing underwear, but you won’t even go without a freaking shirt? How is *that* giving more, Marco?”

“I’m letting you in my life. I’m giving you more. You’ll get what you want later. I don’t know how much later, but you will get it.”

I stare at him and curl my hands into a fist. Then, I growl. “Fine!” I march into his bathroom without a backwards glance, but I do it hearing his laughter.

His laughter.

God, I’m in over my head...

Chapter 16

Marco

I manage to stifle my laughter about the time my fiancée slams the door with what sounds like her calling me an idiot from behind it. I have been moving too slow with her. Hell, I've been so used to having to push her away to keep her safe, I'm still doing it subconsciously. That has to stop. Besides, I need her close. I missed the fuck out of her today. Things feel more vibrant and alive when she's nearby. No, that's wrong. *I'm* more alive when she's with me. I've been half dead inside for so long that the change when she's close is spectacular. I knew she would be hurt today because I left her alone all day. She didn't lay into me, but I saw the pain in her eyes. I didn't want to. Things really are precarious here. There are bastards out there trying to test the waters, thinking my hold on the city is weak now that my father is dead. They have no idea that I'm the reason the Stratakis hold is as strong as it is right now. That doesn't mean I'm not having issues. Today's issue involved making a visit to a street thug named Leno who thought he and his men could sell their smack on my streets. Sebastian, Elias, and I got out some frustration, that was the only good part about the day. I left Gio here at the house to keep an eye on Helena. I didn't realize teaching Leno a lesson would take so long, and I missed dinner with her. I should have made the bastard bleed more.

I turn the bed down and fluff the pillows. I don't usually give a fuck, but there's a contentment that fills me knowing that tonight Helena will be in my bed, in my arms, and I won't have to leave her. This might be the first night this happens, but I am making a promise to myself that there will be no

going back. Helena and I will move forward building our lives together. I will have a home and family. It's what I've always wanted. I won't let anything stand in my way.

My attention turns to the bath door when she opens it. There's something extremely satisfying at seeing Helena come out wearing one of my shirts. It's a worn T-shirt, faded blue and it hits her just above her thigh. Her long legs are on display, and she's put her hair down, having brushed it until it practically glows. She's walking perfection and it hits me in my dick, and then moves up into my chest. I rub the area over my heart without thought. There's that feeling again—feeling alive.

“You okay?” she asks and I realize I've just been staring at her without saying a word.

“My woman is gorgeous,” I murmur.

“That's sweet,” she says a light pink tint to her cheeks.

“It's the truth.”

“I like that you think that way but beauty fades, Marco. There has to be something more substantial to a person than that.”

“The kind of beauty you have will never fade, Helena. It glows from your eyes and shows in your smile. You feel it in the soft touches you give without thought. It's part of you.”

“Marco—” she breathes.

“Get in bed, baby. I'll go get changed and meet you there.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I echo as I walk to her. I slide my hand against the side of her neck, her hair brushing against the back of my hand. I stroke the apple of her cheek and kiss her gently in nothing more than a lip touch.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“I'm getting ready to hold my woman all night and sleep,” I murmur, giving her another kiss and walking into the bathroom.

It took me a bit to fish for pajamas. I don't wear that shit, but there was a pair in there that Melina had bought me one year for Christmas. I kept them because they were from her. I slip them on and instead of the top, I throw on another T-shirt. Once that's done, I finish getting ready and head out. Helena is already lying in bed. She's curled up under the cover, her head on the pillow—her back to me. I slide into bed, wrapping my hand around her waist and pulling her back into me. Her ass hits my cock and I close my eyes at the sweetness of that. She goes stiff at first—although definitely not as stiff as my cock—but eventually relaxes. I keep my arm around her, kissing her shoulder, moving her hair so I can kiss the back of her neck. Breathing her scent into my lungs and letting that calm me.

“Are you planning on ignoring me the rest of the night, Princess?”

“Like you ignored me all day?” she asks.

I move my hand to her hip and with some pressure, pulling it so she understands what I want. She immediately gets it and turns to lay on her back, craning her neck to the right so she's looking at me.

“Helena—”

“I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that. It's not like you're not busy, I get that,” she mutters.

“Baby—”

“And yeah, we're supposed to be using this time to see if there's something between us to make this engagement stick —”

“It's sticking,” I declare.

“That doesn't mean I should expect you to take time off your work schedule to be with me, I get that, too.”

“Princess—”

“And if we were a normal couple, I wouldn't be a big baby. The problem is, we're not a normal couple. We're not even a couple. We're engaged and one night two years ago you

showed me something beautiful and then it was gone. Now, you're here and you're trying to show it to me once more and..."

"And what, Ena?" I ask gently.

"And I'm scared of it," she admits, her voice whisper soft.

"Baby—"

"For two years I craved that glimpse of what you showed me. I tried to hold on and then, after being kidnapped and tied up, I realized that you were never going to give it back to me. Last night I allowed myself to hope once more—like a stupid fool."

Fuck.

"It couldn't have escaped your notice Helena that my father was a seriously twisted motherfucker who got off on causing others pain."

"It didn't."

I sit up in the bed, leaning back against the upholstered headboard and my pillows. I bring Helena with me. She twists so she's sitting up, looking at me, her hand on my stomach.

"All my life, all my fucking life and we're talking since I was seven, that asshole would jack with me. Beatings, inventive punishments, you name it. He did what he wanted, and he did that to keep me and my brothers under his control."

"Marco—"

"You wanted it, Princess. You're going to get it."

"Okay," she finally responds staring into my eyes.

"It got so commonplace, I fucking thought it was normal, Ena. I was so twisted up, I thought everyone had a father who did this shit—shit no child not a kid who was seven, or hell even twenty should know existed." I look at her and she's biting her lip but she's not talking. Instead, she's looking at me, taking it all in. I let out a breath and then forge on. "Finally, when I was eight something happened that locked everything into place for me."

“What happened?”

“You’re not getting that. I’m not ready. No one will get it but you, Helena, but that will come when I’m ready.”

She bites her lip and nods. “Okay, but what locked into place? I’m not sure I understand.”

“I shut down. That night killed something in me, and I shut down. Nothing my father could do to me after that night got through. I may have only been eight, but that night, I got it.”

“What did you get?” she asks. I don’t want to. God, I don’t want to give it to her, but I find I do it just the same.

“He could do whatever he wanted to me physically but pain only lasted so long. I wasn’t going to fall in line for him anymore. I was done. He could kill me, and I don’t mind telling you, Princess, I was hoping for that. Fuck, I was praying for it.”

“Marco, you were only eight,” she hisses, her voice pained.

“And those eight years were hell on earth, Princess. I was ready to die.”

Her eyes go wide, dilating as her breath is physically forced out of her lungs because it burns. Taking that in, I can see she gets it.

“What happened next?”

“Father decided to test a theory. He decided since I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of doing as he demanded, he’d use my brother against me. Gio was five.”

“Oh God.”

“Sometimes I think the bastard just kept having kids because it gave him someone else to use against me and in the process, he could hurt my mother. As my brothers got older and could help defend themselves against the asshole, he got more inventive with any woman I found in my life and the shit he did, was over the top.”

“Like what?”

“It could range anywhere from fucking them and paying them for their services—either willing or non-willing—the bastard wasn’t choosy. Or, if the girl is one I met because her mother or father worked here, he’d fire her family and then proceed to make it impossible for them to find another job.”

“Damn...”

“My father always had to have complete control. He scored the fucked-up jackpot when Mom gave him twins and those twins were as evil as he was. At first, they were babies and innocent. So, we took his orders to protect Atlas and Aden—that is until we discovered how twisted they were, too. By then it was too late again, because...”

“Melina,” she whispers, interrupting.

“I wanted you, Helena. I’ve always wanted you. At first it was the promise of you that I wanted, but you have to know that night in your bedroom, you became mine. I couldn’t allow myself to claim you because doing that put you at risk. So, I kept myself distant. I know it hurt you, but that was the only thing I could do to keep you safe.”

“I knew, Marco.”

“What?”

“I knew your father was evil and I knew that’s what you were doing your best to protect me from and that you had always done it for Melina. I fell in love with you before I knew what love was. I watched how you tried to watch over your sister, and I wanted that for myself.”

Her confession is like a punch in the gut. I brush some hair out of her face and let my fingers glide against her cheek. “Baby...”

“Doing that was wrong, Marco. I did that and used that to get my father to make his move to get you for me.”

“Baby, that took me to agree to it, too.”

“One thing you don’t know about my father. He’s not a great father.”

“I know that, Ena. Discovered that the night I claimed you.”

“You gave me an orgasm. I don’t think you can call that claiming.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I argue.

She huffs out a breath of air and shakes her head. “With my father he’ll give me anything I ask for in order to get rid of me. I am...” she seems to struggle for what to say and then sighs, “an irritation.”

“So, I asked for you. He went about making that happen. He would have made sure your father gave me what I requested. Doing that now, I can see was a mistake.”

“How the fuck do you figure that?” I snap. We aren’t a mistake and if she thinks she’s still going to be able to get away from me, she needs to think again.

“Because I became just another threat out there somewhere that could be used against you, Marco. I became a weight around your neck.”

“Bullshit. That is not who you are, Helena. It never was. I have you in my bed. If I didn’t want this, do you really think that’s where you’d be?”

“I don’t know,” she sighs out. “The truth is, I had dreams of a little girl, and a teen who was nothing but a dreamer. As an adult, all I know now is that I don’t know you and you don’t know me.”

“You want me.”

“I’m in my twenties and never had sex. Pretty sure, that isn’t something to hang your hat on, Marco.”

“Does your body react to Elias or anyone like it does with me, Ena?” I growl, not liking the idea that she doesn’t feel the same pull between us that I do.

“Now who is lying? This thing between us is special. I’m not going to let you deny that.”

“It is. I can admit that, but it’s also fragile and I don’t think you’re the kind of man who knows how to deal with anything... *delicate*.”

“I’ll consider it a challenge to prove you wrong, baby. Now, I’m wiped, so unless you’ve decided you’re ready for me to *fully* claim that body of yours and make you mine, we should try and go to sleep.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for that. Before we go there, I want to make sure we are going to work.”

“I’m going to give that to you for now. There’s something you need to get in that beautiful brain of yours though, Ena.”

“What’s that?”

“You belong to me. I’ve waited for you for way too fucking long. I wasn’t put on this earth to be a fucking monk and coming into my hand while it’s wrapped in your princess panties is getting fucking old. You’re in my bed and I’ll give you a bit to get used to us being *us*, but you need to do it knowing that soon I’m going to be in you, fucking you, claiming you and keeping you. We’re going to be married.”

“Maybe we should quit talking before you freak me out too much,” she whispers, and I smile, leaning down so my lips are next to hers.

“I’ll give that to you for tonight, too, but in return for me being so patient, you’re going to give me that mouth.”

“I can do that,” she says, her words vibrating against my lips before she completely closes the distance opening her mouth to me, her sweet little tongue tentatively searching mine and I take it, before going deeper, grabbing control, and plundering her mouth like a dying man getting his last chance at heaven.

Fuck, she’s so sweet. There’s no way I’m letting her go.

No fucking way.



Helena

It takes me hours to fall asleep after the way Marco kissed me. To keep from begging him to make love to me, I turned back around after we said goodnight. He pulled me back into his body, kissed my shoulder, and then wrapped his arm around me so that his hand rested on my breast. It feels as if even in his sleep he's claiming ownership. That thought, along with the way he kissed me, still has my body wired. That's not what has me panicking. No—not at all. I'm panicked because he said he's been jacking off while using my princess panties. I never could find them after that night. I thought maybe Marco threw them away. The image of him using them to stroke himself until he cums, is one I can't get out of my mind. It's also a very big reason why I can't relax. I want Marco. I want him to claim me, and most of all, I want rid of all the questions in my head and the fear of trusting him again.

I quietly exhale, staring unseeingly into the dark room. I knew the exact moment Marco went to sleep. His breathing evened out and his unique energy leached slowly out of the room. What didn't change though, is the tight hold he is keeping on my breast. I can't say it out loud, but I *can* admit it to myself. I *love* the way he holds me in his sleep, the feel of his body next to mine. In fact, I love it so much that I want to experience it with no clothes between us. *Skin on skin.*

I close my eyes. I know I'm going to give in to Marco. It's always been him for me. I don't know why, and I can't explain it. *It just is.* I just hope that when I do, Marco doesn't break my heart, because he has that power. My father didn't because he never worked to get in my heart. But Marco? He slid into my heart when I was young and also without a reason why. I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame, knowing he could hurt me, but needing to get closer to him just the same.

Yes, he got in my heart and did it in a way that I've never been able to get him out and likely never will.

Chapter 17

Helena

Two Weeks Later

Two weeks. I can hardly believe it. I've been living in Marco's home for two weeks. These last two weeks have been the best of my life. We haven't made love, but our make out sessions are getting pretty intense. I know it's coming. I also know that Marco is only holding back because he wants me to be the one to push it to the next step. I know that he recognizes the hurt he's caused by keeping me on the outskirts of his life and trying to make up for that. He's taking his time, despite the fact that he obviously wants me—and God, do I want him. It's getting to the point, holding back is painful, so I know I'm giving in. We sleep together every night and despite his busy work schedule he never fails to spend the evenings with me. Sometimes we go out, but my favorite thing is when we just lay in the bed, snuggled together and talking. Sometimes it's about silly things, sometimes not, but all of it feels good. He's even encouraging me to work if that's what I want. I thought he'd try to go all bossy, but he didn't. He saw it was important to me and instead, encouraged me. That's something my father never did—not once.

Never.

It gave me enough courage that I mentioned to him that a local gallery in town was looking for an office manager and I've been wanting to apply. I have an art degree and I love working in that field, I've always wanted to try. Marco slid his hand against my cheek, letting his thumb brush against my

skin—something he does a lot—and told me, “*Whatever you want, Princess. I want you to be happy.*”

There was such tenderness on his face and shining in his eyes. It reminded me of the gentle way he spoke to Melina when I was younger—that moment when I watched and wanted that for myself even if I didn’t understand it.

That’s when it hit me. I had it. Marco was giving me what I always wanted. It was in my grasp, and it was *everything*.

Tonight, we’ve been alone, his brothers still out and we’re having dinner. Once again, I’m in his lap and he’s feeding me. I don’t know why he enjoys it, but the God’s honest truth is that I’m starting to enjoy it just as much as him. So, I decided to quit fighting it. That explains why I’m currently curled in his lap, letting my man feed me. We had stuffed peppers for dinner and now he’s hand feeding me Feta cheese that has been wrapped and baked in phyllo dough and honey dripped over it.

I’ve had it before but having it with Marco is different. It’s erotic and intense. My body feels heated all over and I can feel his hard cock pressing against me. The insides of my thighs are wet, and I know he’s aware I’m aroused. I wouldn’t even know how to begin to hide it.

“I’m getting full,” I murmur, my gaze trapped by his dark, intense one.

“Find room, baby. I’m enjoying myself,” he purrs.

“Okay,” I answer, having the strangest urge to giggle. I know Marco sees my reaction because the blue specks in his eyes deepen.

God, he’s beautiful.

“What would you like to do after dinner?” he asks, surprising me. Joy unfurls inside of me, knowing that this is just more proof that he’s trying. He’s making an effort for me... *for us*.

“I wouldn’t say no if you’d walk along the shore with me. I want to feel the sand between my toes.”

“I offered my baby dinner at the best restaurant in Greece. I even offered to put her in my jet and take her anywhere she wanted, and she picked dinner at home with me and a walk on the shore.”

I start to get worried. I don't want to disappoint him. Then, I see his eyes and the way he's looking at me and I melt into him even more. He likes my choices. What's more, every day that passes indicates he likes me. *A lot.*

“Took us a long time to get to where we could spend time together,” I explain. “I don't want to waste it.”

It takes all my courage to tell him that. Nerves hit me hard. This is all new to me. In the last two weeks, Marco has become what I've always wanted. I think I'm afraid to give him my trust. So, when I lay out a piece of my heart to him and admit to being scared or nervous, I panic. I'm worried he'll change again—when he's perfect just like this. I think he feels my reaction because his thumb brushes my cheek.

“Then my girl gets a walk on the shore with the sand between her toes.”

God. Does he have any idea that the way he talks to me makes me want to melt into a pile of goo?

“One more bite, my Princess. Then, we will go for our walk,” he murmurs, bringing a small sliver of the cheese up to my mouth. “Open for me,” he orders, his voice quiet but vibrating with so much hunger that it makes my stomach feel funny.

I lick my lips before doing as he asks. He plops off the torn piece of dessert in my mouth. I chew it, our eyes never leaving one another. I swallow it down almost afraid to move not wanting to end this moment. His eyes molten, like liquid heat and I feel my body reacting.

“You have some honey dripping along the corner of your mouth,” he responds, his voice hoarse and that causes another vibration and this one centers right between my legs.

I'm afraid to breathe, my heart beats erratically as he leans into me. His tongue slides against the corner of my lip,

gathering the honey there. I whimper, unable to stop the sound. He sucks my lip into his mouth, lapping at the tender flesh along the inside. My hands bite into his shirt as he builds the fire inside of me. When he lets go of my lip, my fingers curl in tighter.

“Please, Daddy” I beg, not sure what I’m asking for, only knowing I don’t want this moment to end.

“Fuck,” he groans, and I know he loves when I call him Daddy. He hasn’t asked me to give it to him. I haven’t wanted to. Not until this moment. I know it also broke his restraint. He takes my mouth harder this time, almost on the verge of being violent. The kiss deepens in a way that makes every other kiss he has given me—all of which have been great—pale in comparison. Our tongues war and as Marco always does, he wins. I don’t mind, I surrender and do that making sure he feels it and is secure in the knowledge that I want him to take over. When he pulls away both of us are breathing hard, my lungs are burning, and I’ve filled a need so strong that I want to beg him to make love to me right now.

“You’re trying to make me remember how I fell in love with you when I was way too young to know what love was,” I gasp, unable to stop the words.

“Is it working?”

“Jesus you two. What is it with the whole eating dinner on the lap thing? Every single time I come to the dining room in the last week, you’re going at each other. You should just get a room,” Gio grumbles.

My body goes tight and Marco frowns. I can tell he doesn’t like the interruption. *I don’t either.*

“Careful brother,” Marco grumbles. His nose moves along the side of my face and up against the shell of my ear. “Sorry, baby,” he whispers there, making me smile and hug him close for a minute.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, my heart happy. Heck, my whole body is happy.

“Sorry, Marco. We need to talk to you about the tunnels before we continue with this contractor. He’s refusing to give us what we asked for and the other company is now booked in advance for three more months. We have to make a decision by the end of the week.”

Marco’s face gets tight and something flashes on his face that looks a lot like regret. I give him a squeeze. He gives me a smile. Then shakes his head. “I can’t tonight. I promised the evening to my fiancée. We can meet in the morning.”

“But you have the appointment with the bank in the morning,” Gio points out.

I give Marco another squeeze. “It’s okay. I will go soak in the tub while you men discuss business,” I mutter, giving my man another smile. *My Man.*

God how did this happen. More importantly, how can I fix it so that it doesn’t stop?

He looks at me funny and I reach up to kiss him. It’s just a light lip touch, but I hope it gets my message across. I can’t really complain. Marco has worked hard the last two weeks to show me that I have a permanent spot in his life. With every day that passes I want it more and more. He bends down and touches our lips again and I give him another smile. Something sweet moves through me. I give another squeeze, then move to get up. He doesn’t let go of my hand and it confuses me. “I’ll see you later in our room,” I assure him. I want him to know I’m not mad. He listened to me after that first night. Now, even if he is covered in work, he carves time out of the day to talk to me and let me know I matter. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. It’s something I’ve never had—not until Marco gave it to me.

I pull on my hand, but Marco’s gaze comes back to me, and he shakes his head no, then looks over my shoulder. “I’m not talking business tonight. Tonight, I’m going to spend the evening with my fiancée. We have a date to walk along the shore and make sure sand gets between our toes and that’s what I’m going to go give her—give both of us. We can meet in the morning about the tunnels.”

My body locks, going rigid with shock for a minute.

“If that’s what you want,” Gio responds sounding none too happy.

I’m so surprised, I don’t think I just stretch up toward him and put my lips to his. *He’s putting me first.* If this is a dream, I hope I never wake up. He takes over the kiss and again I let him and I do it thinking being married to Marco Stratakis isn’t going to be as great as I used to dream about when I was sixteen.

It’s going to be better.



Marco

I know my brothers are pissed that I’m putting this meeting off. They’re working hard. To get our home secure. The smart thing might be to see this meeting through tonight, but I don’t give a damn. The shock and happiness that bubbles out onto Helena’s face is all the reward I need. Then, Helena makes it better by kissing me and that definitely makes it better.

I’ve been dying the last two weeks lying in bed with her, holding her, kissing her, but not going any further. My damn balls are permanently blue. Nothing gets past Elias. He knows I’m sexually frustrated. I confessed that I was letting Helena set the pace of our relationship. He rolled his damn eyes and asked me where to send the application for sainthood. Honestly, I’m going insane. I have to have her soon, but when I do finally claim her, I want her to be the one to tell me she’s ready. That needs to be her decision. She’ll tell me when she’s ready. I know she will but fucking hell, if it doesn’t happen soon, I’m going to have to take the decision out of her hands, take what I want, and just hope she enjoys the ride.

As she stands up, I do the same, keeping our hands joined. I ignore my brother’s stares. I’ve got a woman to take to the shoreline and let her enjoy the feel of sand between her toes.

Chapter 18

Helena

I grabbed a blanket before we went out and as the evening breeze blows, I'm starting to wonder if I should have grabbed two. We make our way carefully down the stone steps that lead off the overlook to the ocean below. Marco keeps a firm hand on me the entire time and I know he's worried about me slipping. As we make it to the bottom his hands go to my hips and he lifts me in the air, hefting me over the last two steps.

I stare at him for a minute my heart drumming in my ears. *Can he hear it too?* He bends down and kisses my forehead. My eyes close from the sweetness of it.

“Put your hand on my shoulder, Ena.”

I'm not sure what he's asking until he turns slightly and bends down. I hold onto him and he lifts my foot slightly sliding my sandal off. He does the same with the other foot and then secures them with one finger in each heel, then, he quickly kicks off his shoes that he slipped on before we left. They're casual and they do *not* go with his slacks and black button up shirt. I like that he didn't give a damn. He just wanted to make me happy. I also know that's why we're here. Marco is not a walking by the ocean kind of guy. I don't think he ever looks at the ocean. It could be because he's lived here all his life. All I know is, he's taking time out of a busy schedule to give this to me and I'm going to enjoy it.

Once he's done, he leaves his shoes there. I take the blanket and lay it down, securing the top end with his shoes. He grins and puts mine at the bottom, then holds his hand out to me. I take it and sigh at the contentment I feel.

“You like this, my princess?”

“More than I could tell you. I hate that you put off work because of me, but I am selfish enough to admit that I also love it.”

He laughs. “I wanted to. The last two weeks have been good, haven’t they? You’re happy?”

We’re walking along the edge of the water and the moon above us is almost full and something about his words confuse me.

“Of course, I am. Should I worry that you’re not?”

“No. I’m good. I just need to make sure I keep my Princess happy. I don’t want her to feel pain or disappointment. You’ve had too much of that in your life.”

“It’s not your job to do that, Marco.”

He stops walking to pull me around to face him. His hand instantly goes along the inside of my neck, in his familiar hold. I could almost smile as his thumb starts brushing my cheekbone. I don’t but I do close my eyes and savor the sweetness in it.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I need my woman happy.”

“Can we just stay like this forever?” I ask somewhat foolishly. I ignore the heat I feel on my cheeks and when Marco smiles that somehow makes it easier.

“Probably not, because I can be an asshole at times.”

“You don’t say,” I laugh softly.

He gives me a sexy smirk that I’m pretty sure makes his eyes sparkle—although since the only light is the moon, I can’t be sure. There’s a light by the stone walkway down here, but that’s behind us and I suddenly wish we weren’t so I could see him.

“And you my sexy, little, princess, can be filled with drama at times.”

My eyes dilate, my brows going up. “You did not just say that!”

“Baby, you lost your shit yesterday because you couldn’t find an ink pen.”

“It wasn’t just an ink pen,” I educated Marco. “I was writing a letter to Melina, and this was my special pen I bought for writing. I love that pen. I paid fifty bucks for that pen.”

“Who the fuck pays fifty dollars for a pen?”

“I do. It was a calligraphy pen, and it was in coral. I *love* coral. It’s like the prettiest color ever. It outshines all the crayons in the crayon box.”

“You’re cute when you’re being slightly insane.”

“Well, if me buying fifty-dollar pens, or being in love with the color coral is a deal breaker, you could always call the marriage off.”

“Not happening and if you try to tell me that’s what you want, I’m going to spank your ass, Ena. I’ll also do it in a way that you might like eventually, but it will take a while to get to that part.”

I swallow, his threat turning me on way more than it should. The thought of him spanking me makes my thighs wet—well, wetter. I bite my lip as I look up at him through my lashes. My body tingling from head to toe.

“Fuck, baby,” he groans.

“I don’t want you to call the wedding off. I don’t want to leave you, Marco.”

“Jesus, finally,” he groans and then his mouth is on mine.

And it is... *divine*.

Chapter 19

Marco

The minute our lips connect there's a fire that burns out of control. I've had other kisses before. I've had so fucking many that I can't count them and wouldn't want to. Hell, I can't remember how many women I've had on my cock before my vow to Helena. I do know that if she ever found out, the number would probably scare the shit out of her.

I could say that my hunger for her is because I've been without a woman for so long. I could, but that would be a lie. I don't want just any woman.

I want Helena.

One thing I've learned about my fiancée since she's been living with me is that she fits me better than I thought she would. She's funny and sweet, sassy and full of fire. She might be innocent, but she comes alive with my touch. The same thing could be said with kissing. My woman attacks my mouth every time. She does it going for it, anxious to show me what she likes, before ultimately giving me control. It's no different this time and when she gives herself over to me, she moans in my mouth as our tongues slide together. I swallow that sound down, taking it inside. That does what it always does—makes my cock push against its confines and demand freedom, demanding I take her.

I swear if I don't get inside her soon, my balls are going to be so fucking blue they will glow in the fucking dark. I take control by guiding her down on the sand. I wanted to fuck her for the first time in our bed, but right now, I just need her. I'm not choosy about where. She keeps hold of my mouth as I

gather her T-shirt in my hands and pull it over her body. Immediately, she helps me yank it off and I toss it somewhere away from us. I don't really give a fuck where it's at either. All I know is my hands are flattened out on her stomach, the heat of her skin scorching my palms in a way I've never experienced, and that sensation goes straight to my dick too.

"You feel good, Princess," I groan as I run my tongue against her stomach, flicking her sweet little belly button.

Her body jerks beneath me as my fingers search out the tie on her lounge pants. That's just one more thing I love about my woman. She wears designer clothes easily, but at home, she doesn't care to let it go and be comfortable. Either way she's fucking spectacular, but I love that having her just like this, means I'm probably the only fucker that gets her like this—and I like that *even more*.

I keep kissing her stomach, nipping on her tender skin. With each nibble her body jerks, her hips thrusting up, trying to find more.

"Oh God..." she whispers as her pants loosen, and I begin pulling them down. I get them down her body with relative ease. I don't know if she means to, or if she is just too far gone in her passion, but she helps me—lifting with just the smallest bit of direction.

Once she's free of those, I look down at her. She's like a goddess that they used to write ancient poems and stories about. Breathtaking, holding the mysteries of the universe, and when she opens her eyes there are mysteries in their depths that echo through every single part of me.

"Is my Princess going to let me fuck her?" I growl, my need for this woman bleeding through my voice to the point I can barely recognize the sound.

Her eyes open and even with the evidence of her desire, I see the trepidation there. She's still scared. *Shit*. I should stop. A better man would back away. If there's one thing my old man and I ever agreed on, however, it's that I'm not a good man. Fuck it. I'll keep feeding that fire in her and push her to

the point she'll beg for more. It's not exactly playing fair, but I don't do fair and have no reason to start now.

"Marco," she whimpers, indecision raging in her eyes as she bites down on her lip.

"I'm not going to give you my cock unless you ask for it Helena, but if you think you're not going to give me a taste of your sweet cunt, you're insane."

I watch her body shiver with my words. Her eyes stay open tracking my every movement. I work her panties down her body, pulling them free. I hold up the small scrap of pale orchid silk and smile down at her as I bring it up to my face. I press my nose into it, breathing in the scent of her arousal. Jesus, she's like candy and I can't wait to eat her up.

"Honey," she moans.

"A new pair to add to my collection," I tell her. Her face warms as she realizes what I mean. I stuff them into my pocket, while she watches. "Spread your legs for me, Ena. There's no going back. You're going to give it to me like I like it, aren't you, baby?"

Her perfect white teeth come down on her lip her back arches as she stretches her body hungry. Does she even realize that she's about a minute away from coming? She has no idea that I'm going to play her body and claim not only this orgasm but the one following rapidly behind it. She's not making it through the night without realizing that she belongs to me completely.

"Mm..." she hums, her body moving restlessly.

"Give me words, baby. Give me what I need, and I promise I'll make sure you have everything your hot fucking body is craving."

"Yes, Daddy."

Two simple words, but they strip me bare and give me the world all at the same time. They prove she hasn't forgotten. They prove that she wants me—*all of me*. It also shows that she has no problem with me being in total control.

“Yes Daddy, what? I need all of it, Princess.”

“I’ll give you anything you want, exactly how you want it.”

Fuck. She’ll never know what that means to me. She won’t know—she can’t. To tell her would be trying to explain the hell I went through not having control in my life. I don’t want that ugliness touching her. I’ll give her some of it, but I don’t think it’s possible to truly make her understand—I just know it’s there inside of me.

I position myself between her legs she bends them, pulling them up so that she completely opens herself to me. I look down at the sand beneath her. It’d been a good idea if I had taken Helena back to the blanket. I’m not going to stop this to do it now, though.

“Such a good girl, giving her Daddy exactly what he needs. You deserve a present.” Looking at my options I stand up. She lets out a whimper of frustration. “Don’t worry, Princess. Daddy’s going to give you what you need,” I assure her. I pull her up with me and when her legs threaten to buckle, I take her weight and quickly maneuver us to the side of the rocky cliff. It’s smooth here and will work much better for what I have in mind. “Hold onto the wall, baby. Daddy is going to make everything better.”

“Oh God,” she whimpers, doing as I told her as I drop to my knees. I move one leg, over my shoulder, taking more of her weight. Then, slide my hands around her ass, pulling her cunt closer to me. The smell of her sex, so fucking sweet hits me and mingles with the salt air and I can feel the wetness gathering on the head of my cock. Fuck, I hope I don’t come in my damn pants. I want my cum inside my woman.

Now that I have her close, I can see how wet she is. The lips of her pussy are soaked. I slide two fingers against them, gathering her juices and then slide them in my mouth. *Fucking delicious.*

“My baby tastes good,” I tell her with a grin.

“Please,” she pants.

My tongue dives between her lips and laps at her pussy. I flatten my tongue out licking and pressing it against her. I groan because my woman has the sweetest pussy around. As I lick her cream up, more comes out. She's so fucking ready. I pull back to blow against her clit and the result makes her tremble. I smile, loving how reactive she is to me. I flatten my tongue out again. Licking her from the bottom of her pussy and not stopping until I hit her clit. I concentrate there, wrapping my lips around her clit, sucking it into my mouth. I keep working, using my hold on her ass to try and contain her as much as I can because she's rocking against my face, trying to ride me.

"Honey," she moans.

There's something so beautiful about the sound of her voice, calling out to me so sweetly while she's ready to come that I know I can't hold back. I lick down to her entrance and begin tongue fucking her, grinding her clit against my face, and letting her ride me to get what she needs.

"God." I listen to her and hum my pleasure.

Her thighs tighten around my face and I know she's close. I shift so my right hand takes all of her weight, then use my thumb against her clit, rotating it around and around, working it as I continue eating her sweet pussy. She's so wet that I can feel her juices surround me, coating my face in her cream. When I feel her body jerk, I know it's coming, I can feel it in the way she's grinding trying to reach for more. I use my wet fingers to grab hold of her slippery little clit and pinch it, tugging on it for good measure. She cries out, announcing her orgasm, but I already know. Even when she writhes and tries to twist away, I don't let her. I make her take it.

"Too much," she huffs out her body trembling around me. Only then do I begin slowing down on the way I lick her, trying to soothe—but not completely. I don't bring her down all the way. That's not the way this is going to go.

"It's okay, honey, Daddy has what you need," I rumble. Standing as I help her leg to slide down from my shoulder. "Hook your leg around my hip," I order. As she's carrying out

my instructions, I quickly undo my pants—roughly shoving them down to my thighs, along with my briefs. I wrap my hand around my cock and pump it once with my firm grip. Then, I aim the tip and rake it through her wetness, teasing her clit. Her body trembles as she tries to thrust up. I don't let her. I keep my hold on her tight.

“I'm going to fuck you, Princess. You're going to need to wrap your legs around me and hold on. I know you're a virgin, but I swear to God, I don't know if I have it in me to be gentle. I need you to hold on and just know I'll make sure this is good for you in the end.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Thank fuck. I thought she would deny me. I expected her to push me off. The fact that she didn't tears away what was left of my control. I align the head of my cock with her entrance and slowly begin pushing in. I repeat to myself in my head, over and over that she's a virgin. It becomes my mantra as I slide into her silken depths inch by inch. I stop when I can feel the barrier of her virginity. My gaze goes to hers and we stare at one another. The ragged sound of our breathing echoes around us.

“There's no going back, Ena. From this moment on, you will always be mine. I'm never letting you go.”

“Honey,” she gasps but I don't let her finish.

I thrust through her virginity, claiming her, growling out her name as I claim what can only be claimed once—what has always belonged to me.

“Mine!” I hiss, not stopping until she is completely filled with me, and I've bottomed out inside her. I hold my forehead against her as I force myself to be still, her legs tightly wrapped around me.

“Are you okay, Princess?” I groan.

Her arms are around me holding onto my sides. I have her weight and she's pinned against the rocky cliff. It's not exactly ideal to take your woman's virginity like this, but I can't change it and I couldn't wait. So, this is what we have.

“It’s beautiful, having you inside me, Marco,” she whispers.

“Princess,” I groan, her words destroying me and then building me back up.

“I need you to move, Honey. I need you...”

Her words are filled with an honesty and it’s so important that I don’t have the need for her to call me Daddy. Having her call me that is about total control. In this moment, it is about the two of us becoming one. I want her to claim me—the man—as hers and with her words, I know that’s what she’s doing.

“Then, I’m going to move,” I whisper. “Give me your mouth, baby.”

“Okay,” she murmurs, and her lips are on mine. The kiss starts off slow, but it picks up as my strokes increase in speed. Each time I push inside, I grind against her, giving her that little extra as I kiss her. It doesn’t take her long. I know the minute her second orgasm begins to roll through her and God, I’m glad, because I’m not sure how much longer I could hold on. I pick up my speed, taking us both higher as we shift from soft to just pure out fucking. My strokes become hard, thorough, and faster. I’m pumping in and out, grinding, building, and then, finally, riding out my climax as she curls into me, holding me tight because she’s finished and now is just enjoying the ride.

We stay like that for a bit and when I pull back to look at her, she’s smiling up at me. I kiss her again, this one soft, sweet, and full of promise. Let’s get you back upstairs and if you’re not too sore, I’m going to take you again, only this time in our bed.”

“Okay, honey.”

“No arguments?” I ask and she smiles.

“No going back.”

“Yeah,” I agree, feeling another piece of the bitterness that has been inside of me slide through and disappear. “No going back, baby. Only forward.”

Chapter 20

Helena

I come awake slowly. The room is bright, even with the curtains pulled. I slept in. I didn't mean to, but it's no wonder after the workout Marco gave me last night. After making love to me on the beach, we got dressed. Once we got back to the house, he carried me to the shower and after we washed one another off, he took me again—this time pinning me against the shower wall and having me lock my legs around him. It was different but just as beautiful as when he claimed my virginity.

I smile, stretching and feeling delicious spasms in my body along little twinges of pain that just make my smile deepen.

“You're looking mighty pleased with yourself, Princess.”

I gasp, my body going rigid when I turn my head and stare at the sleepy, sensuous eyes of Marco. “I thought you'd be gone. Didn't you have to meet with the contractors this morning?”

“I decided lying in bed holding your warm body sounded like a better use of my time.”

His words cause a sweet pain to spread through my heart. “Who are you?” I whisper.

He frowns and I know he doesn't understand what I'm asking from the look on his face. Before I can explain he moves his hand against my neck and then pulls me to him. “I'm the man you gave your virginity to. The man you're going to marry and the man who is going to be in your bed every night. Don't try to run away from me now, Princess.”

I lean into him, putting my lips against his to stop him from talking. “Stop jumping to conclusions, Daddy. I just meant the man I know you to be would never put off work.”

“I just claimed my woman’s sweet cunt. I just painted her womb in my cum and I have her warm in my bed. Work is the last thing I want to do. It’s time my brothers pick up the slack. I have a wedding to plan. After last night, you could be carrying my child.”

I blink. “Um...” *Okay, I give up. It’s clear um is a sound I’m going to make indefinitely with Marco in my life.*

“Woman—”

“Sweetheart, we’ve barely been together. Don’t you think we should hold off a little bit on the whole wedding thing? I mean, at least until we get to know each better first?”

“I’ve had my face buried between your legs while you came all over my face. I’m the first man to ever be inside your body—and I’ll be the last one. You’re in my bed and I’m keeping you in my bed. I’d say we know one another just fine, baby.”

I sigh. Okay, so maybe he has a point, but that’s not it. “That’s not exactly what I’m talking about.” He shifts so he’s sitting up on the bed, his back propped on the headboard. Then, he picks me up. I quickly straddle him as he sits me on his lap. I brace my hands on his stomach and the heat of his skin instantly has me getting wetter. This man is like a drug and I’m quickly becoming an addict. I’m wearing a T-shirt that he gave me after I got out of the shower. I do *not* have my underwear because Marco-the-panty-thief stole them. Therefore, I know he can feel that I’m wet because he doesn’t have any clothes on except his pajama shirt—which, incidentally, is also making me wetter, but pisses me off that he’s still hiding himself from me.

“Maybe you should explain what you are talking about before you end up pissing me off. I just had the best night of my life. I don’t want to spend the day pissed, baby.”

“I just meant...*Wait*. You just had the best night of your life?”

He shakes his head. “How are you going to ask me that shit. Were you not there? I had my woman coming all over my face. I was buried inside of her, and she slept all night in my arms. Best fucking night ever, Ena.”

“Don’t make me cry, damn it.”

“What?”

“You say something sweet like that and make me melt into a pile of goo and cry, when I’m trying to be sensible here.”

“A pile of goo?”

“Exactly. You can’t do that shit.”

“Baby, what’s going on here?”

“We’ve barely spent any time together. I mean the sex was great but what do you really know about me. We don’t even know one another’s favorite color.”

“Why does this matter?”

“Because it does! Couples are supposed to learn and discover each other. I mean, do you even know that I like peanut butter and banana sandwiches? Because I do! Only, not fried though, because that would just be gross.”

“I’ll make note,” he says, looking as if he might burst out laughing at any minute.

“There’s nothing funny about this, Marco,” I snap, fake slugging him on the arm.

“If you think that, then you’re not sitting where I am. I have my woman in my lap, her pussy dripping all over my cock and I’m sitting here discussing peanut butter and banana sandwiches.”

“They’re yummy,” I grumble.

“I’ll let you feed me one some night after I’ve fucked you so hard that I’m nearly passing out and you have to go find

food for me because I'm too weak to get you and me one myself."

"Um... Can we do that like...maybe, tonight?"

His lips twitch and I can tell he's trying to hold onto his anger but having trouble finding it. I call that a win.

"We can if you quit fighting me on this. We're planning our wedding, Ena. We're not going backwards. Not this time."

"I'm not saying we should go backwards. I just think we should slow down a little before we say I do."

"Slow down?" He snaps those words out like he can't believe me.

"Well, yeah."

"Jesus Christ, Ena. It has been six years. How much slower do you want to go? We go much slower, and you'll have to push me up the aisle in a fucking wheelchair."

"Marco! Stop! You're not that old and besides, I'm just talking like a few months or so, not years!"

"Months? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I'm not. We can date for a few more months and if we're still getting along then we can set a wedding date."

"Whatever," he grumbles.

"Are you agreeing?" I ask, surprised. Perversely, I'm a little disappointed that he agrees. God, he's really turning me into a headcase.

"Sure, baby. Whatever you want. We'll keep on like we are, and we can set a wedding date while you're popping out my kid."

"Oh stop. I'm not getting pregnant."

"Aren't you the woman who was begging me to go deeper last night. I know you were innocent, but I'm pretty sure you know how babies are made."

"Now, you're just being a jerk. Of course, I know how they are made. It's just I'm on the pill."

“What?”

“I’m on the pill.”

“Why in the hell are you on the pill? You’re a virgin. What did you do? Decide you’d just start taking it in case you wanted to screw someone before I could bring you here where you belong.”

I blink and if it was physically possible, I think my head would spin around until steam comes out of my ears. “You know, Marco, it’s a good thing you’re good in bed, because you’re a real asshole.”

“I—”

“I’m on the pill because my periods are painful still, but without the pill to keep me regular it is like fifteen times more painful. So, I take the pill.”

“Well, you’ll stop it now.”

“I will not.”

“You’re going to have my baby.”

“You don’t even know my first-grade teacher’s name!”

He stares at me, his body going still. He looks at me like I’ve grown horns on top of my head.

“Woman, of course I don’t know her name. Why in the fuck would I know that?”

“I don’t know! It’s just something a man should learn about the woman he’s marrying and it’s something he will learn while they were dating and getting to know one another.”

“Sweetheart, it’s a good thing you’re sexy as fuck and good in bed because I think you might be unstable.”

“If I am you’ve made me that way,” I mutter. “Marco, this is good. It’s so much better than I imagined it would be. I just don’t want to push it too fast and have it fall apart.”

His hand moves under my hair to the back of my neck, and he pulls me to him. He kisses me slowly, gently, and full of feeling. It feels like he’s trying to send me a message. I’m not

sure what it is, but his kiss feels good. When we break apart, he keeps pulling me so that my forehead is against his.

“What we have *is* good. It’s going to stay that way honey. You need to stop worrying. I’m not your old man. I’m here and I want you. I’m not going to disappear and leave you alone. You’re new to this, honey, and I’ve been in my own prison, so I’m not much better, but I have faith in what’s between us. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have worked so hard to have you right where you are right now.”

“Can I ask you to at least give me a week to get used to the fact that this is my life and that you really do want me?”

“I can give you that, but you’re still in my bed and I still get your kisses.”

“And I’m staying on birth control for a bit. I want your baby, but I’m not ready to be a mom just yet.”

“We’ll talk about this again, Princess, but for now, I’ll let you win.”

“Mighty magnanimous of you, Marco.”

He shrugs and I have to fight breaking out in a laugh. My man doesn’t have a problem with ego, that’s for sure.

My man. That makes twice I’ve thought that, and it feels even more true now.

“Do you really think I’m good in bed?” I ask, the thought that he does warming me all the way through.

With my question something happens that rocks my world. Marco throws his head back and laughs out loud, his arms going around to link behind my back as he squeezes me. My heart stalls in my chest and then does somersaults. *He’s laughing.* Not just a little. He does that some, it’s always a little stilted, but I still love to see it. This is a full out belly laugh, head back enjoying the sensation in a way that I know he is because his eyes sparkle.

It steals my breath.

“Are you seriously asking me that shit? Baby, I fucked you until neither one of us could move last night and we passed out

in bed. Do you think that shit would have been possible if you weren't fucking spectacular?"

"Um..." *Fucking spectacular?*

"Right," he says, still laughing. "Then, let me say this now. Sex can be good or bad. If two people are into each other, it doesn't take much to make it good, Princess. Sex is sex. To get what we shared last night, takes much more."

"It does?"

"It does. You're the best I've ever had. It's not even close. You'll be the last woman in my bed, so having that means like I've won the fucking jackpot. So, I'm telling you right now, baby. We're getting married. We're building a family, the kind that neither one of us had and wanted."

His words warm me from the inside out. I look at him. His hair is mussed. He has his pajama shirt on, but open so I can take in the beautiful hair on his chest and still keep my hands flat against his skin. He's beautiful. He's offering me everything I've ever wanted. I can't help but feel like he's pushing us somewhere we're not ready. How can he want to marry me, have a child with me, build forever with me when he doesn't even trust me enough to let me see the scars that I know are on his back.

I want to ask, but I don't. I know if I bring it up, he will withdraw from me and that's the last thing I want.

"Maybe I need a refresher course," I suggest.

"A refresher course?" he repeats.

"Yeah, I mean, what's that saying? Practice makes perfect? I want to be perfect for you Marco."

"Are you asking me for my cock, baby?"

"Yeah, I am, Daddy," I respond, my voice dropping down as I rock on his cock. I know I have his cock bathed in my juices. I can't help that. I want him again, so much so that my clit is throbbing.

"Fuck, you may kill me trying to keep your sweet pussy happy, Princess."

“Will you make me happy right now, Daddy?”

I feel like the most desirable woman in the world when he releases a ragged breath and his eyes sparkle with a hunger that undoes me.

I love him. *Love. Him.* I always have and I always will.

“Rise up on your knees baby.” I do that, my heart going crazy. “Wrap your sweet little hand around my cock and position me.” I don’t waste a second. I do that immediately, so hungry for him I feel like I’m going to climax before he even gets inside of me.

“God, you feel good, Daddy,” I whimper as I wrap my hand around his thick cock, his precum and my juices mixed together on his shaft making him slick as I stroke him once, holding him tightly.

“Now, guide me inside. Slide down on Daddy’s cock and squeeze your tight little cunt around me like a good girl,” he growls.

His hand comes up to tangle into my hair, giving me that sting of pain that I’m quickly beginning to crave. Marco’s not looking at me though. His eyes are glued to his cock and he’s watching as I slowly lower, taking him just like he ordered.

I let out a moan as he stretches me because it feels so good. My head goes back as I revel in the need I have for this man.

“Eyes on me, Princess. Don’t you fucking lose me. I want to watch you.”

I open my eyes and bring my gaze back to him. “Yes, Daddy.” I pant as he bottoms out and I settle against Marco. I sit there, watching him, the muscles of my pussy tightening around his shaft, trying to milk him already. I don’t move but the urge to do so is so strong that I can barely breathe. “Please, let me move. Please,” I beg.

“Not yet,” he denies me, and I have to bite my lip to keep from demanding he let me move. “Daddy has a present for you,” he says.

“Are you going to give me your cum, Daddy?” I groan, rocking my hips because I can’t stop myself.

Marco reaches around and slaps one of my ass cheeks. The burn of his spanking makes my pussy spasm and a fresh gush of come slips out. I may not climax yet, but I’m there. *I’m right there.*

“Fucking hell. You like Daddy spanking you, don’t you, Princess.”

“God, yes.”

“I’m thinking Daddy could turn you into his own personal little slut who would beg me for his cum. Am I right, baby?”

I want to say no. I feel like I should, but all I can do is whimper because he reaches his hand up and pinches my nipple, twisting it slightly. More sticky wetness slides from me. I can feel it. I’m so turned on my nipples are tingling. They’re hard and almost painful.

“Answer, Daddy. Are you going to be my little cum slut, begging for my cum? Letting me cum all over you?”

Oh shit. Oh God. *Fucking yes, I will.*

“Yes. God, please, Daddy. I need to move.”

“Bend down here and feed Daddy your nipple.”

I immediately cup my breast, lean in, and bring it to his mouth. His tongue comes out first, licking the nipple, lapping at it. That feels so good, but it’s not enough. *It’s not near enough.* Finally, he sucks it into his mouth and a jolt of pure electricity travels straight to my pussy, my muscles tighten even more, my clit is throbbing because I’m so worked up. I’m going to come. It’s building and doing it in a way that I know when it happens, I’m going to explode.

He releases it with a wet popping sound and the cool air hits the sensitive skin. I can’t take it anymore. I reach down, needing to touch myself—desperate to come.

“If you touch that pussy, baby, you’re going to make Daddy very upset.”

“I’ll take my punishment like a good girl,” I assure him. “You can spank me.”

“That’s not the punishment you get, baby.”

“Oh,” I tell him, my hand stopping but so close to where I need it the most that I’m not sure I can keep from touching myself now. “You can make me your cum slut, Daddy. You can come all over me. You can even feed it to me. I’ll lick it all up, I promise—every last drop.”

“You’re not hearing me, baby. You touch that pussy, and you don’t get to come.”

I freeze. Suddenly, I’m afraid to move. “What?” I ask.

I thought we were playing. Sure, I never thought being called a slut would be hot. Yeah, I was wrong. When I heard Marco’s graveled voice calling me that and I knew that he was getting off on it, it was H-O-T. Now, I’m feeling out of my depth. The thought of him not letting me climax when he’s built up inside of me something so big that I can barely breathe, is something else. It’s not hot, it’s kind of terrifying.

“I give you an order, you follow it, baby. You don’t? You pay.”

I blink.

“Now, I see you’re finally getting it,” he growls. Before I can catch my breath, he knifes up, his hands on my hips as he sits. Then, somehow, he whirls us around so that I’m facing the headboard and he’s behind me. It happens so seamlessly, so easy that I’m not even sure *how* it happened. I stop thinking about it when he moves me by pushing me down in the mattress. “Elbows to the bed, baby. Keep that body low and stick this pretty little ass high up as you get on your knees.”

Oh God.

I was hot before, but just like that, I find this might be even better. I do as he asks—*exactly* how he asks. There’s no way I’m risking what will here until forever be called *bad* punishment. It’s not going to happen. This might be all new to me, but I’m not stupid. My head goes down, my ass goes high. I let out a whimper of disappointment as I feel him leave me.

The sheets and cover on the bed, however, are pressed against my hard nipples and that feels so good the whimper turns into a moan—especially when I feel Marco’s fingers move through my wetness and then slowly up to the entrance of my ass. He slides his fingers there, painting my entrance and it feels good. *Really freaking good.* Then, I can feel pressure there and realize just a couple seconds before he pushes inside what he’s doing, and that’s *better*. My pussy contracts and I can feel more sticky-wet slide from me, painting the lips of my pussy, and run against the inside of my thighs.

“Daddy.”

The word is a moan, a devotion, or maybe a song. I’m not sure. Feelings are bombarding me, and it all feels so huge that I can’t think. I can only... *feel*.

“In this room—no, scratch that. Wherever I claim this body, Princess, you need to understand that *I* own this body. *It’s mine.* You give me complete control. That’s your gift to me. My gift to you is I promise you with every fucking thing I am, I will protect you, I will keep you safe and I will *always* take care of you. I will give you pleasure. You just follow where I lead. Out there, you can be you. You can give me lip. I love it. It makes me hot. You can give me sweet, and I’ll love it. It makes me hot. Fuck, you can do nothing but give me a damn eyeroll because you’re finding me annoying, and I will like that and get hot. You can make me so fucking mad that I’m going to turn this sweet little ass red, and as twisted as it fucking sounds, I’m going to love that, too. I’ll love all of that because all of that is you and what you do. I end the day with you in my bed, giving me control, trusting me to guide you, and knowing after years of having ate shit to finally have you and everything you give me is *my* reward, I’m good. I’m more than good. That means, when I give you an order in here, you follow it. Understood?”

I know he’s instructing me. I know what’s happening, but the entire time he’s talking his fingers are tunneling in and out of me. He’s rocking my body back and forth, so the added dimension of my nipples rubbing against the sheets is there and all that coupled with his words is undoing me.

“Daddy,” I whimper.

I want to tell him, I’m close to coming. I want to tell him that everything he’s doing feels so good. I want to tell him that I love him. I can’t do any of that. I don’t have the air to get the words out. I’m pretty sure he figures it out. I know this because in the next minute with his fingers still buried in my ass, his cock presses against my throbbing pussy, and he thrusts inside.

“I asked if you understood me, Princess?”

That’s when I find out, I was wrong. *So, wrong*. There’s another level of pleasure and Marco has just led me to it. That’s when I also discover that I can speak because I cry out as he slams inside of me.

“Yes!”

That breaks something free in both of us. I know because now his free hand is at my hip. His fingers are biting in as he fucks me hard with his cock and with his fingers. I’m so full that I taste him on my lips. I inhale and it’s all Marco and sex. He’s tunneling in and out of me so hard, so fast that with each thrust I move up on the bed.

“That’s my girl. That’s my beautiful Princess. You take my cock so pretty,” he groans. “You like having me fuck your ass, too. I’m going to fuck you there with my cock soon and you’re going to be a good girl and give me that, aren’t you, baby?”

“Yes, Daddy. I want it. I’ll be your good girl.” My response comes out in broken breaths that exhale with every thrust. My ass pushes out with every one of his inward strokes. I don’t know how we manage it, because I can barely think, but our bodies move in unison, and it’s so beautiful that I feel tears stinging my eyes.

I can feel my inner muscles spasming around his cock. I know I’m about to come. I try to hold back. I don’t want to disappoint Marco, but it’s more than that. I want this—this beautiful freaking hot way we’re coming to together and all of the pleasure he’s building—to last longer. When his hand on my hips slides down my thigh and under, I know it won’t. He

seeks out my clit, doing all of this by proving that he might not be of this world because he does it without missing a thrust. The minute he touches me, I detonate.

“I’m coming.” I think I breathe the words. It’s possible I scream them. I don’t know. I just know that I come hard. A minute later, Marco’s fingers in my ass still as they plant inside. Then with one more hard thrust, his cock goes deeper than it ever has, and I feel him cum. I literally feel his release jet out in powerful bursts as his cock slows and begins gliding in and out. I ride out my climax as he does this, my knees weak and my body well used. I feel his lips low on my back, press against my spine in a kiss.

“Be back in a minute, baby.”

I think I manage a grunt. My eyes are closed, and I feel sleep pushing in, so I can’t be sure. Somewhere in the distance, I hear water running. I figure he’s cleaning up. I suppose I should, but I feel Marco’s cum leaking between my legs and I don’t want to lose that. Sleep closes in a little more. Then, I feel a cool cloth move against my thighs and I try to drag myself awake. I don’t quite manage it. I just mumble. “No. Want to feel your cum leaking from me. Please.”

The cloth is gone. I hear Marco groan as he moves his arm around my waist and pulls me back into his body. “Fuck me, Princess. I was wrong. You’re not my reward. You’re my miracle. I don’t deserve you, but they will have to bury me six feet under the fucking ground before I give you up.”

I hear it, but I can’t respond I’m too far gone. I feel his lips press against my shoulder and then I’m out. Not realizing that I whisper to him exactly what I’m thinking in that moment.

“I love you, Marco.”

Chapter 21

Helena

“My Princess slept in.”

I smile as I walk out onto the veranda. Marco is sitting at the table, drinking coffee. There’s a huge plate of fruit and yogurt in front of him. I know he’s waiting on me. I don’t even have to question it.

“Yeah, but when I woke up, I was all alone.”

“I had an early morning meeting. I’m trying to make sure my evenings are clear lately. I find I like the company here better.”

I stand still, watching him and the smile on his face. The way his eyes sparkle, the smile on his face and mostly how relaxed he appears, increases his hotness factor until it’s off the charts and immeasurable.

“Ena?”

“You’re beautiful,” I breathe.

It seems impossible, but his face gets softer. “Come here, Princess.”

“You’re going to have to quit feeding me, Marco. If you don’t, I’m going to be as broad as the side of a house.”

“Get your ass over here before you buy yourself a punishment.”

“Will it be the good kind or the bad kind, Daddy?”

“Ena,” he grumbles, but I see the humor on his face, and it makes me grin. Although, just in case he’s talking about the

bad kind, I walk to him. Immediately, he pulls me into his lap, settles me and then brings his lips to mine. It's a sweet kiss, full of emotion that I'm scared of trying to decipher exactly what he's saying. When he finally pulls back, he leans in, putting his forehead to mine.

"Morning," I whisper.

"Morning, Princess. Did you sleep well?"

"Oh yeah. Daddy wore me out."

He laughs, pulling back to shake his head. "I think you might enjoy our bedroom activities even more than I do, baby."

I shrug, because I'm not sure I like it more, but I definitely like it as much as he does.

"Okay, Ena, we need to start planning our wedding. I want you under my protection and my ring on your finger, declaring that you belong to me and are not to be fucked with."

"Marco—"

"Speaking of which," he continues not letting me speak. I give him a mean look, but he's steadfastly ignoring that and instead, reaching into the pocket of his slacks. I mostly ignore that, taking in how dapper my man looks in his black pinstripe suit. All at once he gets my *complete* attention. I gasp as he shows me a large velvet ring box by depositing it in my right hand. Then, he takes my left hand and grabs hold of my engagement ring, pulling it off.

"Hey!" I cry. For a second, my heart squeezes in my chest. *Is he breaking up with me?*

I wasn't in love with that ring. It was rather small, and though I wouldn't have cared, because it meant I was marrying Marco. I watch as he carelessly tosses it over the veranda to fall three floors down. My body jerks. "What are you doing?" I cry.

Marco gives me a quick kiss, closed mouth but intense. "That was the ring I purchased because of my father. I couldn't

buy the kind of ring I wanted my wife to wear. If I had, it would have let him know that you were important to me.”

“Oh,” I murmur. “Still, that’s kind of wasteful. I was more than satisfied with that ring.”

“I wasn’t. Anything my father touched is poison. It needs to be gone.”

I don’t really know how to respond to that, so I say nothing. My gaze drops down as he opens the box he placed in my hand. Which, with hindsight, should have clued me in that he wasn’t breaking up with me. Inside the dark green velvet padded box is a princess cut diamond and not just any diamond it’s a large, crystal-clear diamond with ten smaller diamonds surrounding it. I watch, stunned, as he slides the ring on my finger.

“When I did this years ago, I had no idea of the gift that was being given to me, Ena.”

“Marco…” I whimper, feeling so much that I have no idea how to put it into words.

“I do now, baby. I won’t allow your father or anyone to hurt you ever again.”

I feel tears stinging my eyes and he leans down to touch my lips. I immediately open to him and his tongue slides into my mouth with a languidness about him that he’s never had before. This kiss isn’t about passion—although that’s present. This kiss is a promise, and it rocks me to my core.

“Really you two, are you seriously at it again?” Sebastian gripes, ending our perfect moment. I look up into Marco’s eyes when we break apart. He uses the pad of his thumb to wipe away a tear that has escaped. I bite my lip as he sucks it into his mouth.

“Shut up, Sebastian.”

“No, seriously, I need to know. Is there some kind of new fad where couples can’t sit apart at the table when eating breakfast?”

“Couple,” I whisper to Marco almost gleefully.

Marco smiles, and bends down for another kiss, this one quicker, but I love it just the same. He pulls me around so that I'm facing Sebastian and my back is pressed against his front. His arm goes around my waist.

"If you're done busting my balls, would you like to tell me if you're ready for the meeting with Antonio's men today?" Marco asks.

"Antonio is coming? Is Melina here?"

"Sorry, Princess. It's just a meeting with Victorio and Lodi."

"Oh. Still, while they're here, we should take them to dinner. I'd love to thank them once more in person."

"No," Marco grumbles.

"No?" I frown at him. "Why not?"

"Victorio is too damn pretty. Women fall over him like he's some rockstar god. You aren't getting around him."

"Um...Marco, you cannot be serious."

"I am. You are only around him in emergencies and only after I've repeatedly fucked you so you remember who you belong to. Not to mention you'll be too worn out to worry about the likes of Victorio."

"Oh my God! Sebastian can hear you," I hiss. For his part, Sebastian is busy laughing his ass off.

"So? If he had a woman, he'd do the same damn thing," Marco responds.

"He's not wrong. Someone should really mess that man's face up. He's too pretty," Gio says, joining us.

Elias is walking beside him and is nodding too. "Victorio is a nice enough guy but part of me wants to kick him in the balls every time I see him, and I have no idea why."

"I...You all are insane!"

I go to berate them more and my phone vibrates and dings indicating a text message.

I reach in the back pocket of my slacks and thumb through the message and see it's from the gallery, wondering where I am. I look at the time on the screen and panic.

“Oh my God! When did it get that late. I have to go! I'm meeting with a new artist today. I'm trying to convince her to show her paintings at our gallery.”

I move to jump up off of Marco's lap, intent on getting to work. Marco has other plans. He uses his hold on me to keep me locked to his body. He turns me slightly so I can see him more easily.

“Not so fast, Ena. We need to decide about the wedding. Do you want a huge wedding or small family event? I don't care either way, but I'm going on record right now and I'm telling you that your father isn't paying a damn thing. He doesn't get to touch it. If he can't be bothered to be good to you when he had you under his roof, he doesn't get the privilege to give you good now. That will fall on me. I'll make sure your dreams come true.”

My eyes sting with his words, but I refuse to cry again. I just look at him, hoping he can see how much his words mean to me. “Marco, can we discuss this tonight?”

“No. I want it figured out. I want a gold band to join that rock on your hand, baby.”

I shake my head and sigh. “Fine, and despite what others think about me. I'd prefer to go simple. I don't want a big wedding. I want my family there and that's it. I doubt my father will want to come unless I insist, so by family I mean your brothers, Melina and Antonio, along with his men if they want to come.”

“Then I—”

“That *includes* Victorio.”

Marco grunts.

“However, because I do *love* clothes. I want a gorgeous dress that will probably cost a lot, so you may want my father to pay for it.”

“I’m paying for it,” Marco insists stubbornly.

“Suit yourself, but I want all the trappings of a big wedding, caterers, gorgeous cake, fancy designer dress lots and lots of ribbons and flowers.”

“Then, you best be looking at venues—”

“No, I want it here, in front of the ocean below, and we can’t do it until our new home is complete.”

“Our *new* home?” Marco questions.

“Honey, you just threw away a beautiful ring that was smaller but still cost an outrageous amount of money all because your father had a hand in buying it. You need to quit fighting it and just destroy this house and have them build one that you will *want* to live in.”

“Fuckin’ A,” Elias says.

“You’ve been hanging around Antonio’s men too much,” Gio grumbles.

“Ena, if we do that. It could take a while.”

“So, it takes a while. I don’t care. I do, however, want a say when it comes to the interior decorating. It’s only fair since it’s going to be my home, too. I’ve had enough of blank rooms with no personal touches to last me a lifetime. I want a real home.”

Marco gives me a smile and I can see his approval written clearly on his face. “Do I need to consult with my future wife on how big said house is to be?”

“Honey, I’m *really* late. Can we talk about this later?”

“You need to talk to me. I can see in your eyes that you have something in mind, Princess.”

I let out a sigh. “You know you are really annoying.”

“I can agree to that for sure,” Sebastian joins in.

“Ena,” Marco warns.

“You will fight me on it,” I hedge.

“Ena.”

“Fine,” I huff. “I think it needs to be four separate homes in one compound that is joined by a central business headquarters. The four homes can be separate structures and they will all share one giant courtyard, forming a square. That will make family get-togethers easier and that way each house can have a private backyard that still faces the ocean. It’s the only fair way to do it so that each of you have your own home.”

“Fuck, Helena,” Sebastian says, and I look at him, then I turn my gaze to all of them. “I’ve spent my life alone. I’m looking forward to having brothers—but just so you know, I’m not living every moment of every day with you. That’s why having our own homes is important. I figure the main office can be the entrance to the courtyard and at an angle. It can be big enough to house your men and their rooms, and a garage.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot.”

“Marco, you’ve been miserable on what to do with this place. That’s why you keep stopping the progress. I want to see you happy and it’s clear you and your brothers aren’t happy here. Now, I really need to go.”

“Okay, honey. We’ll talk more about it tonight, but for now kiss your man.” I lean in to kiss him, it’s quick and brief, but still perfect. “Have a good day at work, baby.”

“You, too, honey,” I whisper, with one final look at my husband-to-be, I take off in a sprint.

“Bye guys!” I call without looking back. I hear them all laughing and saying goodbye and it makes me happy.

I fit in here. *I belong.*



Marco

My eyes stay glued to the area where Helena just disappeared from. I can still smell her sweet scent in the air and I’m

already missing her.

“You seem like a different man,” Sebastian murmurs.

“I’m finally away from that bastard. My fiancée is right. We need to burn this fucking house to the ground.”

“You bring the matches and I’ll have the gasoline waiting. We’ll roast marshmallows and fix smores,” Elias mutters.

“You really have been spending too much time with Antonio and the others,” I laugh.

“I like the asshole. What can I say?”

“I do too,” I admit.

“Who knew the sister that we spent our lives protecting would be the one to help save ours by bringing her husband into the fold?” Gio adds softly.

I shake my head, taking a drink of my coffee feeling contentment sweep through me. I’ve never felt it before, but fuck me if it doesn’t feel good.

Chapter 22

Helena

I stretch as I open my eyes. I already know I'm alone in bed. Marco was meeting once more with Victorio and Lodi, then finalizing what he wanted for the new build with the architect. They're scheduled to begin demolition in the morning. Tonight, when Marco is finished, we'll be moving into a hotel in Athens. It's not ideal, but anywhere Marco is, is definitely home.

It has been a few days since I shared my idea about the new home with him. I was afraid he'd be upset or laugh me out of the place. Instead, he loved my suggestion and is set on building on it. I haven't seen the final plans yet, but he did ask me to tell him where I'd like our home together to face. Upon hearing Marco use those words, I lost it. I cried. *Our home together*. There was just much in those three words and all of it was monumental. I couldn't handle it. I cried my eyes out right there, with Marco holding me. He was worried and wanted me to explain why I was upset. How do you explain that someone is making every dream you had come true? I may have been young when I set my eyes on Marco—so young that I didn't exactly know what I was doing. That didn't change the fact that he was giving me what I wanted most. His sweetness, his gentleness, and making me feel like I mattered. He's giving me all of that, but he's giving me stuff I didn't know I needed—not until he came into my life.

There's just one thing continually bothering me. It happened again last night. Marco got in late last night. I tried to stay awake for him but lost the fight. Still, I felt him slide into bed without a word. I curled into him, and he still had his

shirt on. When I asked him to take it off He got in late last night and then without a word he crawled in bed with her but he still wouldn't take his t-shirt off for me.

I know he has scars. I've seen them on his arms, they run deep. The ridges are evident even under the ink. Just from the glances I get of them, I want to cry. So, I know it is bad, but the fact Marco's trying to hide himself from me says he's not truly comfortable with me. If he cares about me to the point that he's planning to marry me, why won't he go without a shirt? It doesn't make sense.

I get up and walk to the shower with a sigh. Oh well, I can tackle that problem another day. I smile as I slip into the shower, turning on the water and letting the heat move over me. *Heaven*. Marco took me hard last night. I think I've discovered his favorite position is putting me on my knees in the bed, ass up drilling me from behind, taking me roughly, while his hands are fisted in my hair, and using her body while simultaneously giving me all I could ever want. I don't spend a long time in the shower. I don't have time. I want to go find my fiancé before I leave for work. I have an early schedule today. With that in mind, I blow dry my hair and put on light makeup. Then I get dressed in my cream pants suit and secure my hair at my neck in what I hope turns out to be a sexy chignon. Incidentally, the only jewelry I wear is my ostentatious wedding ring. I don't have her pumps on because her feet are killing me. I've been wearing too many of my best hooker shoes on the concrete and tiled floors of the gallery. I tag them with my fingers and walk gently from the room all dolled up and tiptoeing in my stockings. I'll put the shoes on when I have no choice—definitely after I enjoy breakfast with my man.

I smile thinking about how much my life has changed, as I move through the hall and round the corner that will lead out onto the terrace because that's where Marco always has breakfast and meets with his brothers. I'm so excited to see him this morning. I wonder how he would react if I just admitted to him that I love him? I want to. I know it's going to come out soon. I don't think I have it in me to keep holding back.

As I round the corner that will lead me to the terrace my steps slow because I hear Elias laughing. I find myself smiling. I like that. I can see the shadows on his face. I also know the scars that was left on him that day. I'm not talking about bullet wounds either. No, these scars were on the inside and you didn't have to see them to know they were there and because of that I take a moment just to enjoy the sound of him laughing. Once his joy settles down, I start to walk again. Before I can announce I'm there, he speaks and what he says makes my blood run cold.

"Do you really think Marco is that into her, or is he just playing a role?"

I blink. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know he's talking about me. I shake my head. I shouldn't be upset I guess, but I am. I kind of feel like I'm sucker punched. *Can't he see how Marco is with me?* Sure, he's never used the word love, but you can't miss how tenderly he treats me. He makes me feel precious.

"I think he's making the best of a bad situation," Gio murmurs, and there's no laughter in his voice. He's calm, his voice sober.

"A bad situation? Dude, have you seen Helena? She's hot and clearly Marco is getting what he wants from her."

Okay maybe I was mistaken about Elias. Suddenly, I don't care if he laughs or rises about his scars.

"Yeah, but you know Marco's type. It is *not* Helena. She screams high maintenance that is not Marco's type. Don't you remember Paulina? Marco was *gone* for that chick. She's his type, curvy, big ass, bigger tits, and dark hair and eyes. Marco was in love before our father stepped in and stopped that. She was the complete opposite of Helena. *Complete opposite.*

"Yeah, she definitely wasn't high maintenance. She was the stable groomer's daughter. She wouldn't know art or designer labels. She didn't care."

"Exactly," Gio huffs.

Suddenly, there's a knot of pain growing tight in the pit of my stomach.

"You might be wrong," Elias argues. *God let him be wrong.* "He could truly care for her. He sure seems like he does."

"Think back. You remember that day Marco literally crawled out of bed because Aden, Atlas and our father nearly beat him to death the day before? I tried to get his ass back in bed, but he wouldn't listen. He insisted he needed to send flowers to Helena for her birthday because he couldn't fucking walk to even think about going to a party to her house. The man was fucking wrecked over it because he said she would try to insist on ending the engagement. He didn't spell it out, but I knew that was why."

"So? Doesn't that mean he does care for her?"

His father beat him? That's why he missed my party? My hand comes up to cover my mouth. Oh God. I had no idea...

I asked him, Eli. I asked him why he insisted on going through with this wedding and engagement."

"What did he say?"

"He said father wanted this alliance with Helena's father and that Helena requested Marco specifically. He said if he bowed out, then father would put one of our other brothers in his place and the man he would pick would decimate her.

"I'm not so sure, Altas." Elias says. "Why can't he end it now if that's true, Gio? There is no Atlas and Aden now. There's no father. Why is he still going through with marrying her if it's not because he has come to care for her?"

Gio shrugs and if I could breathe without experiencing pain, I'd walk over there and slap him. "Maybe he does care for her, but I think it probably goes back to the person that Marco is—the man he's always been." The brothers stare at one another in silence before Gio finally finishes. "He's so used to protecting those he cares about that it is a way of life for him. It's a crusade that he uses to prove he is not our father. I think

he's protecting Helena to keep her from being forced to go back to her father."

"Is her father as bad as ours?" Elias asks.

"When Marco came back a couple years ago, he was livid because her father left her alone when she was in pain and didn't even care that there wasn't even staff to watch over her. I think he's still sacrificing himself—this time to take care of Helena."

"I don't like that. Of all of us, Marco deserves to be happy," Elias says.

I lean on the wall, my legs threatening to buckle, and I can feel tears stinging my eyes."

I was making him happy... wasn't I?

"I don't either, brother. I don't like it a damn bit. He deserves better and so does Helena."

"All arranged marriages have bumps," Elias reasons. "Maybe they will end up finding happiness."

End up finding happiness. End up, finding *fucking* happiness. I was such a fool. I thought we were happy.

"Maybe," Gio allows. "If Helena doesn't find out the man that she wants pities her. I admit I don't know her that well, but she doesn't seem like the type of girl to accept pity. She doesn't seem. like the kind of girl to accept pity.

Pity? Those tears that are stinging my eyes nearly kill me with the need to release them, but I realize that's not it. They're already falling. It's the pain that is crippling me. I back away from the terrace. Thinking about all the things that Marco has told me since I moved here.

He was going to protect me. He was going to make sure my father never got the chance to hurt me again. He wasn't even going to let him pay for the wedding.

Oh God. That's when I take off running back to my bedroom. As I get inside with the door closed—and locked—I realize, it's not my bedroom. I have nothing here. My legs give out. My weight is held up by the door and that doesn't work. I

slowly sink down until my ass hits the floor, the sobs racking through my body.

It was all a lie.

Chapter 23

Marco

I'm fucking exhausted. I was supposed to be home early so Helena and I could go to dinner and then check into the hotel in town. This did not go as planned since the demolition crew had trouble obtaining one. Of the permits needed. That means I had to wade in. This also meant that a meeting that was supposed to over midday, extended and didn't finish until about twenty minutes ago. I need to get my ass in the shower, clean up and take my woman out for sustenance. After that, I was going to take her back to the hotel and fuck her until we both couldn't move. That was the extent of my plans, but I thought they were damn good ones.

"Ena," I called. "Did you get your stuff boxed up today? The boys are going to load it up early in the morning, baby. They're going to bring what you want to the hotel and then put the rest in our storage container."

Silence.

"Princess?"

I open the door to our room and it's empty. When I say empty, I mean she's not here. Her presence can't be felt. I frown. I sent her a text and told her there was a permit hold up and the meeting would take longer than expected. I also told her be ready when I got there, and we'd go out for a bite before getting to the hotel. She didn't respond, which was odd, because she always does. I didn't think a lot about it though. We're good. We're solid. She probably didn't get the text. Service is not the best sometimes, and she went on to the hotel

without me. I will have to speak to her security detail for not reporting that shit.

First, I need to get a move on. I paid a fuck-load of money to get the utility department to cut power to this damn place tonight. I want those beautiful wrecking balls outside to bring this motherfucker down tomorrow. We'll burn what can burn and the hell with the rest of it. They can cart it out of here in large dump trucks. I don't give a fuck as long as I don't have to see it anymore. Helena gave me the freedom to do what I truly wanted. She knew I hated keeping the house—even if it did make sense to do so. She also came up with a plan which would make our home a home for all of my brothers as well as us. I like it. I like knowing that asshole that donated his sperm for our existence, but gave us nothing but shit afterwards, would rot in hell with the twins—offspring that somehow inherited every vile cell the bastard had in his body. I loved knowing while the three of them rotted, my real family, would thrive and grow stronger.

I look around the room. She obviously went to the hotel without me. *Disappointing.* I take a breath, inhaling the scent of her perfume. I take it into my lungs deeply, letting it calm me and wash away the stress of the day—just like it always does. I walk slowly to the bed, undoing my tie, then unbuttoning my shirt.

I usually get undressed in the bathroom—alone. I've been holding back showing her all of his scars. I didn't want her to see her reaction to the ugliness. She's the only good thing, the only pure thing that has ever belonged to me. I don't think I could handle seeing revulsion in her eyes. I suppose that makes me weak, but at this point, it is what it is. Still, I know that in doing that, I'm keeping a certain amount of distance between us—a distance that is hurting Helena. I've been toying with the idea of revealing the scars. It's best to know now if she can handle them. She's innocent, sweet and despite having a father who spends his time ignoring her, she's sheltered. If she can't deal with it, I'll keep them hidden. She's into me enough that I can manage to distract her from the proof that I am the son of a monster. She never has to know

that deep inside of me is lurking the same type of beast that I keep a tight rein on.

That can't be tonight, though. Tonight, I need my woman to soothe the filth I felt inside as I took the demo crew through the dungeon and the rest of the tunnels. I hated doing it, but I need that system destroyed carefully. Whatever we do here, I need to keep the structure of the overlook the home is built on solid. I'm going to bring Helena's vision to fruition. That thought makes me smile. I'll make sure she's happy here. They'll be happy here *together*. We will have a family, build a life—all the things I have wanted my entire life and yet, never thought I would receive. I lean back to take off my shoes but my hand hits something unusual. It's firm and crinkles under my palm at the same time. I put my foot down and turn to see what it is and frown when I see a pink envelope that I recognize immediately as Helena's stationery. I grin, glad she left me a note letting me know where she's at. I'm still going to tear into my bodyguards. They don't make a move unless I know exactly where they're going and where my fucking wife will be.

I rip open the envelope, anxious to read Helena's sweet words, and fuck, she is sweet. She's always giving me that sweetness, that gentleness that she carries inside her. She gives it to me so much that now, I'm addicted. I crave it.

I unfold the letter, a smile still playing on my lips as I take in her writing, gentle but strong strokes of a pen that make beauty. Helena can do that with anything at her disposal—even pen and paper.

As I begin reading, the smile dies on my lips and slow anger being leeching in.

Marco,

*I've really tried. I thought I
could do this. I thought I could live*

this life with you. I can't. The you I fell in love with as a child is not and has never been the real you. I tried to pretend that we could have a life together. I was wrong.

The love I thought was the real thing, has just turned into to emptiness. I've had enough empty in my life. I can't pretend to be happy anymore. I need to find where I belong in this world. The only thing I am totally sure of is that I don't belong with you.

We are too different.

I will have my father send the papers dissolving our premarital contract and engagement.

You're free. Be happy, despite everything, I want that for you.

Helena.

After reading it, I read it again. Then again. *And again.* I zone out—just staring at it. I'm still not sure how many times I read it, but with each word repeated in my brain bitterness and anger take over. I crumble it in my hand and grab my cell.

“Yo, what’s up, Marco? I thought we were meeting for a family dinner here at the hotel?” Sebastian asks.

“Helena is gone. I want her security team in my hotel room in twenty minutes. I want our best trackers finding her and I want her found now. No delay.”

“Fuck, did someone take her? What’s going on?”

“No, she left on her own. I’m not sure what happened, but it’s clear something did. Are the security cameras at the house still working?”

“Of course. We had the feed transferred to the construction trailer you had set up for your office.”

“Good, then change of plans. Have the security team meet me there and you and Gio come too. All hands on deck damn it. I want Helena found and I want her found now.”

“Got it.”

He hangs up and I throw Helena’s fucking note in the floor. It deserves to be buried with the rest of the soon to be rubble of this place. As for my fiancée, I’m going to turn her fucking ass red for pulling this shit.

I just have to find her first.

Chapter 24

Marco

“There’s no audio, but do you fucking assholes want to tell me why my woman looks like she’s been gutted like a fish just listening to you talk?”

I look at Gio and then Elias. I wait as they stare at one another.

“We didn’t know she was there,” Elias mutters.

“What were you talking about?”

“Marco, we didn’t know she was there,” Gio repeats.

My control is gone. I slap my hand down on the old metal desk. The old steel desk—that was made circa 1960’s—causes a burning pain to hit my palm. I ignore it, my gaze boring into my brothers. “What the fuck were you talking about? What caused my woman so much pain that her entire body recoiled?”

Gio shoved his hand through his dark hair. “Damn it, Marco. We *thought* we were alone!”

“You have about three seconds to tell me what you said before I beat that shit out of you,” I growl.

“We want you to be happy, Marco. We like Helena, but it seems so sudden,” Elias begins.

“Sudden? What the fuck? Helena has been mine for years!”

“She was forced on you.”

“She was—”

Gio holds up his hand and I snap my mouth shut trying to restrain the urge to kill my fucking brother.

“You said it yourself. You only agreed to this engagement because she chose you. It trapped you because if you said no, she would have gotten one of the twins and you knew what that meant.”

“*Is that what you said while she was listening?*” I bite out the words. My voice is quiet but filled with anger and shock. How the fuck can my own brothers be so fucking blind?

“Not that word for word, but that’s the gist,” Elias says. “We were worried about you,” he adds, trying to mollify me. It doesn’t work.

“Have you fucking seen me with Helena? Do I look like I’m not happy, you assholes?”

“Marco, you always have had this sacrificing for the greater good complex. You fancy yourself some fucking white knight that has to save the rest of us,” Gio tries to explain.

“God, you can’t see what is right in front of you,” I growl.

“We like Helena. We’d just rather you finally live your life, not tie yourself to a woman who was forced upon you.”

His words make me flinch. Is the bullshit they were spouting when my woman was listening, and her heart was ripped out of her chest. I turn away from him and my gaze automatically goes to the screen where the security film is on a loop. Seeing the pain hit her—drown her—nearly brings me to my knees.

“She’ll be okay, Marco,” Elias says.

“It’s better for her to know. Helena has a soft heart like Melina. She loves you. Being married to you, knowing that you don’t love her, would kill her,” Gio adds.

I don’t think I reach out and wrap my hand around his neck and thrust him up against the wall. “Does she look like she’s better on that fucking video, Gio?”

“Marco—”

“Does she look like she’s *fucking better*?” I hiss the last of my question, letting the anger inside of me go free, ready to incinerate the whole damn place.

Gio looks at the screen and I can see the regret on his face, but it’s much too late for his regret.

Much too late.

“You tie yourself to her, you’re doing her no favors. That girl wants a fairytale. She wants the white knight you pretend to be. Only, she doesn’t want a pretend hero, Marco. She wants the real thing,” Gio says, his voice softer. I let go of him, shaking my head.

“I can be that for her, you fucking asshole. I *was* that for her.”

“You can try. That’s what you’ve been doing—trying, Marco, but we have the same blood. We have the same family. We can’t be anyone’s hero. We don’t know what love is and that’s what your woman wants.”

I stare at my fucking brother. I love him. *Love*. However, right now, I’ve never hated him more in my life. I draw back and plant my fist into his stomach. He groans as he exhales from the force of the blow, his body bending forward. “Get this straight. I may not be a fucking roses and candy kind of hero, but I can still be Helena’s. Not one fucking person has shown me what love is but that woman. She’s mine and I can be whatever the fuck she needs me to be.”

“Marco—”

“Not another fucking word. Find my woman and you better pray nothing happens to her before I find her.”

“Happens to her?” Elias questions.

“She’s the fiancée of a Stratakis. Our father was so fucking hated, if you don’t think we have a million enemies out there, you haven’t been paying attention,” I snap. “Find her.”

“Where are you going?” Sebastian asks, having been mostly quiet through all of this.

“I’m going to search the hotels for her and call her father on the off chance that she called the bastard. If that doesn’t work, I’ll call Melina.”

“There’s no need. We know where she’s at,” Clinton—my chief of security—says as he walks through the trailer’s door.

“You found her?” I ask, wondering if I can finally start breathing again.

“Yes and no,” he hedges.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“We know where she is,” he says.

“Good enough, go get her and bring her to my hotel—”

“Can’t do that boss.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“She apparently called her father when she left the house. Her father’s helicopter picked her up about an hour after she snuck out of the house on a private airfield in Athens.”

“*Fuck!*” I hiss. “Get the chopper ready. I’m bringing her back home.”

“Can’t do that, boss. The chopper is down for repair and the jet was used to take Victorio and Lodi back.”

“Fuck. Fine. Get the car ready. I’ll call George on the way.”

“You got it,” Clinton mutters.

I look over at my brothers—specifically Gio and Elias. “You two better pray that I bring my woman back.”

With that, I stalk out and I do it, finding that I’m praying too. *I need her.*

Chapter 25

Marco

Three Weeks Later

I walk into the Kratos' offices, ready to do battle. I wasn't able to get to Helena. I called her father, but his helicopter didn't bring her home. It took her to his jet, and she's been hiding out from me. I have no idea where she has been—despite my best efforts. Apparently, George Kratos has finally chosen to be a father, because he refused to tell me where his daughter was.

Fucking bastard.

He tried to arrange a meeting to dissolve our contract and to mend fences. He is wise enough to know that even though the Stratakis name is now bound with the DeLuca, we are only stronger—not weaker. He also knows that I've always been the brains of the Stratakis empire. If I had left all that shit to my father, he would have had us bankrupt in mere months. I wouldn't agree to a meeting until Helena was there. Her cell has been deactivated. She won't call me despite the demands I've made to her father. So, if she truly is intent on ending our engagement, she will have to at least look me in the eye.

I'm not letting her go. She can think what she wants, but she's mine. I was the first man between her creamy thighs, and I'll be the fucking last. I've been pushing our construction and demo guys. They've made a lot of progress in three weeks—even if it is costing me a whack. I know I'm nowhere near having a place I can bring Helena too—since I know when I get her, I will have to keep her tied and probably gagged. At

this point, the thought of that is not unappealing. Hell, she'll be lucky if I don't tie her and keep her suspended from the ceiling until she caves. It's not something I ever wanted. I get off on control, but with my history there's no pleasure to be found in the rest of that shit. I'm upset enough with Helena, that I don't give a fuck. She's slowly unleashing the monster that I've done my damndest to keep locked away. Today is her last chance. I hope she choose smart. I'm pretty sure she won't.

Clinton and Gordon stop by the doors of the conference room, flanking it as I walk in.

As I push the double doors open, all eyes look up. I scan the room, immediately searching for Helena.

"Marco," George Stratakis says. I ignore him. I look at the table and the blonde sitting, facing me. For the first time in fucking weeks, I feel like I can breathe.

"I want a moment alone with my fiancée," I growl, getting a certain amount of grim satisfaction when Helena flinches. She bites her lip. *Is she afraid of me?* She should be. As mad as I am, she should be terrified.

"Now, see here, Marco. We've agreed to your demands, but my daughter has been through enough—"

"Your fatherly concern is noted, but it's years too late. I want left alone with Helena, or I will make things very uncomfortable for you George and we both know I can do it."

"Stratakis!" George blusters. He doesn't want to lose face in front of his men, attorney, or daughter. Normally, I would care. Today, I do not. Today, the only thing on my mind is getting my woman, back. I sit down across from Helena and stare at her.

"Make your father and the others leave, Helena, or you won't like how I make them leave."

I watch as shock hits her face, stealing over her features. Her eyes dilate and I know she realizes I'm telling the truth.

"I won't have this! I had you here upon good faith. I will not be disrespected—"

“And I haven’t seen my woman in a little over three weeks. You are one of the reasons I haven’t seen her in three weeks. So, you either leave now, or I will make it happen another way.” I take out my phone and put it on the table in front of me, but my eyes never leave Helena. “And we both know I can do that, George. One call and I can make your empire fall like a fucking house of cards.”

“Do you realize what you’re doing here?” George hisses.

“Declaring war? You bought that the minute you kept Helena from me. The choice is yours leave or I call.”

Helena and I are staring at one another. It’s a silent standoff. God, she’s fucking beautiful. Her hair is bound tight against her neck. She’s wearing another one of her fancy-ass pants suits which shouldn’t be sexy but are just the same. This one is gray with a checkered pattern in darker and lighter hues of the same color. The material looks soft and is different from the silk she normally wears. I’m not a man who knows shit about fabrics, but I want to run my hands down her body to see if what she is wearing is as soft as it appears. Then, I want to rip it off of her and fuck her right here on her father’s conference table, slamming into her while she’s begging me to give it to her harder. I wonder how old George would react to his daughter submitting to me. My cock presses against my slacks, stretching out as I harden. The constriction of my pants is painful, but welcome. I’ve been dead inside since Helena left.

“Daughter—”

“Leave us alone, father,” she says quietly.

Around us is the sounds of chair being pushed back, men grumbling under their breath and George Kratos doing his best to save face. I ignore it all. The only person who has my focus right now is Helena.

“You have ten minutes,” her father says as he heads to the door.

“We have as long as I want. Don’t test me on this George.”

He slams the door shut without another word.

Helena leans back in her chair, shaking her head. “Was that really necessary?”

“You’ve been hiding from me, Ena. You’re lucky I’m forcing myself to be nice here.”

“Be nice?” she scoffs.

“Trust me, baby. I’m being very understanding considering my woman disappeared without a word and has kept herself hidden from me for three weeks.”

“I’m not your baby,” she whispers.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’re completely mine. I told you there was no going back and there’s not. Your fate is sealed, baby.”

“It’s not. The agreement is made to be dissolved with or without your agreement Marco.”

I give her a grin, but there’s nothing joyful about it. She’s going to push me. I expected it, but I was hoping it wouldn’t come to that. She’s not going to like how I push back.

“Helena—”

“Will you just stop? Jesus, what is all this about? You’re free. Find someone that fits into your world. That is not me.”

“Bullshit. You know better and I know better. Don’t try to play me for a fool, Ena.”

“What do you want from me, Marco? What is the purpose to dragging me here? I should have just told father to let our lawyers and court drag it out,” she huffs. “You know as well as I do a judge will end the agreement. There’s nothing binding if one party asks to be released.”

“We can go that route, baby. If that’s what you want, we will absolutely. In the end, your father will be in jail, and you’ll still be mine.”

“Yeah, right,” she laughs rolling her eyes.

“I’ve been in business with your father for years, Ena. Do you really think I don’t know where his skeletons are buried?”

Her eyes go round and the intake of her breath is audible. This time the smile I give her is sinister and another chain from the monster I keep leashed inside of me is broken.

“You wouldn’t do that. That’s not who you are, Marco.”

“It is. I’m not a nice man, Helena. You don’t live with the evil I’ve lived with and not have some of it inside of you. For you, I was better, but baby, I can be the biggest bastard around if I need to be to keep you.”

“Why? You’re free, Marco. Go live your life. I forced this agreement on you. Now, I’m fixing that.”

I stand up, kicking my chair back so hard it falls and bounces off the tile. I ignore it and round the table. Before Helena has a chance to react, I’m standing in front of her, grabbing her hand, and pulling her up to look at me. “Did I fucking tell you I wanted to end our agreement?” When she doesn’t answer, I tighten my hold on her hand and jerk her deeper into me. “Did I tell you that I wanted to end our agreement?” I ask again, my voice sterner, letting some of my anger loose on her.

“Marco, you’re hurting me,” she whispers.

“What the fuck do you think you’ve been doing to me the last three weeks? Don’t feed me some bullshit about setting me free. I told you when I claimed you that you were mine. I was not fucking around. You aren’t getting away from me Ena.”

“I’m an adult, not property, Marco.”

“You’re an adult?” I ask with a bitter laugh.

“Yes, I am and I’m not ready to get married.”

“You’re not an adult.”

“I am!” she snaps.

“You’re a spoiled little princess who heard to men talking out of their ass and ran away instead of coming to your man

talking to him like a fucking adult.”

Helena pales while trying to pull away from me. I let go of her hand and allow her a little distance—but not much. She’s not getting the chance to run.

“Fine. I should have spoken with you about what I heard,” she says rubbing her wrist where I was holding her.

“You think?” I bark.

“That’s not why I didn’t come back when my father told me you wanted to see me, though.”

“Oh really? Why in the hell didn’t you, then? Don’t try to tell me it was because you weren’t happy, Ena. I know better. You and I were solid. What we had was good.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t good. It was. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“I want more, Marco. I want what you can’t give me.”

“What do you want? It’s yours, but you can’t run away every fucking time things try to push in on what we have together, Ena. You fight for a relationship, what you don’t fucking do is run away.”

“You can’t give me, what you don’t have, Marco.”

“What don’t I have?”

“I thought I could forget, but I can’t. All through our engagement, until recently, I wasn’t much more than an afterthought. I thought I could ignore how that made me feel, but hearing your brothers talk about me, brought it all back.”

“My brothers don’t know shit, Ena. They don’t know me.”

“It doesn’t matter what they said, Marco. The truth is, I can’t forget how you did me for years—”

“I told you the reason why,” I huff out, trying to rein in my anger, but doing a piss-poor job of it.

“You did and I get it, but that day on the plane was the worst day in my life. I needed you and you couldn’t be there for me.”

“It’s the past, Helena. You can’t say I haven’t been there for you since.”

“You have, but is that because of how you feel about me, or because you don’t have to concern yourself with Melina now?”

“What the fuck?” I snarl, slapping my hand down on the table. “Why do I get the feeling that no matter how I answer you’re not going to be satisfied?”

“Because I won’t,” she whispers. “I’m sorry, Marco, but I don’t want to marry you.”

“That’s tough shit, Helena, because you *are* marrying me,” I counter, dropping my voice down but leaning into her.

“You can’t force me to marry you.”

“I can. If that’s the way you want to play this, Helena, then believe me, I will fucking do whatever I have to do to make sure my ring is back on your finger.”

“Oh. That reminds me,” she whispers, avoiding my eyes. She grabs her wallet off the table and opens it and unzips a compartment. When she’s done, she reaches out her hand and I see her engagement ring trapped between two of her fingers. She’s reaching them out to me and I just stare at them. “This belongs to you.”

“Put it on your finger, Ena.”

“No. I told you, Marco. I don’t want to marry you.”

“Then it would seem you have a choice to make, Ena.”

“A choice?”

“You either put that ring back on your finger and come home with me, while planning our fucking wedding or you can begin to make arrangements to visit your father in jail for the rest of his life, while figuring out how to live because he won’t have a penny in his name.”

“You’re bluffing,” she gasps.

I hate the look in her eyes. I hate it more that she’s looking at me and finally seeing the evil inside of me. I can’t help it.

She brought us to this point. I don't have a choice. I'm not letting her go.

"I'm not, baby. In fact, try to run from me. Just try, Ena. I *dare* you."

"Marco, this is insane," she whispers.

I can see it in her face. *Fear*. She's finally getting it. I'm not husband material. I'm a monster, but she's not getting away from me. She's made her bed and now I'm going to fuck her in it.

"I see you're finally getting it. You gave yourself to me, Ena. The time to run was before that. Now, there's no escape."

"My father is powerful. You can't do what you're threatening," she says, but she knows the truth. I can see it in her eyes.

"I made it my business to know everything about your father, Ena. I can destroy him with one call."

To accentuate my ultimatum, I reach across the table and pick up my cell. I look at her. Her beautiful face is full of fear. I don't like it, but at the same time, it makes my cock even harder than it already was. She's at my mercy.

"You'd be blackmailing me into marrying you. I'd be marrying you against my will," she breathes, talking more to herself than me, but I heard her, so I respond.

"It didn't have to go this way, but you gave me no choice, Ena. If I have to force you," I shrug, "so be it."

"You do this and anything I've ever felt for you will turn to hate, Marco."

I take her hand. She tries to jerk it away from me, but I don't let her. I slide the ring on her finger and keep her still with a firm grip.

"I can take your hate better than I can take you leaving," I respond, and God help me, it's the truth. If she left, I'd be completely alone in the darkness.

I need her.

Chapter 26

Helena

My heart is going crazy. It's pounding so hard against my chest that I can feel each beat vibrate through my body. I look up at Marco like he's a complete stranger, because at this moment, *he is*.

He's actually going to blackmail me into marrying him. I don't know what to do. Hell, I don't know what to think. I heard what his brother's said. They're not wrong. Marco does have a hero complex. I thought he cared for me, though. I was sure of it, and I even convinced myself to go back because I was happy. Then I realized I didn't want to be a responsibility to any man. I wanted what Melina had. I wanted to be Marco's world. Less than that would probably kill me eventually. I'd rather be alone than face that. So, I pushed my father to end the agreement. He ignored me until I broke down. I hated him seeing me so weak, but I couldn't help it.

I was terrified of marrying Marco and never having his heart.

Suddenly, I'm realizing he doesn't have a heart.

"You can't be serious about this," I murmur, looking down at our joined hands and the ring on my finger.

I remember the day he gave me this ring. I thought all my dreams were coming true. Now, I realize it was nightmares.

"I think I've already established that I am."

"Even if I agreed to marry you, Marco, I can't stay in Greece. My boss transferred me to their American store, and I start work there tomorrow. I'm there for two months."

“Quit.”

“I can’t! I love what I do. She only gave me the transfer because I told her I needed a break. I can’t leave them in the lurch. Your reputation is everything in this business.”

“I’m not living apart from you Ena. It’s not happening. Tell them you quit.”

“You waltz in here and threaten my father, tell me you’re going to force me into marriage and now you’re trying to ruin my career. You’re asking too much! When you tire of me, I will need my career to fall back on. I can’t give up my job.”

“I don’t think you’re grasping the fact that our marriage is till death do us part.”

“I get it, but with the sweetheart of a guy you are, you’ll be dead in a week.”

I see the shock on his face. I’m worried that I said too much, pushed him too far. Obviously, this Marco is not the man I’ve been sharing a bed with. I’m not sure who this man is at all. I just know that I don’t like him.

“I’m not giving you two months. That’s out of the question,” he insists stubbornly.

“What do you care? You don’t even have a house. Melina said you had a party celebrating its destruction.”

“How nice to learn that my fiancée could stay in touch with my sister, but not me.”

“You should use that to help you realize forcing me into a marriage that I don’t want isn’t good for either one of us. Let me go, Marco. Find a woman that is better suited to you. Maybe you’ll get lucky, and the former stable groomer is available for a position at the new house. Then, perhaps you can reconnect with his daughter.”

I thought Marco was angry when he first came in here. *I had no idea.* With my words, His face is washed of any emotion. His face is a stark white, devoid of color—except for the molten fury that I can see in his eyes. My breath stalls in my chest. Fear begins moving through me. Marco’s hands

come around me and he spins me around, before backing me up against the stone wall of my father's conference room. "I get you heard shit out of my brother's mouths. What you need to understand is that is *exactly* what it is. *Shit!*" he hisses that word in a way that makes my entire body flinch and tighten. "Paulina was a childhood crush. I was too fucking stupid to know anything. The last time I saw that bitch she was begging for my father's cock as he was offering to let me share her."

I gasp, his words hitting me like an assault. I don't know what to say or do, but in the end, I don't do anything because Marco doesn't give me a chance. His lips slam down against mine. I try to remain strong and resist his kiss, but I'm too shocked by his words. They've left me raw and wounded and I don't even understand why. His tongue thrusts in my mouth. At first, I don't respond but...

Maybe it says I'm weak. I feel that way. I've missed Marco so much since I left. In my head and in my heart, I've already said goodbye to him. I never expected this. I never thought I would have his lips on mine again, so I give in. I take his kiss and moan into his mouth. He swallows the sound down and our tongue goes volatile. His fingers bite into my hips as he pulls me into his body, grinding me against the hard evidence of his arousal. I hold onto his biceps, my knees going weak, my fingernails biting into his skin—even through his clothes. My lungs burn as the kiss continues and when it finally ends, I fall against his chest. His face buries into the curve of my neck. His hot breath slides over my skin and I feel his lips press against my throbbing pulse point.

"Fuck, baby. I've missed you."

My heart squeezes in my chest and I close my eyes against the bittersweet pain that hits me.

"Marco..."

"You're going to be my wife, Ena."

"If I agree, you can't ask me to give up my job. Talk to your employer. See how soon they can transfer you back here. I will allow some leniency, but you will not run away from me

again. You need to come to terms with the fact that we've come too far to turn back."

"I've come to terms with the fact that I never knew you. You're threatening to destroy my father if you don't get your way."

I don't know, maybe I expected him to relent and smile at me in that easygoing way that he's always treated me with. Instead, he pulls back showing me his face is impassive. "I will use whatever is at my disposal to make sure I have you and you are safe by my side."

"Even when I don't want to be," I mumble.

"You say you don't, your body says you do."

"Sex is just sex without emotion behind it."

"Lucky for you that you'll only have one man between your legs and that man is me. You love me. I'll remind you of that."

"Love can die, especially when it's abused."

"Love is not so fickle, baby."

"How would you know?" I huff out.

"Why does it feel like you are trying to make me angry again, Ena?"

"I have no idea," I lie. *When he's angry, he's easier to dislike.*

"Do we have a deal?" he asks. And I force myself to pull back and look up at his face.

"I will tell my employer that I need to transfer back to Athens, but it will be on their schedule, Marco, not yours."

"You will visit me. I won't go weeks without you—not again."

"Let's see what they say on the time. I agree if it's over a month, I will come to visit," I respond, praying he agrees.

"Ena—"

“I need time alone to regroup, Marco. I can’t do that with you insisting what I want and feel. You don’t know me.”

“I know you, Ena.”

“I’ll call work tomorrow and we can go there. You call off your bulldogs concerning my father.”

“You’re not going to try and renege on our deal if I agree to this shit?”

“Would it do me any good if I did?”

“Not a damn bit.”

“Then, no. I won’t change my mind.”

“Give me a kiss and we’ll call the others back in and tell them the wedding is still on.”

“Marco, I don’t—”

His lips stop anything else I was about to say. I try to remain solid against him, but I eventually give in. That seems to be a theme when it comes to Marco. I don’t know how I’m going to handle marrying him. I find myself hoping once I start work in the US, he’ll go back to forgetting I’m alive. At the same time, I don’t want him to.

Jesus, I’m a mess.

Chapter 27

Helena

Three Weeks Later

“I’m fine, Melina. Stop worrying.”

“This is not like you, Helen. You’ve always been more sensible than me when it came to this kind of stuff.”

“And where did that get me? I waited forever on your brother. That’s over. It’s time he waits for me. I need to spread my wings.”

I sound confident. I doubt she can hear the mess that I really am. In the two weeks since my showdown with Marco things have changed—at least a little.

I’m working in Phoenix, Arizona at an art gallery and I actually love what I do. I’ve been able to come in and gain several big-name artists, but more than that, I’ve started a local talent display that has become so popular it is now the number one money maker for the entire gallery. I now have a list of artists submitting their work, hoping to get their work seen. For the first time in my life, I feel accomplished.

All this means I have to talk to Marco. He’s expecting me to come back to Greece in a week. Instead, I’ve agreed to stay in Phoenix for another month. I know he will be pissed, but it’s not like he’s gone out of his way to see me since I came to the US either. Which to me means he’s slowly reverting back to the Marco I remember when I was younger. I guess that’s why I called Melina first. I wanted to see what she thought.

I'm thinking, based on her reaction, Marco might not be as easygoing about my extension as I had hoped.

The good part of this conversation is that I've managed to make sure there is no sadness in my voice, none of the pain I feel from being away from Marco. I sound carefree. *I'm not*. Yet, it's good she thinks I am. That means when I talk to Marco, I will be able to pull that off with him. *Maybe*.

Melina is like a mother hen when it comes to ones she loves and that has only increased since her hot as hell hubby knocked her up. I count myself lucky that I'm one of the one's that she let inside her heart. She's probably the only person who has ever loved me. That's not something I take lightly.

"Do you have to spread your wings so far away? I mean, you're in the US, can't you at least stay in Miami? Marco will lose his mind when he finds out you're working closely with some hot guy billionaire. I mean, if you were going to kick my brother to the curb couldn't you find a hot guy here? Heck, Antonio has some really sexy bodyguards. Levi is single and so is Zane and you *know* they like you."

"I didn't come to Phoenix to find a hot guy," I laugh. "I came because I needed to get out of Greece, and I'm not dating anyone. Your brother might be slowly reverting back ignoring me again, but I don't think even I am prepared to see what he'll do if he thinks I'm dating someone while I'm *technically* engaged to him."

"You know how crazy that sounds, right? I don't think anything with Marco involved should be qualified as *technically*, honey."

I let out a deep breath and flop down on my bed. "I think I need a little crazy, Melina. I've lived in shadows my whole life trying to stay out of my father's way. I definitely was in the shadows of your brother's life. I think..." I let out a sigh and close my eyes, my grip on my phone tightening. "I want my life to be different. I *need* it to be different than what I've had. I'm not dating. I swear. My boss is from Greece. I didn't know him and we're not dating. I don't want to date and he

understands that. He makes me laugh and he's fun to be around. I *need* fun, Melina."

"I know," she whispers, and I know she understands. Melina still sounds sad, though.

"I'm not here for him or anything like that. I'm here to find myself. This isn't about me finding someone else. This is about me learning to love myself."

"Are you doing that?"

"I think I am starting to. I love my job. My work for the gallery means something. I'm making a name for myself. I'm good at it. Melody and Z say that I can plan this next exhibition solely on my own."

"Melody?"

"She's the manager at the gallery. She's technically my boss, since she has more interaction with Z than I do. He may own the gallery, but she's the decision maker."

"You sound really happy, Helen."

"I am," I mostly lie.

"I just want to put this out there," she responds, and I frown.

"Put what out there?"

"There are galleries in Miami. I'm pretty sure my man could even get you a job in one."

I laugh, feeling my heart warm. Yeah, that's Melina. She loves me and she wants me happy. She wants to take care of me.

"Love you," I murmur.

"You too, Helen. Will you call me soon?"

"You know it," I agree without question.

"Good. I also expect to hear more about this Z person," she mumbles, making my smile deepen.

"If I see him again, you will be the first person I dish to," I vow.

“If?”

“Melina, I told you. I’m here for my job. I mostly do that job with Melody. I very rarely come in contact with Z.”

“Whatever. I just know my brother is not going to be happy.”

“I’m not sure he will care either way,” I respond, my words hurting my heart even as I say them.

“I think you’re wrong, but if he doesn’t then I hope this Z guy steps up.”

I shake my head, but don’t respond. Z is good looking, but he’s not Marco. God, I’m so stupid.

“I better go, Melina.”

“You better be here for the birth of my child, Helen,” she huffs.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I respond, completely honest.

“Talk soon.”

“Soon.” She clicks off her phone and I do the same when I know she’s no longer on the other side.

I hold my phone close after we hang up. I close my eyes and I wish—not for the first time—Melina was here with me. Right now, her voice in my ear telling me that everything is going to be okay sounds like heaven.

I probably wouldn’t believe her, but it sure would be nice to hear.

It’d be better than the silence that surrounds me right now.

Much better.

I stare at the phone. I know I should call Marco, but I’m chicken. I’ll do it tomorrow.

Or maybe I’ll wait until he calls me.

Chapter 28

Marco

“Marco, we have shit going down.”

I frown looking at Elias as he walks into my makeshift office.

Hell, I been living in this damn box container since we tore our father’s old house down to the ground. I’m not religious man, but after we blew the tunnels up, I had the ground blessed by a priest. I didn’t know shit about how to do it, but my sister Melina contacted a priest, and he showed up and took care of it. I figured it sure as hell couldn’t hurt. Antonio suggested we keep the tunnels. I thought about it. I mean, I knew they may have come in handy, but I also wasn’t sure who knew about them. I didn’t need my enemies having a way in.

We’ve started building back, but every time I turn around there’s another hold up. I thought—stupidly—that I’d have a place to bring Helena home to in a month. That’s the only reason I agreed when she asked me for more time. It’s getting damn frustrating, however. There’s a distance growing between us, and I don’t like it. We don’t talk but a couple times a week. The time difference and our schedules are too great to overcome at times. She’s pulling away and while I have no intention of letting her this distance is getting beyond frustrating.

At the same time, I don’t want to be the only one doing all the work. She will not see me as some pussy-whipped shell of a man that she can wrap around her finger. I have a man on

her. She's under my guard and protection. If she doesn't sort out her shit, I'll have them bring her to me.

That is if I manage to have a place here to keep her!

I don't exactly want to bring Helena to my construction trailer and fuck her on a damn blow-up mattress. My brothers opted for a penthouse suite in a hotel in Athens. I didn't want that. I want to be here overseeing shit and remembering that I am not my father. I don't give a fuck where I sleep if Helena isn't here.

“What kind of shit? Is Melina okay?” I ask, pushing thoughts of Helena out of my head.

“Why do you immediately think something is wrong with Melina every single time one of us says there's trouble?” Elias asks, walking over and sitting down in front of my desk.

I grimace because he's right. She's the first thing that comes to mind whenever someone says they have bad news for me. It's a kneejerk reaction that happens because of years of conditioning. I've had my baby sister used against me and threatened so many times by our father that even though the bastard is dead, I still live in fear of it.

“Old habits,” I mutter.

Elias nods. He understands. Then again, he almost died protecting her himself. I'm damn glad he survived. Having my brothers with me right now is what keeps me going. Still, there are days, I think about chucking it all in and walking away. I have thought about getting my woman and going to Rio. Although, I'm not sure Brazil is far enough away. If I had just walked away, left all of this in DeLuca's hands, it might have been better. Helena and I could have had a new beginning.

Instead, I fought for this position. I'm not even sure why. There are moments, however, that I remember that I'm a man who spent my life hating the monster that fathered me and eating his shit on a daily basis. I lived for the certainty inside of me that one day I would end him and once I did that—if I *survived*—I would take everything he had.

It feels good to finally do that.

“I think we can all let our guard down when it comes to Melina now, Marco. It’s clear she has her man wrapped around her finger—especially now that she’s knocked-up. That, plus the fact that he’s the man he is and will protect her with his life, I think she’s good.”

“Yeah,” I admit, knowing that Antonio DeLuca would kill any motherfucker who dared to touch her. She was his wife, but she was also cherished, and it showed in everything my sister said and did. I don’t smile much but the thought does make my lips twitch. Then, I let out a breath. “So, what shit is headed our way now, Eli?”

“Zervas,” he responds.

He only says one word, but it’s enough. Zervas hates me and I hate him. Those facts have been true for as long as I can remember. That hate only increased when I took the helm of what used to be my father’s business. I haven’t forgotten that Zervas fucked up my play to get rid of my father before shit went to hell. Now, he and his family are the biggest rival to my interests here in Greece. My father should have struck out against them ages ago, but my father was too weak. He couldn’t see the forest for the trees. Ruining them and wiping them from the scene here in Greece is on my list. The problem is my fucking list seems to grow every damn day.

“What’s going on?”

“You aren’t going to like it.”

“I don’t like the mention of his name, so I think that’s a given. How about we quit playing this game and you just tell me outright.”

“Word is his father put him in charge of their American interests. He’s been living there for two months.”

“Why does this matter? The fact that he’s that farther away from here is good news as far as I’m concerned.”

“You would think that,” Elias mutters.

“Damn it, Eli, out with it already.”

“He’s in Phoenix.”

“So? It’s a large city and highly populated.” I don’t like he’s close to Helena, but to my knowledge he has no idea who she is.

He reaches inside his blazer, and fishes something out of the inside pocket. He tosses it across my desk. I pick it up, frowning when I realize it’s a photograph. I flip it over to see what the picture is actually of and can’t believe my eyes. Helena is at a restaurant laughing and talking with Zervas. Bitterness churns in my gut.

“He’s running the gallery your woman is working at.”

“*Motherfucker!*” I hiss.

Helena belongs to me—has always been mine. Just because she deserves better than the blood in my veins, doesn’t mean I will let her go. Seeing her laughing and sitting with this piece of shit is a fucking blow. Zervas is an asshole of epic proportions. Being who I am and my father being who he is, that’s saying something.

“How in the fuck...” I mutter, my voice sounding foreign to my own ears.

“We’ve had the new guy that DeLuca sent over—Callister—watching over Helena like you ordered. She hasn’t been around Zervas often, and it’s always some kind of work luncheon, but if that fuck-wad is involved...”

“She could be in danger,” I finished.

Fury, the likes of which I haven’t tasted since my father was alive, spoils the air around me so much that it burns my lungs and overtakes me.

“Does her father know?” I ask.

“He knows Zervas is running the gallery. You pissed him off enough that last meeting with Helena, you don’t really have an ally there anymore, brother.”

“Then they all need to learn a lesson.”

“Do we extract Helena now?”

My first instinct is to say yes. I don't do that. She loves her job. I need to figure some things out and, in the meantime, I need some help.

“Not yet.”

“Brother, I don't think you should keep waiting.”

“Duly noted. Tell our man to stay close to Helena, but make sure she doesn't know she has a tail on her. I'm going to call Antonio. I may need a little extra help.”

Elias lets out an annoyed breath, but he nods, clearly not happy with my decision, but thankfully, he's not going to keep questioning me. I can't stop to talk to him about it right now. I need to get someone close to Helena now. Then, I need to figure out exactly what Zervas is doing because I'm sure it's bad whatever it is.

Chapter 29

Marco

“Something going on?” DeLuca asks, in place of a hello. He sounds irritated. I smile.

“Can’t I just call my brother-in-law to shoot the shit?” I ask, and despite the poison currently churning in my gut, my lips twitch.

I hate to say that I like this asshole, but I do. He is good for my sister. He shelters her. It’s the way she should be protected, the way I wanted to and tried—but ultimately failed. He also spoils her and that makes me happy.

I can’t really ask for more than that.

“Don’t remind me of the only drawback I had in claiming Melina as mine.”

I laugh. Yeah, damn it. I like the bastard. He’s been good to my family. He didn’t have to let me oversee things here. He sure as fuck didn’t have to let my brothers either. My father was a bastard who destroyed everything he touched, and he lost to DeLuca. Yet, instead of burning it all to the ground and erasing Stratakis holdings, he restructured and gave it the DeLuca umbrella of protection. That said, Greece is small. The power we wield here is nothing compared to the vast holdings DeLuca has in America. It’s still a fortune and sure, I may answer to him, but I’m in charge here and that means something. The fact Melina wanted her brothers happy may have factored into DeLuca’s decision somewhat, but he’s a man who took over a fucking kingdom and not only did it successfully, but he also made it bigger, stronger, and better.

I stifle a sigh. I not only like the man, *but I also respect him.*

I scrub my face with my hand and stretch back in the chair. “I’ve got an issue.”

“Christ, Marco, when are you going to nail the woman down and stop fucking around?”

“Come again?”

“I didn’t stutter. I like you, despite your last name—”

“You forget my sister has the same last name.”

“No, she has *my* name,” he growls in return. “The point is that even though I like you, you called when I’d rather be fucking your sister instead of fucking around with you. So, take my advice and lock Helena down.”

“I’m working on that,” I mutter.

“Bullshit. I’ll believe it if that means you’re telling me the issue you have has nothing to do with Helena.”

“Well, it does—”

“Lock that shit down, Marco.”

“There’s nothing to lock down,” I growl.

“Then, how is she a problem?”

“She’s in Phoenix, Arizona.”

“I know.”

“You know?” I snap.

“Her and Lina talk almost daily. So, yeah, I know.”

“Well, I just found out she’s working for Zervas Cirillo.”

“Christ,” DeLuca responds.

“I need that situation contained and I don’t have that reach. She knows my men. If I send them in, it will make shit worse. Helena loves this job. She has enough reason to hate me. I need to give her a little freedom without...”

“Without giving her freedom?” DeLuca finishes.

“Mostly,” I admit, the truth of that statement burning in my gut.

“This wouldn’t matter if you’d—”

“I thought you might know someone out that way. Someone willing to alert me if she gets in over her head. While I get some things done here so I can bring her back.”

“You already know she’s going to get in over her head,” he practically groans.

“I’ve not heard of Zervas personally hurting a woman...”

“But?” DeLuca prompts.

“He hates me almost as much as I hate him. If he finds out Helena is mine...”

“Christ. Okay. I don’t really do business out that way. I do work with the Russians who have a stronghold in the area. Killian has some men out there who can help. I’ll shoot him a message have his guys reach out.”

I rub the back of my neck. It burns that I’m having to ask for help at all. I’m going to turn Helena’s ass red for this shit. I make a fist with my hand, frustration rolling through me.

“Thanks, man.”

“Don’t thank me yet. E-Z—the man who will get in touch with you—is a good man but he also has a taste for blondes.”

Fucking great.

“If she decides to go to another man, and that man is a good man, then I’ll deal,” I mutter.

“Do me a favor, if you’re going to lie to yourself, stop trying to sell me the same lie. I don’t believe that shit and I don’t think you do. I don’t know what kind of bullshit you got slithering around inside of you—”

“I—”

“I also, don’t care to know—as long as it doesn’t interfere with what you do for me. What I do know is that shit builds up and if you don’t deal with it, it will get you killed. Deal with it

brother, because losing you would make *my* woman unhappy and that would piss me off. Got me?"

"Got you," I respond. What he's saying is probably true, but fuck if I know how to change. I'm too old to try at this point.

"Later Marco-Polo."

I growl under my breath. "You know I hate that shit."

"Why the fuck you think I do it?" he laughs and hangs up.

Asshole.

I shake my head and toss my phone onto my makeshift desk. I close my eyes and immediately Helena's face fills my vision. *Fuck.*

Lock her down.

I shake the thought away. DeLuca doesn't understand. He doesn't have the filth boiling inside of him that I do. I haven't taken a breath of clean air in so long... Shit, I don't know if I ever did. My old man poisoned everything, and he did that from the day I was born so chances are I never have and never will.

I need to make sure when I bring Helena here, I can keep her happy. Having her living in a fucking construction trailer with no gallery to work in will not do it. When I get her here, it needs to be perfect.

"Fuck," I hiss and get up.

I've got a house to rebuild based on my woman's plans. The rest will have to wait. I can only do so much...

Chapter 30

Helena

I look down at my phone and immediately panic when I see Marco's name. The urge to let it ring and not answer is so strong that I can't catch my breath. It's probably not good to be terrified by a phone, but I am just the same. I pick it up off my nightstand, staring at it, willing it to stop ringing. At the fifth ring I decide I'm being a wimp and pick it up.

"Hello, Marco."

"I thought you were going to pretend you were asleep again," he mutters.

"I've never pretended to be asleep," I mutter. "I just chose not to answer."

"At least you're honest about that," he says with a sigh. I frown when I hear him. I shouldn't be concerned about him. Hell, I shouldn't still be in love with him. There's something seriously wrong with me that I'm both considering everything that has happened.

"You sound tired, Marco."

"That would be because I am. It's hard to sleep when my wife is on another continent."

"I'm not your wife yet."

"I'm not getting in that discussion again. I'm too damn tired and I miss you tonight."

"Marco—"

"Be honest, Ena. You miss me. At least give me that."

“I don’t think your ego needs more stroking,” I mutter, unable to lie but not wanting to admit that I do miss him.

“I can tell you something that needs you to stroke it.”

“Marco,” I squeak.

“Just being honest, baby. Are you ready to come home yet?”

“Marco, I like my work. They want me to stay until my new project is off the ground and I know you’re going to be pissed, but I agreed.”

When he doesn’t say anything, my hand goes to my stomach. The walls are closing in on me and I don’t want to make things worse with Marco, but I need time. At this point, I’m not sure why I want the time, I just know I can’t face going back to Marco right now. Part of me feels like of silly for running off without talking to him. He was right when he said I should have talked to him. This distance has shown me that I will marry him, because I miss him so much that I ache inside.

I just wish he felt the same about me.

“I need you with me, Ena.”

“I don’t want to leave this project, Marco. It’s my baby. You could always come visit me if you want to see me.” I hold my phone to my ear with my shoulder and neck so that I can wring my hands together—my nerves getting the better of me.

“Are you saying you want me to come to you, Ena?”

“You’re the one who said you wouldn’t allow me to leave you, but...”

“But?” he prompts.

“It just seems like old times,” I finally respond.

He goes quiet and I know I’ve stepped into it. I’m just not sure I care at this point.

“Are you shitting me, Ena? You run away spouting shit about needing time and wanting a chance to do your job—”

“It wasn’t *shit*. It was true.”

“Fine. You tell me that *shit*. Then, you act like I’ve failed some fucking test because I let you have what you asked for. *Jesus Christ*. How does a man win with you, woman?”

“I can see trying to talk to you was a mistake.”

“The *mistake*—as you put it—was leaving in the first fucking place.”

“Why did you call, Marco? Was it just to yell at me?”

“Believe it or not, Ena, I missed you.”

My heart squeezes in my chest because he sounds like he truly means that. I exhale, the sound shaky to my own ears. I close my eyes and let another piece of me slip away.

“Believe it or not, Marco,” I copy before letting him in just a little more, “I miss you, too.”

I hear him hiss into the phone.

“Marco?”

“I wish you knew how fucking good it is to hear you say that, baby.”

“Does that mean you’re going to come see me?”

“I’ll put Sebastian in charge of the construction crew and fly out in the morning. I’ll take the private jet. You’ll be there waiting on me?”

“Send me the time and location and I’ll be there.”

“I won’t be able to stay long,” he added, and I noted he did sound upset about that. I also knew he was telling the God’s honest truth. I’d been talking to Melina, and I had spoken to Marco—at least some. I’d even spoken to Sebastian—who called to ask me to please give Marco a chance—and to Elias and Giovanni. The latter of those calling to apologize and to make it clear they didn’t know how their brother felt about me. I appreciated their calls, even though I wanted to tell them that the real reason I ran was because I didn’t know how Marco felt about me either—*and still didn’t*. Yet, because of all the calls, I knew Marco was having trouble out of Stratakis rivals. I also

knew that the alliance between him and my father wasn't going so well after the stunt that Marco pulled about our betrothal. So, I knew, him coming to Arizona just to see me was huge. It was so huge it was monumental, and it was also a concession I didn't think he would make.

God my fiancé was confusing.

"I understand, Marco. I know you're pushing things around even to come see me."

"I don't think you get this, and I've apparently fucked up trying to show you, but I'd do anything for you, Ena."

"You forget blackmailing me into marriage."

"You'll forgive me for that in time."

I try to draw on my anger, but all I feel right now is fear that he's right. "I do want to see you," I confess—because I'm stupid.

"Hopefully it's not to convince me we shouldn't get married."

"We probably shouldn't. We're very different people."

"I'll text you when I'm enroute, baby."

"Okay."

"Helena?"

"Yes," I answer trying to prepare myself. He used my full name and history has shown that when he has done that, it's not always a good thing.

"I'm going to try and talk you into coming home where you belong."

Damn it. That shouldn't make me smile. *It does.*

"I may try to talk you into staying."

"See you tomorrow, baby."

"Tomorrow," I whisper.

He doesn't say anything else, and I hold my phone and wait. I know it's probably just a minute, but it feels like longer.

Eventually, he does hang up and I close my eyes.

I do this thinking the same thing I think every time Marco is involved.

God, I'm a mess.

Chapter 31

Helena

I walk into the gallery pasting a smile on my face. The sound of my Louis Vuitton heels clicking on the marble tile echoes around me and I smile. I don't have many vices, I truly don't. But shoes? It's definitely a vice. It is one thing I love about this job, too. It was literally in my job description to wear good clothing—the type that men and women who come inside to drop hundreds of thousands of dollars on art would expect. Today I'm wearing my favorite black matte, slingback pumps. They have gold shiny straps and the heel flares out and has the same shiny gold accent. They're gorgeous and cost a mint but they make my tapered wool, crepe dress look even better. If one is going to go all out and buy Louis Vuitton shoes, they have to have the matching dress. The dress is high neck and long sleeved. It shouldn't be sexy, but since it's form fitting and hugs my body, falls just above the knee and has a gold zipper that travels the entire length of the back and makes no apologies for being seen—rather accentuating its existence so it's the standout showpiece of the dress—*it is*. There's matching gold, solid buttons at the wrist of the sleeves and a built-in gold, thick chained necklace that comes out of the collar of the dress and dangles just a few inches down. I wore my hair down, leaving a wave in the shiny, blonde tresses and I know I look good, but as I walk to the reception desk, and put my coffee down that I grabbed at the java house down the street, I feel eyes on me immediately. I hide my smile as I slip off my dark, chunky sunglasses.

“Damn, Helena. The moment I saw you, I knew you would class up this place, but every time you walk through the doors,

you take my breath away.”

I know it’s silly. *I do*. Still, after years of having a father who barely tolerates me and a fiancé who ignored me, Zervas Cirillo’s attention is a balm to my ego.

It helps that he’s really hot. Admittedly, he doesn’t have the same, rugged, masculine appeal of Marco, but he is hot and sexy. Any girl would love to be on his arm. He’s tall—so tall that even in my heels I have to bend my head back to look up at him. His body is massive. He could have easily been an American football star. He’s wearing pinstriped dress slacks with a white silk dress shirt that has two buttons undone at the top. He looks hot, I can’t deny that.

I could even be attracted to him. Sadly, I can’t go there because I’m in love with Marco. It’s sadder because I know Zervas would never be able to hurt me the way Marco does.

Marco has caused me to doubt elemental parts of myself. He’s left scars everywhere. My heart, my self-confidence, my soul—all of it—feels as if I’ve been ripped to shreds. I’m not sure I’ll ever put myself back together again. I’m adult enough to admit that Zervas giving me so much attention feel like a bandage over those wounds. I walk over to him and put my hand on his bicep to steady myself because even with my heels, I have to stretch on the tips of my toes to kiss his cheek when he bends to me.

“You’re always flattering me,” I murmur.

“Котик, look in the mirror. It’s not flattery if it’s the truth.”

The intense look in his green eyes makes me uneasy. *He wants me*. He could have any woman around. I don’t doubt that at all and yet, he’s definitely sending out vibes that he wants me. *Vibes I’m doing my best to ignore*.

Котик is Greek and it’s basically calling someone baby in English. That should feel nice, instead it makes me think of Marco.

“You are crazy, Z,” I chastise, trying to defuse the situation and take it down a notch.

“You know you’re gorgeous, Helena.”

“Whatever you say,” I mutter, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks. I watch as his lips curve into a smirk and shake my head.

“Are we ready for the showing this weekend?” he asks, switching to work.

“I’m waiting for the final appraisals. Those should come today. I’ve also spoken with the caterer and approved it per your requests. The advertisements have stepped into overdrive starting today. We’ve also been getting a lot of inquiries from the gallery’s website and there have been numerous buyers calling in, too.”

“Tell me what I did before you fell in my lap?”

“I think you got along fine. You’ve had this place opened, what? Five months? I’ve never seen a gallery get the amount of traffic this place gets. I honestly think this event showing off local talent will push us over the edge. It’s a great way to get the local community interested and increase word of mouth.”

“Let’s hope you’re right. I’d hate to head back to Greece and tell my father I was a failure. Especially since the reason I came to America in the first place was to prove that I could stand on my own two feet and be a success.”

“I understand the need in that,” I laugh and God, I do. That’s further proof that Zervas and I have quite a bit in common. He understands the dynamic between my father and I because, from everything he tells me, he has the same issues with his. Too bad I didn’t mean him before my heart latched onto Marco.

“I know you do, angel. I better get to work. My first meeting is at ten this morning.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re meeting with the Levkin brothers.”

“Actually, just one. Ivan Levkin. Don’t get too close to him. Keep all interaction purely professional.”

“I’m sorry...” I blink. *Does he think I spend my time flirting with the patrons here?*

“That smile you have is powerful. It hypnotizes a man. Ivan Levkin is not the kind of man you want to treat that to. His brothers are decent men. He is not.”

“So, dim the smile. Got it,” I joke thinking he’s crazy.

“No, don’t smile at all,” he replies.

I look up at him, thinking he’ll be giving me a smile and laughing with me. *He’s not*. His face is totally serious, and it make me nervous to see the intensity his eyes.

“Okay,” I tell him, swallowing nervously.

“Good. Do you want to catch lunch with me after my meeting?” he asks.

“Melody and I usually eat at the diner across the street,” I respond, thinking a casual lunch with Zervas would *not* be a good idea. Besides, I don’t want Melody to think that is why I got this job. Which is crazy, because she hired me before I ever met Zervas.

“Melody called me this morning. She’s taking a leave of absence.”

“What?” I ask, shocked.

“She said she needed personal time because her mother had a heart attack.”

“Oh no. That’s horrible. I should call her and see if I can do anything,” I whisper, my heart hurting for her. “Can you give me her phone number?”

“Of course, but I’d wait for a while. She was traveling today, and life will be hectic for her for a bit.”

“Oh,” I breathe. “I didn’t think of that. You’re right of course.”

“So, lunch?”

“I have a lot of work here,” I hedge.

“You need to eat, too,” he counters.

I push my doubts away. I’m being silly. It’s just lunch. “Okay, sure. We can go over the event in more detail.”

“Good,” he says, giving me a smile that’s hot enough to make me extremely nervous.

I think I may be getting in over my head. Something about this entire encounter with Zervas has me worried. Maybe it’s a good thing Marco is coming in tonight.

Chapter 32

Helena

Crushing disappointment.

That's the only way to describe my reaction to the. Call I got from Marco five minutes ago. He can't be here. I should be used to things like this where Marco is involved but I'm not. He says he will be. Here, just not before next week. I assured him it was fine. I think he could tell from my voice it wasn't. He promised. He would make it up to me. I let. Him believe he could and then he hung up. That surety inside of me that Marco will eventually tire of me is getting stronger... *as is the pain in my heart.*

The gallery's main door opening grabs my attention and I put away my thoughts of Marco and the pain that he has caused me yet again. It's time to greet a customer and make a sale. That's my job—my new purpose. *Screw Marco.*

“Welcome to Evergreen Art. We...”

I trail off as I look at the man who just walked through the doors. I find my breath has frozen in my chest. He's tall, built, and solid. Saying that, I mean he's *solid*. He's the kind of man that sums up every daydream, fantasy, and erotic thought a woman would ever have in her lifetime. I'm no stranger to hot men. My best friend's husband Antonio is so hot that you would think he'd leave a trail of ashes wherever he walks. Zervas is more contained and pretty, but definitely just as hot. Then, there's Marco. He's his own brand of hot, the type that probably can never be duplicated or matched. He oozes testosterone through every pore in his body and it just gets more deadly as he gets older. His brand of hot should be

outlawed. The same could be said for his brothers, they all have it—although Marco is still unmatched.

That said, the guy that walked through the door just now is a whole different kind of hot. He's also nothing like I've seen in the gallery before. He's wearing a pair of worn jeans that look like they were made to cover his body. They're a faded denim which has turned white in the best of areas. He's got a black leather vest with assorted patches on it. There's a top one that has white embossed lettering that reads, *Titans of Hell*. Then, under that declares he's a president. He's got a gray thermal Henley on that is stretched over his body in a way that even with the vest hiding what is underneath, you can tell it's stretched over his massive frame as if it has been kissed by an angel. *Perfection*. He's got beautiful chestnut hair that gleams and shines, making me jealous. It's long and falls down past his shoulders. It's also styled in a way that looks like a seventies rock god and, *sweet Jesus*, the man works it. He is literal beauty, and it takes everything I have not to sigh when I look at him. Actually, I am pretty sure I do sigh, but at least I manage to do it under my breath, so I don't embarrass myself in a pile of drool at his motorcycle boots.

"We?" he questions, his voice gravelly as if he has a three pack a day habit, but the sound is so sexy that the word skitters across my skin and sends tingling sparks down my spine. *Oh God...*

"I'm sorry?"

His lips twitch. He's got a beard and mustache, but it's groomed in such a way that you can still see his full, tempting lips and I struggle not to get hypnotized by them. *Damn*. No one has accomplished it yet, but could he be the guy that could make me eventually say, "*Marco, who,*"?

Probably not, but a girl could dream.

"You were welcoming me to the gallery," he murmurs, his eyes twinkling.

"Oh, right. Welcome," I respond, and shit, my voice sound breathy.

His lip twitch turns into a full smile.

“Thanks,” he says, still watching me closely.

“Can I help you?” I ask, trying to remember that I’m working and not a blathering idiot.

“I’m thinking you definitely could.”

His words make my cheeks heat. “I...uh could?”

“Definitely.”

Oh, shit. His tone and gaze definitely clue even my addled brain into the fact that he’s flirting with me.

“Are you, uh...looking for art?”

“Not going to lie,” he murmurs, still looking at me in a way that makes me feel warm all over. “I was driving by outside and saw you through the window and decided to come in and say hi.”

Damn. That’s kind of hot. *Like really hot.* There’s every chance in the world that it’s just a line, but I find I don’t care if he does this kind of thing a hundred times a day. Right now, he’s doing it to me, and I like it a lot.

“Well,” I respond with a settling breath, “I kind of get paid to sell art, so unless you’re here to scope out the art and maybe purchase, I’m not sure I can keep talking.”

“Are you going to show me what you have?” he asks, and I mentally have to remind myself that he’s talking about art.

“What uh... kind of art do you like?”

“What kind of art?” he asks, as if the question is totally foreign to him.

“Yes. I mean, what kind of pictures and artwork do you have hanging in your home?”

He tilts his head as he looks at me. “Does the Harley Davidson flag that’s hanging above my bed count?”

“A Harley...” I stop a startled laugh bursts from my lips. “I don’t think so,” I add when I finally get myself under control.

“Then, I guess you could say I’m wide open.”

“We have a local artist that we’re highlighting this weekend that you might like.”

“You do?”

“She’s very talented,” I assure him, and I’m not lying.

Liberty is amazing. Her pictures are beautiful charcoal drawings that pull you in. You get lost in them. She paints too, and we’re blessed to have several of those on display, but charcoal is definitely her preferred medium.

“Then how about you show away, darlin’?” he drawls.

I shake my head. I’m starting to wonder if he’s flirting or just really smooth. Either way, it’s more than a little flattering, for sure.

“We have some of her art hanging in the gallery. There are more, but we’ve moved it to prepare for our event this weekend.”

“Your event?”

“We’re having a gallery showing of local artists this weekend. Liberty is the headliner.”

“Liberty?” he asks.

“She’s the artist that I think you will like,” I explain as I continue walking him toward the display that I want to show him.

“She’s got a cool as hell name,” he murmurs, and I smile.

“Yeah,” I laugh. “It’s much better than Helena.”

“I take it that’s your name?”

“Unfortunately,” I complain, making him laugh.

“Well, you may not like it, but I do.” He gives me a wink and damn if I don’t blush again.

“Okay, but it’s still not as cool as Liberty,” I joke.

“Maybe not, but I bet I wouldn’t stop my ride to come inside and check her out.”

“I think you’d be wrong,” I giggle.

Liberty is beautiful. I’m not dumb. I know I look good, and I can work it, but she is drop-dead gorgeous. She’s sweet and nice, but she’s so beautiful that she’s the kind of girl I’d be nervous to have Marco around—especially since I’m not sure how he truly feels about me.

“Where did you go?” the man asks.

“Huh?”

“Babe, you seemed a million miles away just now.”

“Oh, I was just thinking about Liberty,” I lie. “This is her work.”

I gesture my hand out toward the huge wall of art. Even though we’ve taken a lot of her work down, there are at least six large pieces and three small hanging on the soft white wall. The gallery lighting highlights each piece individually. Zervas spared no expense when it came to this place. He also used hardwoods and colors that are native to Arizona and the result is breathtaking. He kept the backdrop of the walls a creamy white so that it fades and makes the art jump out at you and grab your attention. The tiled floor is expensive Italian marble and continues to make the place a clean slate so that the art is the star. It also screams expensive so that buyers who are looking for art are instantly aware the pieces here are quality.

My customer is quiet as his eyes move over the drawings and the one lone painting that we haven’t moved yet. I know immediately that his attention is centered on the painting. I know this because it is my favorite piece in the entire gallery. It’s a beautiful depiction of a solitary biker. He’s pulled off to the side of the road at Dobbins Lookout and staring at the sun setting in the sky. I thought of this piece after first seeing EZ. The image is beautiful but something about the biker’s profile makes you think he’s lost and suddenly found his way. I’ve always hated that you can only see his back and side—his face completely hidden by the shadow of the night. I imagine the painting was meant to catch the sunset, but the biker always grabbed my interest first.

He reaches out moving his finger ever so gently against the glass, where the title of the painting is emblazoned. *Peace*.

“I thought you’d like this one.”

“I want it,” he says.

“I’m sorry, the artist is taking this one back. She only allowed us to have it on display. The others we will be in the show and are definitely for sale, however.”

“Call her and tell her to name her price.”

I blink taken by surprise at his vehemence. I knew he would like the picture. That’s why I wanted to show it to him, but I didn’t expect this response at all. “I’m sorry. Ms. Quinn is out of reach at the moment. She will be in town this weekend for the show. All of our artists will be. I can approach her with your offer then.”

“Liberty Quinn,” he murmurs and it’s very odd, but the way he says her name is almost like a satisfied purr.

“Does that mean you’re coming to the art showing Saturday?”

“What time?”

“It starts at seven,” I respond.

“You going to be there?”

“Of course, I’ve been planning it alongside my bosses.”

“And Liberty will be there?”

“She doesn’t really mingle with the general public. She’s a very private person, but I can talk to her.”

“So, she’ll be here.”

“You’re like a dog with a bone, aren’t you, Mr. ...” I trail off, realizing that I don’t know his name.

“You can just call me EZ,” he says.

“Easy.”

“Yep.”

I shake my head. That can't be your given name. Dare I ask why they call you Easy?"

He gives me slanted grin. "It's initials, darlin', E. Z. Although, for you, I can be easy if you want."

"I'm thinking you are a natural flirt, EZ," I laugh.

"Can't deny that," he says. "Some even say I have skill at it. You could go to dinner with me tonight and I'll dazzle you."

"Dazzle?" I laugh.

He gives me a slow nod.

"I'm afraid I'm tonight," I lie, half tempted to tell him yes. *What the heck does that say about me?*

"Helena? Do you have that folder I asked you to lay out for Mr. Levkin?"

I jerk as Zervas calls out my name, his voice sounding almost harsh. When I turn to face him, I see Ivan Levkin is standing beside him. He looks at me and it takes all I have not to shiver in revulsion. I get the distinct impression that the man is imagining me naked and it's not a feeling I like. Instinctively I move in closer to EZ. He must sense my nerves because his hand goes to the small of my back.

"Uh, yes. It's on my desk. I'll just go and get it." I turn my head to the side to look at EZ. "I'll be back in a—"

"I wouldn't have thought you were an art lover, EZ," Ivan interrupts, his voice cool.

"I'm a lover of all things beautiful. Doesn't matter if it's art or women. This place just happens to have both."

"I can see that," Ivan replies and I do shiver then and EZ's hand at my back strengthens, allowing me to feel his touch firmer against my back.

"Does she belong to you?" Ivan asks.

"What?" I squeak.

Before I can say anything else, EZ's hand moves to my hip and gives it a warning squeeze. The air around us feels thick. I

snap my mouth shut, however, because—for whatever reason—I can sense the situation is dangerous.

“Club protection,” EZ responds. I’m not sure what that means, and I don’t know if it’s good or bad. What I do know is I wish was anywhere else but here right now.

“Helena belongs to me,” Zervas says.

My body jerks. I know he’s been flirting but I haven’t said or done anything to make him think I wanted his attention. At least I don’t think I have.

What the hell is going on here?

I feel EZ’s hand tighten on my hip again. It’s almost painful. I glance at him, and I see surprise on his face. He can join the club. I’m completely astonished. I’m not sure how I ended up in the twilight zone, but I definitely feel like I’m there right now.

“I’m just going to go get that folder,” I murmur, because I don’t know what else to do. I want to talk to Zervas to make sure he hasn’t lost his mind. I want to ask EZ what he means about me being under *club* protection. I don’t do any of that. Nope. I’m not that brave. I try to make myself as small as possible and move around the men.

“I’ll follow you. I’m done here until you speak with the artist about that painting,” EZ says, and I don’t respond. I just walk away. He can follow or not—and I’d prefer not. I need a moment alone.

And maybe a stiff drink...

Chapter 33

Marco

Two Days Later

“Are you claiming this woman as yours?”

“What the fuck?” I growl.

I know the voice. It’s the man that Antonio put me in touch with. We’ve spoken a few times and I faxed him the information I had on Helena. I made it clear she was off limits. Yet, I also said that I was doing this for her protection.

Which, admittedly left room for him to wonder. That means, I’m mad at myself and his question pisses me off.

“She’s a hot piece,” EZ says, and I don’t stop the rumble that escapes.

“She’s not a *piece* and she’s off limits.”

“Oh, I got that message.”

“Good,” I mutter.

“It was delivered by her man.”

“Her *what?*” I bark.

“Your girl is hot, but she also a damn magnet for trouble. First, she’s hot as shit—”

“It would be better if you fail to mention this again. She’s a job to you, nothing else.”

“Last I checked, my dick still works and since I woke up with two women in my bed, I received that confirmation today.”

“Jesus,” I huff.

“That means I noticed your girl is shit hot. If the worst happens and I become dead below the waist and don’t have the will to swallow a bullet then, I might fail to notice her long legs that are made to wrap around a man. There’s even a chance I’d miss her sweet ass—”

“It’s like you have a fucking death wish,” I growl.

“But I sure as fuck wouldn’t miss the way her long hair begs a man to wrap it around his hand and introduce those cherry lips of hers to his—”

“Finish that sentence and I will fly down to Phoenix tonight and cut out your fucking tongue.”

“Seems to me you’re a bit touchy for a man who says he’s only having me watch her for her protection—not because said woman belongs to him.”

“Helena and who she is, is none of your business.”

“Well, someone needs to make her their business. Your girl has managed to attract the attention of Ivan Levkin and just saying man, that’s something no sane woman wants to do.”

“Fucking hell,” I exhale.

“That said, she wasn’t truly doing anything other than standing and talking to me when he saw her. Looking the way she does, though, she doesn’t need to do much else.”

“So, I need to have a word with the head of the fucking Russians there? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Well, you could do that,” he returns. “I don’t think I would, though. I personally think the less ole’ Ivan spends thinking of Helena the better. So, not sure having your words with him would be in her best interest. Ivan is an assclown of epic proportions. He doesn’t like boundaries and he lives to own things that other men want. Since I told him Helena had club protection, that was a red flag—but one he would have

honored because we're forced to work together on several projects while I clean up the shit here in Phoenix. I've also made it priority to show that my club is a force to be reckoned with. That's something that I'm doing a decent of enough job with because of the ties I have in Miami and proving this club has the balls and fire power to back up my threats. All that means, I was comfortable throwing out the play that Helena was club property. Then, Zervas had to fuck that up by claiming her as his woman."

"He did what?" I bark.

"He claimed her. I will add this is a fact that your girl didn't seem too thrilled with and was shocked to hear."

"Jesus, this is sounding like a clusterfuck."

"Pretty much. The girl needs rescued because like I said, she's a magnet for trouble and the trouble she's buying could go sour real quick. So, if you're not going to claim her, I'm thinking I might wade in."

"You will *not*."

"Someone needs to. Zervas Cirillo claiming her was bad news. Ivan will see that as a challenge to get her and when your girl turns him down, he will get creative. He does *not* take no for an answer."

"You monitor that shit closely. If a claim needs to be staked, I'll step in and do it in a way that Ivan won't be breathing when it's done."

"Now, ain't that some funny shit."

"What?" I ask, not knowing what he's talking about and still pissed off at the shitstorm that Helena is creating.

"You let her leave Athens and sell me bullshit about just wanting to make sure she has protection. You leave out the part where you explain she means something to you—"

"I don't—"

"And now, you're willing to kill the head of the Bratva just to keep her away from him. Ivan may not have many friends —"

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“He may not have many friends, but someone puts him on ice they will move forward to exact revenge and make an example as they do it.”

“They can try.” I sigh, feeling so fucking tired that I ache with it. “What’s your next move?” I ask.

“Some fancy art showing tomorrow night. I’m seeing to some personal shit there, so I’ll look after the girl who is yours but apparently not completely yours while I’m there. I think you may need to look at a broader picture here.”

“What’s that?”

“If Zervas Cirillo is in bed with Ivan, the shit he’s involved with is not good. Shit went down with the Russians a few years back that jammed up Kilian. That involved art forgery. With Ivan? My guess this time it’s not forgery, it’d be drugs. Having connections with a spineless shit who owns an art studio that imports worldwide would make an appealing situation for someone like Ivan. Wouldn’t fill me with warm fuzzies to have a girl, who is not my girl, but I obviously got the dick ache for, to be working in the middle of that.”

“Warm fuzzies? *Christ.*”

“You get me,” he laughs.

“Did you give Killian or Antonio these kinds of headaches?”

“No, but then they didn’t hesitate to claim what was theirs. If they had left their women’s asses hung out to dry, I’m sure I would have.”

“There’s shit you’re not aware of,” I mutter, not about to explain myself.

Mostly because my head is so fucked up, I’m not sure I can explain.

“Fair enough. Maybe you should ask yourself is all that shit going to matter if it gets Helena hurt or worse, *dead.*”

“Let me know what happens Saturday and I’ll figure it out then, I guess.”

“Okay, but you dick around too much and me and my boys are going to double my fee.”

“Don’t really give a fuck. You do a good job, double it. You just let me know what’s going on and keep Helena safe.”

“I will as much as I can what with her ass bare and hanging out in the wind.”

I roll my eyes, shake my head, and hang up without another word.

Then I close my eyes, while I plot ways to make Helena pay for giving me a headache.

Shit.

Chapter 34

Helena

The showing is a success. I look around the gallery with a sense of pride. Not to toot my own horn, but I know I'm the major reason it has gone so well. I've worked my ass off. Zervas appreciates it. He's told me often. I do have regrets, though. Mostly, I'm regretting having lunch with him the other day and laughing at his jokes. I can even admit I let myself be distracted by the way he made me feel beautiful. In my defense, it'd be hard for any woman to ignore when a guy as sexy as Zervas gave them attention.

I've put distance between us since he told Ivan Levkin that I belonged to him. That hasn't been hard to do because I've been swamped with work for this event. Still, I know I have to quit putting things off and talk to him. I don't know what's going on with Marco, but I do know we have things to discuss and figure out.

Once this event is over, I know I will have to talk to Zervas and address the elephant in the room. I normally face things head-on. Right now, I just can't deal. Until tonight is over, I shall be like an ostrich and keep my head buried in the sand. I have a job to do and I'm doing it awesome. That way, when I return to Greece, I will be welcomed back to the gallery there. If Marco doesn't prove he can be the man I need him to be—or tells me I'm not the woman he wants—then, perhaps I will take Melina up on her offer and see if Antonio can find me a position in a gallery in Miami.

The best part is that with my experience here, I'll be able to demand a reference. If Zervas proves he's a shitty person

and won't give me one, I will at least have vendors and artists that can vouch for me.

"There's the woman I've been looking for."

I turn to look at EZ, mostly ignoring the way his voice slides over me like whiskey—warm heat that vibrates as I drink it down. *Why can't Marco give me that kind of attention? Why can't he be here?*

"You're not fooling me. You're here looking for Liberty."

"Guilty, but if a man is any kind of a man he can handle two women at the same time," he purrs.

"Sorry, EZ. I'm the kind of woman that doesn't like to share and I can't be sure because I've never had that discussion with Liberty, but I'm pretty sure she doesn't either."

"I'll make note," he says, his eyes sparkling.

"That might be wise," I laugh.

"Is Liberty here?"

"She texted. I told her to alert me when she got here and then I'd meet her in the office. She promised my boss that she would be here in case bids were received—which they have been. Usually, we have to conduct business over the phone, but she hadn't met with Zervas yet, since he just took over the gallery. So, she agreed to do it this way."

"She got something wrong with her?"

"I'm sorry?" I ask, confused.

"The way it sounds, she doesn't want to show her face in public. In my experience, that means she's either wanted by the law or is afraid of making kids run away screaming and crying."

I blink. "Um... She's kind of beautiful," I whisper. Okay, it's true I haven't seen her in person. I've only spoken to her on the phone, but I've seen her file and there's a picture in there of her and she is definite breathtaking. I don't explain that to EZ.

"So, she's wanted by the law."

“I don’t think so. The gallery usually vets every artist pretty thoroughly,” I point out.

“Then, what is her story?”

“I’m not sure she has a story. Maybe she’s just a private person?”

“That would be a shame.”

“It would?” I ask, thinking this conversation is getting extremely confusing.

“You said she was beautiful. All that beauty needs to be shared if so.”

I smile. I don’t know why, but I think that’s kind of sweet. “Well, she’s going to text me when she gets in the office. I’ll talk to her then. For now, I better go mingle and make sure everything is running smoothly.

“I don’t think Ivan Levkin is here,” he replies out of the blue.

“No. I don’t think that man is really concerned with artwork—at least not by up-and-coming artists.”

“Good. I don’t like him being close to you.”

“I gathered that. One day we should probably discuss what club protection means,” I murmur.

“It would mean if Levkin got close to you in a way you didn’t like or even made you the tiniest bit of nervous, I’d make sure he backed away or face some repercussions that he would not like.”

“I don’t think I understand. Isn’t Ivan Levkin kind of a heavy roller in Phoenix? I don’t know him, but Zervas said he owns the main bank here in town.”

“He said that?” EZ asks and there’s no disguising his surprise.

“Yes, although I could have misunderstood him. He said Mr. Levkin was behind the financing of the gallery. He took a chance on Zervas, so he owes him.” I let out a sigh. “I’m afraid I’m a little clueless when it comes to running a business.

I guess he probably meant a finance company or something like that.”

“Something like that,” EZ murmurs.

He looks like he’s about to tell me something else, but one of tonight’s featured artists calls my name. I look back at him to tell him goodbye, but he just gives me a wink. He’s already walking away. I frown because he’s headed toward the exit. Has he given up his quest to buy Liberty’s painting? I shrug. I’ll ask her either way so that I will know when—or if—EZ comes back in.

For now, I need to do my job, not think about the EZ.

Chapter 35

Marco

“Hello?”

“How did your even go, sweetheart?”

“Marco,” she breathes. “You remembered.”

“Of course, I did. It was important to you.”

“It would have been better if you were by my side,” she confesses and fuck, that feels good. We’ve spoken more often, and I can tell some of her anger is gone. I’ve also called in markers and put plans into action that if she knew about them, would only piss her off again. Hopefully, I’ll be able to keep those from her.

“Speaking of which, I’m coming down there Tuesday. I’ll be staying a week. I’m planning on staying at your apartment.”

“You are... I... You could at least ask, Marco!”

I grin. “You’re not getting the chance to turn me down.”

“I wouldn’t have. I was starting to think you didn’t care if you saw me again after canceling the last time.”

“I had to cancel.”

“You always do, Marco.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t exactly have a nine to five job.”

“I think I know that more than anyone,” she mumbles.

“One of my father’s old allies thought he would take over our holdings here in Athens and was using someone we once

considered a friend to do it. I had to move in and move in quick.”

“Oh.”

“That the only response you have, Ena?”

“You’ve never really explained things before.”

“I’m trying to be better for you. Plus, this kind of involves you.”

“What do you mean?”

I lean back on the damn inflatable mattress that’s set up in the floor of the back room of my construction trailer and close my eyes. I’m wishing I was in Helena’s bed right now, her arms around me. I know things have to change. I can’t keep going like this and I can’t trust that my woman isn’t going to get into so much trouble she’ll be drowning in it. That’s the main reason I’m coming down. The other is that when I come back, she’s coming with me—even if I have to tie her ass up and carry her on the jet myself.

“The old enemy that tried to make moves to take over our stronghold here was Toban Cirillo.”

“Cirillo?” she squeaks.

“Zervas’ father.”

“Marco...”

“And the man who was trying to help him was—”

“My father.” She says those two words so quietly that I’m not sure I was meant to hear them. *But I did.*

I exhale and close my eyes. “Did you know what they were planning, Helena?” Even as I ask the question, I know she didn’t. Helena would never allow me or my brothers to be blindsided. She doesn’t have that in her. Besides, her father has cut her so many times, why would she feel loyalty towards the man? I ignore the small voice that says I’ve done the same. She will give me her loyalty. *She’ll give everything to me.*

“Of course not! Why would you ask me that? Okay, fine. I could see *why* you would ask me that. I mean, I’m here with

Zervas after putting off my return there—”

“You are not *with* Zervas,” I growl, not liking those words out of her mouth at all.

“I didn’t mean *with*, with for God’s sake!”

“I don’t like your name mentioned with his.”

“Trust me, I’m getting to where I don’t either. It’s hard for me to admit that I used to like the way he flirted with me.”

“I think you need to explain that.”

“It was harmless flirting. It was nice. I mean, it’s good for a girl to know she’s desirable—”

“I’m pretty sure that *I* made that clear to you, Ena.”

“You did, but you also have this knack to make me feel lacking,” she murmurs.

“Ena—”

“You left me alone for a long time, Marco.”

“Sweetheart—”

“I know you had your reasons, but I also know we’re slowly reverting backwards instead of moving forward.”

“You don’t think I know that, baby? You ran from me, remember?”

“I remember. I also know I’ve been here for a while and the man who didn’t want to allow me the opportunity to work here hasn’t been here once.”

“Another test I wasn’t aware of,” I mutter, finally getting it. “I’ve been trying to handle you softly. You didn’t exactly thank me for threatening your father.”

“I think you bought enough trouble doing that. Or, at least, I would assume that’s why my father talked to Zervas’ father.”

“You would assume correctly,” I admit with a sigh.

“How did you find out their plan?”

“That’s something for us to discuss face to face. There are things you need to know, and they are the type of things I

refuse to discuss over the phone.”

“Does that mean our conversation is tabled until Tuesday?”

“This particular one, yes. I have a different one we can enjoy, though.”

I’m rewarded with her light laugh. The sound wraps around me, and I enjoy it for a minute.

“Why am I afraid to ask what it is you want to discuss now, Marco?”

“What are you wearing?” I purr.

My bigger reward is her laugh, it’s deeper this time, fuller, and there’s a happiness to it that I’ve missed so fucking much that I could barely breathe.

“Maybe if you’re lucky you can convince me to continue this conversation Tuesday when you get here.”

“Baby,” I groan.

“I’ve missed that, honey.”

“I’ve missed you. I want you home, Ena.”

She lets out a quiet sigh and just before I start to lose the hope which has sprung to life, my woman rocks my world. “Marco—”

“Ena...”

“I wish I hadn’t left. Overhearing your brothers hurt, but it made me panic. I didn’t want to be someone you were with because you felt you needed to save me—or someone who trapped you.”

“I don’t know what has changed, but I’m fucking glad. There’s something you should know, sweetheart.”

“What’s that?” she says so softly it’s like a gentle puff of air with the words carried on it.

The sound makes my cock ache and I feel it in my balls. I have to have her back soon. I’ve killed myself so I can go there and still do what needed to be done for DeLuca, for the

family and to make things good for Helena. I'm not stupid, I know everything I do is ultimately for her. It's not for the reasons she thinks though. I don't have a need to be a hero—not when it comes to her. No, when it comes to my woman, she is saving me. She's the reason I didn't lose myself to the darkness.

“If anyone saves anyone in this relationship it's you. You are my sun and you keep me from getting lost in the darkness.”

“Marco—”

“I'm coming Tuesday. We'll talk about your work, but I need you to know, I want you back home. I'm done with being separated.”

“I'll see you, Tuesday, honey,” she whispers.

Long after we've said our goodbyes, I'm left lying on a piece of shit, blow-up mattress and wishing my woman was here with me. Yet, I'm smiling. I'm doing that because for the first time in way too fucking long, I feel hope.

She's coming home and I'm never letting her go again.



Helena

I take the last drop of my drink into my mouth and swallow it down. Then, I close my eyes, knowing that I've surrendered to Marco. I don't regret it. I did it because I wanted to. I can't even blame it on the fact that I'm more than slightly tipsy. What just happened wasn't because of the alcohol. It's because I'm tired. I never wanted to leave Marco in the first place.

Marco is not Melina's Antonio. He's not like any man I've ever known or probably will know. He has his own baggage and his own scars. I have to quit comparing him to others. I have to trust in him. I was confused as hell when I ran, but the longer I'm away from him the more positive I become.

Marco is where I belong. Things here are a mess. Zervas has me on edge. We barely talk now but sometimes when he looks at me, my skin crawls. It's drastic how quick that has changed, but I know it began that day in the gallery when he told Ivan Levkin that I was his property. My uneasiness at work has gotten so bad, I've already been thinking of returning to Greece. With Marco's call tonight, I know it's time to stop punishing us both.

I miss him.

Tuesday can't come soon enough.

Chapter 36

Helena

Two Days Later

“Are you ready?”

I look up as Zervas comes in the gallery. It’s weird. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look nervous, but he’s been different ever since the night of the event. I don’t understand why because that show was a major success. The gallery made a lot of money, and the artists were all happy. Most notably Liberty Quinn. Every single piece she had sold. She never agreed to sell EZ her painting, but since she shared with me that she’s been seeing him, I don’t think that matters now. I’m happy for her. I push my thoughts away and try to concentrate on Zervas, noting his energy is even more strained than it has been.

“Ready?”

“You agreed to a business luncheon with me, remember?”

I sigh, because I do remember, I was just hoping he would forget. I don’t want to have lunch with him. I want to avoid him as much as possible and then leave with Marco when he gets here tomorrow. This is what I want, but apparently it is not what I’m going to get.

“Zervas, I really do have a lot to do. I have company coming in tomorrow—”

“We need to. Go over work. It’s just work, Hel’.”

I frown. That’s something else that’s different. That last few days he’s shortened my name. *I hate it*. I know I can’t

really say no here, though. He's not exactly taking no for an answer, but it's more than that. I still work here and he's the boss. That means, I need to suck it up and get this over with.

"Let me grab my phone and purse," I mutter, turning to go to my desk. I open the bottom drawer and grab my stuff, switching my phone on and slipping it into my purse.

"Ready?" Zervas says again, looking put out because he had to wait on me.

"I am. I'm thinking Cilantro's Greek salad sounds good. I'm famished."

"We'll have to do that tomorrow. I'm taking you to a new place. You're going to love it."

"A new place?" I ask, not liking this at all. Suddenly I'm tasting fear and I don't like it. There's something very wrong going on here. I can't tell you why I feel that way, other than Zervas is freaking me out.

"Yep," he says, ushering me outside.

I'm trying to come up with a way to insist we go to Cilantro's—which we can do by *walking*. I don't get the chance, because apparently, I'm cursed with bad luck today. I know this because somehow, I completely missed the fact my boss pulled his car into a fire lane, parked illegally, and left his convertible, baby blue, Ashton Martin running.

Who does that?

More importantly, how did someone not hop in the car and steal it? I mean I've not been in Phoenix long, but there are police sirens going off often. An empty Ashton Martin should tempt even the lamest of car thieves, right? *Jesus*.

"Zervas—"

His hand hits the small of my back and becomes forceful as he directs me to the passenger side. He opens the door and I go inside. I don't really have a choice. I'm pretty sure if I had refused, Zervas would have thrown me in headfirst. We ride in silence until he navigates out of the downtown. When he still

doesn't speak and shows no sign of getting off the interstate—we've passed five exits so far—panic starts to take me over.

Make that six exits.

"Zervas, where are we going?" I ask, unable to take the silence any longer.

I don't know who this guy is, but he's not the man that I've gotten to know. He's not even bothering to flirt with me—something he has done since day one. He's also not trying to have a conversation with me at this point.

"I'm going to show you the new gallery in Vegas," he says, not sparing a glance my way.

His words also make my blood run cold. *Vegas?* I told him pointblank that I didn't want to see the new gallery, but he never mentioned that gallery was in another freaking state either. I

I also told him I was returning to Athens and my old job so there would be no reason to show me his new gallery. The fact that he practically kidnapped me to take me somewhere I'd basically already said no to, is scary. I'm also the kind of girl who, despite my father ignoring me, has led a sheltered life. What Zervas is doing makes me afraid. I don't handle fear well. The last time when I was afraid that Marco was only being so great to me because he felt responsible for me. That made me run away and land myself here—in extremely hot water.

With that in mind, I decided I needed to alert someone about where I was. I would prefer that be Marco, but I know, instinctively, I can't let Zervas know who I am reaching out to. With that in mind, I undo my seatbelt and reach into the backseat where my clutch and phone are.

"What are you doing?" Zervas asks. I turn to look at him and see that he's half watching the road and half watching me. The look on his face can only be described as tense.

"I had an appointment with Liberty this afternoon. I'm going to call her to let her know that I won't be available," I invent, then immediately go back to tag my stuff.

“Leave your phone back there. Liberty’s number is programmed in mine. Call her on that and tell her you’re fine.”

Tell her I’m fine? I frown, looking at Zervas. “Why would I tell her that? I am fine. Right?”

He looked up at me and for a second something slithers across his face that sets off warning bells inside my brain.

“Of course,” he says, but my brain is screaming one thing. *He’s lying!*

Shit. “I’ll just use my phone. I’ll text her we have an ongoing chat there.”

“Helena. Sit down and put your seatbelt back on and use my fucking phone.”

Wow. Okay. *Wow.* Zervas had never cursed at me since I met him. That panic inside of me started to build higher.

“Zervas—”

“Damn it, Helena. Do as you’re told.”

“I’m not a child. I’m an employee and that’s it. That does *not* give you the right to talk to me like that. Now, I will use my *fucking* phone and I will call *my* friend,” I huff, being pissed more than terrified at the moment.

I turn back around to grab my stuff. I need it close by because at this point, I’m going to bail out of this car, and I don’t even care if it’s moving. I’d rather take my chances than stay in this car with Zervas if things keep going like they are. I almost touch my purse when pain sears through me. I feel a hand yank on my hair so hard that my neck wrenches in an unnatural position. It’s so painful I feel a pop in my neck. I go still, but I don’t get a chance to try and figure anything out because he yanks me back into the seat.

“I’ve got a lot on me right now. You need to sit your ass in that seat. Call Liberty so she doesn’t get her fucking biker in on this shit. That means you convince them everything is good, and I swear to God, Helena you better do that.” Okay, apparently Zervas knows that EZ has started seeing Liberty.

How did he know this? I would ask, but that's the least of my worries.

I need to focus. "What's going on here, Zervas."

"There's shit going on and you need to do what I say. If you don't neither one of us will be breathing by the end of the day. Now fucking call Liberty!"

Immediately, my anger took a backseat. It did this because there was too much panic and bone curling fear were swamping me. I wanted to call Marco. I'm pretty sure if I did that on Zervas' phone it would be bad. So, I do the safest thing I could. I call Liberty. I pray she answers because I'm totally lying out of my ass. We don't have a scheduled meeting. She's already let me know that EZ doesn't want her art anywhere near the gallery—which was part of the reason I began wishing I was back in Athens to begin with. *Of course, the biggest reason was because I missed Marco so much it hurt.*

Pushing those thoughts away, I tighten my grip on the phone, realizing that I'm trembling so bad there's no way I can dial it. *Shit.* I take a deep breath, close my eyes and immediately Marco's face comes to mind. His eyes twinkling, his face gentle in the way it always was when he was feeding me dinner or just holding me. I didn't appreciate that enough. I didn't let it calm me the day I heard his brothers, and I didn't realize that when he tried to blackmail me into marriage, he was doing it all because he wanted me. Suddenly, I don't give a shit if he has a hero complex. I need a hero.

Right now, I just need his arms around me, his gruff voice telling me everything was going to be okay.

"Put it on speakerphone," Zervas growls.

Shit.

"Hello," Liberty answers.

"I'll put it on speaker, hold your horses it's just ringing right now. You have to give me time, Zervas."

"Watch your mouth, Helena," he warns coldly.

I swallow down the bile that threatens to rise as I click the phone over to speaker. Liberty being Liberty is quick to understand—*thank God*. She says hello again, but this time she does it in a way that makes it sound like the first time she has—at least I hope that’s what Zervas thinks.

Dickhead asshole of epic proportions. That’s what his name shall be from here on, I decide as I force myself to speak. “Hey, Lib, this is Helena.”

“Oh, hey girl. I didn’t recognize your number.”

“What? Oh yeah, I’m calling from Z’s phone. I’m afraid I have bad news.” I try to breathe when I get the chance—hoping to calm my nerves. *I don’t think it works*. I pray that Liberty has heard enough and plays along. So far, I think I should get an Emmy for my acting performance.

“What’s the bad news, girl?”

“Our meeting to pick the pieces you want in the gallery, I’m afraid I’m going to have to cancel.” I hold my breath. I’m lying out of my ass. Liberty will know that immediately. I’ve already given her the name of an art gallery in Tucson. I sent them pictures of her work and even the sales we’ve received from them. They’ve been calling her every other day to get her to bring them her work and I know she’s in the process of inking a deal with them. Zervas didn’t know any of this because he has no reason to. At first, I kept it quiet because I didn’t want him to know that EZ had basically told Liberty that Zervas was dirty. Hell, I wasn’t even sure I believed it, but I wanted to protect Liberty in case. *That shows how stupid I am*.

Now I know Zervas is definitely dirty and that he *is* an asshole. I was thinking he probably was before Liberty told me what EZ said. I just wish I had tried to protect myself along with Liberty. I also wish I had begged Marco to come get me sooner. Or hell, rescued myself and flew back to Athens and begged Marco to forgive me for running away. Either would have worked at this point, damn it.

“Oh darn. I was looking forward to that,” Liberty lies, letting me breathe easier. “Is something wrong?”

Zervas drops his hand down over my free one. His large fingers encircle my wrist and squeezes unto the point of pain. It's all I can do to keep my whimper—that wants to escape—contained.

“Nothing,” I deny, while internally screaming the opposite. “Z is just taking me to see a new gallery he’s hoping to open. He says it’s awesome. We could put that painting you’re working on there. It’d fit right in considering the location of this new gallery.”

God, I think I probably suck at all this 007 shit. Still, Liberty told me about the painting she was doing of a small wedding chapel in Vegas. I’m hoping like hell my lame-ass hint isn’t as lame as I think it is.

“Where is the new gallery?” she asks.

I start to answer, but suddenly Zervas twists my wrist in a way that I know he’s going to break it if I don’t shut this down.

“Oh shoot. I have to go, Lib. Z’s getting another call. I’ll phone you tomorrow and reschedule,” I add and click to end the call.

He immediately yanks the phone out of my hand, tossing it on the dash.

“Zervas—”

“We have about five hours to get to Vegas. You keep your mouth shut unless I say something to you. I have enough on my plate without adding your hysterics to the mix.”

I open my mouth to say something else, but snap it shut. I need to come up with a plan. A five-hour trip, I should be able to come up with something.

Maybe.

God, if I survive this, I’m never leaving Greece again.

Chapter 37

Marco

“I guess I don’t have to ask what kind of mood you’re in,” my brother, Sebastian, asks.

“Don’t start.”

“Christ, Marco, if she’s worrying you that much go and get her.”

“I plan—”

“Exactly! Go and get her!”

I look up to see my sister come in, DeLuca at her side.

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter under my breath. I shake my head and then, speaking louder this time, “Melina, you don’t need to start on me either.”

“Someone needs to. Do you know that creatin wants her to go out of town with him next weekend.”

“I know,” I mutter, and I do.

Helena told me during last night’s conversation. She also made it clear that Zervas is making her uncomfortable. This trip is supposedly to look at another gallery that he wants Helena to oversee. She told him that she would be returning back to Athens, but he seems intent on making her want to stay in the US. I know why. I doubt Helena truly understands. The damn woman has never seen her appeal. I’ve been breaking my back here and taking in meetings all hours of the night so I can get away. She’s not going to see the gallery. Helena told him she wouldn’t. She’s coming back to Athens. I plan on leaving to be in Arizona tomorrow evening and she’s

coming home with me. I leave first thing in the morning, and I would tell them all of this—*if they would let me get a word in.*

“Marco, you have to do something!” Melina cries.

“Helena is fine.”

“Bullshit. What the fuck is with you, Marco? You can’t convince me that you don’t care for Helena. I won’t believe it.”

“You’re starting to sound just like your husband,” I laugh. Hearing my sister curse is different, but feeling her fire is good. She’s completely healed from the shit we’ve lived through, and I know DeLuca is the reason. Yet another reason to be beholden to the asshole. Such is my lot in life I suppose. *There are worse things.*

In response, DeLuca—who is sitting on a sofa in my office—pulls my very pregnant sister onto his lap. “She’s magnificent,” he proclaims as he wraps his arms around her. I sigh yet again because I can’t begin to argue. Since falling in love with the man, she’s blossomed. She oozes happiness. It’s a welcomed sight—especially with the hell that we all lived through.

“Did you tell Helena she needed to come home?” I ask Melina point blank.

“Yes. She told me she was a grown woman and was handling things. Then, she told me I was overreacting.”

“Then maybe you should listen to her *and* me,” I respond.

“You need to man up, Marco, before you lose the best thing that could ever happen to you,” Melina warns.

“Man up?”

DeLuca and my brother Sebastian don’t bother to hide their amusement.

“You heard me,” Melina huffs. “I’m getting ready to be a mother and I refuse to have my child’s aunt tied to an ass-wipe.”

“An ass-wipe?” I repeat. I try to keep my voice stern, but even I can hear the amusement that bleeds through.

“An American word that I learned from Antonio,” she explains, huffing out an annoyed breath. “Zervas is an ass-wipe, right, honey?”

“Yeah, Lina. He’s definitely an ass-wipe,” DeLuca responds. She beams at her husband and he kisses her. I shake my head. Those two are so in love that it’s almost sickening.

“Don’t encourage her, DeLuca.”

He ignores me but I watch as he pulls back from my sister’s kiss and the look on his face is startling. That man is completely wrapped up in my sister.

I owe him a lot. He didn’t have to trust me to take over things here. Yet, he did. Sure, he has his men watching over me, but he’s slowly loosened those reins. I’ve been proving myself and he’s shown me that he appreciates my efforts—and those of my brothers. You would think at my age, I wouldn’t need that, but I have to fucking admit it feels good to prove myself. Somewhere deep inside, I have this worry that because I am my father’s son, I might destroy everything I touch. It’s reassuring to know that hasn’t been the case.

I look around my new office inside what will eventually be mine and Helena’s home. I just moved into the space last night. The building of our house and what my brothers have nicknamed the Stratakis and DeLuca compound is finally happening. There are only four rooms finished in mine and Helena’s house—our bedroom and bath, my office, and the front foyer. The others are slowly being added. Since my brothers are perfectly happy in their hotel, the construction crew is currently working on the massive kitchen and formal dining area. Once this house is finished, the crew will move on to complete the main entrance with the offices and the underground area for the men. There will also be a wing for my family that is secure in case we go into lockdown. The brothers can move there from the hotel when it is done, while their own homes are being completed. I’m pleased with the design and the way it’s coming together. Hell, DeLuca was so

impressed with this ideal, he's thinking of building something similar in his home—especially with a baby on the way.

It's a massive project here. The new build could probably house a third world country, and there's a lot to do. Still, it feels good to have an office that's not in a damn construction trailer.

My cellphone rings and I frown as I pick it up. "I have to take this," I mutter in DeLuca's direction. Since I work for him, taking calls while I'm supposed to be in a meeting with him, is probably rude. I don't have a choice, however. I need to answer this one. It's EZ and I've learned the hard way that when he calls, I better take it because when he's doing other shit, he will *not* answer his phone.

"Yeah?" I answer.

I don't bother with pleasantries. EZ is not the kind of guy to use them unless he's in the mood and since I've been in contact with him, he's not been. He's been a man on a mission. I asked him if there has been a change and he said he had some personal shit he needed to attend to, so I let it go. I got enough of my own bullshit. I don't need to hear his—even if he would tell it to me. Between my brothers, and DeLuca I got enough men that I may have to sort out—let alone the female side. I'm not looking to become buddies with this fucker. There are days I'm not even sure I like him.

Especially when he's talking about how hot Helena is.

"A situation has come up," he replies without preamble.

"Speak," I respond my voice tense.

"Zervas has gotten into some hot water. My connections inside the Levkin organization tells me he's into the Russians for a lot of dough."

"Fuck."

"When I say a lot, I'm talking if he doesn't make some sort of payment soon, he won't be breathing. I think the only reason he's lived this long is the fact that Ivan is using the gallery to move their product."

“You’re fucking kidding me,” I bark.

“I suspected it after a talk with your girl. She was under the impression Ivan was a banker. Your girl is shit-hot but definitely clueless when it comes to the business her boyfriend is in.”

“He’s not her boyfriend,” I snap. “She’s mine.” If I wasn’t so angry, I’d be laughing at the term boyfriend. *What the fuck? Are we back in high school?* Admittedly, Helena isn’t far away from those years. That’s just another reason that I allowed her to live a life there without me for as long as I have. That ends tomorrow. I’ll be bringing her home. God just the thoughts of having her in my bed tomorrow night is *everything*.

“That’s not what Libby tells me. She says they were going away together this weekend. In my world, that’s bullshit a man is a man, he takes his woman and claims her right then, but I think you get that in your girl’s world that means *other* shit.”

“He’s trying to get her to go look at another gallery he wants to expand to. She’s not going. Also, who in the fuck is Libby?”

“She’s my woman. This conversation is about yours. Word is this idiot has one week to get shit together and come up with some money. If not, Ivan will make moves and from the look of Zervas yesterday, I’m thinking even though he has shit for brains, he is aware his days of breathing are about to end.”

“I’m not seeing how that’s a bad thing.”

“Well, I’d be willing to agree with you there, but then, Libby isn’t in the position your woman is and that’s to say, your woman *is* poised to be caught in the crossfire.”

“Jesus.”

“I get you are seeing what I’m saying.”

I look over at Melina and sigh. “Do you know where Zervas is planning on taking Helena?” I ask her.

Melina is smart. Plus, I’m pretty sure she can hear the tension in my voice. She shifts so that her whole body is tense.

“He didn’t tell her,” she says quietly. “He wanted to surprise her.”

“Fuck,” I hiss. “Does your girl know where they’re going, EZ?”

“If I knew that information, I would have already given it to you.”

“It’s okay. That’s not until the weekend, and I will have a man in place tomorrow evening to bring Helena back Greece,” I explain, not bothering to explain that the man in question is me.

“Right, well now is time to give you bad news.”

“Haven’t you already done that?”

“Afraid not, man. I’m calling to tell you your girl is with that asshole now. They weren’t supposed to leave until the weekend. Libby said Helena called her about ten minutes ago on the asshole’s phone. She called to cancel some meeting she didn’t really have with Libby.”

“Come again,” I murmur, my blood running cold.

“Libby said the bastard made her put it on speaker phone, so she didn’t really get to ask a lot of questions. Helena told her they had already headed out—said Zervas wanted her to see the new gallery sooner because he had something that was taking him out of town this weekend.”

“What the fuck? Why did she call on his phone?”

“Libby didn’t ask because she already knew Helena couldn’t talk freely. My woman drove straight here to get me. She says your girl sounded scared but was trying to cover it up.”

“Fucking hell. Were they in a car or plane?”

“No idea. Libby has been texting her on both her phone and the asshole’s but hasn’t received a response.”

“Text me the number that Helena called Libby on. I’ll use it to locate them.”

“That will work as long as it’s battery hasn’t been removed and it’s turned off—like *really* off,” EZ responds.

“Does Helena know you’re seeing Libby?”

“Yeah. I think that’s why she called Libby, I’m sure of it. Helena was smart. There’s no way she could call you with him listening in.”

“Do you know anything else?”

“Libby said Helena spoke of a painting she’s been working on. It’s one that the two of them had discussed and she told Libby the painting would go great in the new gallery considering the gallery’s location.”

“What’s the painting of?”

“It’s the wedding chapel in Vegas where I married Libby.”

“Wait you’re married? You weren’t even seeing anyone weeks ago when you were drooling over my woman.”

“That’s the difference between you and me. I don’t fuck around. Stop worrying about me. You have bigger issues. I’m thinking if I was looking to get a woman alone because she’s shit-hot but also has an old man that’s loaded, and I’m desperate for money...”

“Update me if you hear anything else,” I growl and hang up.

“Marco?” Melina says, sliding off DeLuca’s lap. He’s watching me and I know he is aware shit has just gone sideways.

“Get on the phone. Keep trying to get Helena on the phone. Don’t stop. I need her to turn her phone on and keep it on so I can find her.”

Melina is already dialing the phone, looking extremely worried. She does it while berating me though. “Fine, but you need to tell me what the hell is going on and I want to know now. I’m also going to point out that none of this would have been an issue if you had married her and clued her into the fact that you actually do care about her.”

I ignore her while getting the text from EZ. I immediately text it to Sebastian. “Sebastian, talk to Elias. See if he can get a trace on Helena’s phone and the number, I just texted you. They may be headed to Vegas.” He nods, turning away without another word. DeLuca is still watching me.

“I’ll get in touch with Victorio. He was great at that shit. It’s why I kept him as a bodyguard for so long, even though he is much better doing what he is now,” he says.

“I’m heading to America. I was going tomorrow regardless. Seems Zervas trapped her and made his move earlier than we thought he would. That’s on me. I wasn’t aware he was in over his head with Levkin. I need men on the ground in Phoenix, DeLuca. I’ll also need to take some with me to Vegas. I’m flying there since that’s probably where they’re headed. If you can’t—”

“Stop that shit right there. This is a family. I’ll call Niko. He’ll get it arranged. They’ll meet you at the airstrip. If we get a bead on the phones, I’ll route whichever crew is headed the wrong way to the correct one, DeLuca orders.”

“Sounds good. I’m leaving to get my woman,” I respond, starting to walk away.

“Praise Jesus, you’ve come to your senses,” Melina mutters, her cell still pressed to her ear.

“Any answer from her?” I stop to ask.

“No. It keeps going to her voicemail. I’m going to try texting her. Sometimes that works better,” she responds, not looking up. “When we get her back safely, I’m going to turn my husband loose on you to punish you for the stress you’ve put me under, Marco. I’m pregnant! I’m not supposed to be getting upset.”

“Melina—”

“Don’t you Melina me. You need to knock some sense into him, Antonio.”

There’s humor in DeLuca’s face, despite the tension that is still evident there. “Yeah, *il mio tesoro*, I do.”

“Melina,” I growl again.

“Just go get her. You’re lucky I’m even talking to you right now,” she huffs. “Damn it, Helen! Pick up the phone right now, or I swear to you, when I get ahold of you, you won’t be able to sit for a freaking week,” she screams into her phone.

“Jesus Christ,” I snap. “DeLuca contain her. It doesn’t take a big imagination to know where she picked up that threat from.”

“It’s an effective threat,” Melina mutters.

“Yeah, well, if anyone spanks Helena’s ass, it will be me. It’s annoying enough that my sister kissed her before me.”

“Say what?” DeLuca responds—doing it in a way that tells me he wasn’t aware of that little morsel of information.

“Oh my God, Marco! You need to let that go!”

“You kissed Helena? Where the fuck was I?” DeLuca growls.

“You weren’t around,” she mutters. “I’m going to kill you, Marco.”

“This isn’t shit you keep from me, Lina. You like that kind of thing then we can make it happen.”

Milena’s whole body goes tight. My gaze rakes over DeLuca and I can tell he’s playing with my sister. I can also tell that she’s hasn’t clued into that yet. I’m sure of that by the way she’s looking at him, but it’s clearer when she speaks.

“If I were you, I’d hush now. You’re stressing me out and that’s not good for me or the baby. I was in school. I was a kid and we wanted to know what kissing was all about. It was an all-girls school. The options were limited. That said, if you so much as let another woman around any part of you, the only way you’d *ever* get back in my bed is if you cut that part off, buried it in the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, had the ground spoken over by a voodoo warrior princess who would help to make sure that portion of your body was doomed into hell for eternity.”

“You aren’t watching those freaky witch movies you like anymore, Lina,” DeLuca growls.

I leave them arguing. I’m unable to catch my breath. I need to track Helena down. I’m not sure I can breathe normally until I do.

Chapter 38

Helena

I stare out the passenger window as the scenery passes by. In a blur. There's a road sign ahead and as we pass it, I read it and frown. Sixty-three miles from Vegas. I'm quickly running out of time.

“Zervas—”

“We get there, you remain quiet. You agree with everything I say. I'm going to protect you, Helena, but you have to help me do that.”

“You need to tell me what's going on. I can't help if I'm blindsided with everything. You got to prepare me so we're a team here.”

“You're not fooling me. You've shot me down every single time I've tried to move our relationship from business. We're not a team,” he denies.

“Zervas, honey,” I plead, the words bitter on my tongue. I'm trying to keep my head here, but I'm wishing I had a gun, a knife or hell even a container of pepper spray would be good.

“We will be a team, though. Our fathers are already arranging it.”

“Our fathers?” I squeak, suddenly getting a very bad feeling about all of this. Which is *extremely* bad because I already knew the situation was dire. Now, I know it's worse.

“I know your relationship with that fucking pig, Marco Stratakis, is over. Your father wants to make sure he has

enough firepower to bring him down. Dad and I are willing to help. In the deal I get you.”

“You get... *Are you saying my father is trying to arrange a marriage between us?*” I screech.

“It’s already done. Once you and I are married. He’ll be depositing money into my account.

My heart begins beating harder and shame feels me. “You’re saying my father *sold* me.”

“Doesn’t matter I was into you before, Hel. It’s just that with the bank he’s sending my way, I can pay off what I owe Ivan. We’ll be free. The gallery here will be your wedding present. You’re good at this shit. Hell, we made a good profit this past month with just what you’re doing now. I get Ivan paid off we can go legit there—”

Go legit? This just keeps getting worse and worse. “How much do you owe Ivan Lekin?” I whisper.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s all taken care of now. I can make you happy, Helena. We’ll be good. We just need to work together to get through this. We’ll be solid.”

My stomach is churning with every syllable he utters.

“How much does my father think I’m worth?” I ask. Inside I just keep thinking that my father basically sold me to a cretin to get even with Marco.

Back when Melina was going through her shit, I remember thinking as bad and as inattentive as my father was, he still would never sell me into a marriage. I just never thought he would do that. I mean he arranged my marriage with Marco at my request, but it was an arrangement to join the families. No money exchanged hands. I knew especially in our social circles, arranged marriages were commonplace in Greece. I even knew some had to do with money, but that wasn’t needed on my father’s part and the fact he moved to make this agreement without to me, and with the only intention of punishing Marco broke something inside of me. I wasn’t sure what, because the pain was too intense to try and decipher in right in this moment. I just knew... it hurt *a lot*.

“Enough to get the Russians off my back and out of our lives. It’s going to be okay, Hel. You’ll see. We’ll be happy. This marriage with you is the first thing that I’ve done that my father approves of. He’s behind it completely and that will soothe over the anger he has with me. It’s going to be okay. You’ll see. You’re my good luck charm.”

“Good luck charm?” I respond with a bitter chuckle that is strangled by the emotion that is choking me and come out sounding painful.

“That’s exactly what you are. You’re my own lucky rabbit’s foot.”

I cringed. I couldn’t help it. “I don’t think that’s really that lucky, Zervas.”

“Of course, it is. Everyone knows that,” he mutters, while switching lanes.

I shake my head and stare out my window again. “Tell that to the rabbit who only has three feet,” I mutter.

Zervas starts laughing like some sort of hyena that is in the throes of enjoying year fifty of a five pack a day habit. God, how could I ever think he was a good guy? I’m such an idiot. I pushed all thoughts of what I just learned from my head.

“Where are we going to live?” I force myself to ask. If I’m going to get out of here, I need him to think that I’m on board. Then, I need to find a way to kill him. Okay, maybe I didn’t have that in me, but I still needed to find a way to incapacitate him.

And make it hurt.

“Phoenix. You like it there and we have the gallery. We could move to the suburbs though if you’d rather. I don’t really care.

“I want to go home.”

“Greece? You miss it?” he scoffs.

I was thinking home as in back to Marco, but I said nothing. I just grunted.

“Maybe that’s not a bad play. My old man isn’t getting any younger. It’d be good both of us work him so that when he finally kicks the bucket, we get everything he has.”

God.

“That sounds good,” I mumble, trying not to be physically ill. “Do you think you could stop. I need a restroom.”

“We’re almost there. You can use the restroom at the chapel.”

“I really have to go, Zervas. I’ll be quick. Besides, you don’t want me to hold it. That’s how girls get infections and that’s not a good way to start off a marriage.”

“Shit. You better not be playing me, Hel.”

“Scouts honor. I just need to pee.”

“Okay, babe.”

God, he really is a moron. I practically hold my breath as he pulls into a gas station. I would have preferred a restaurant, but I guess beggars cannot be choosers. The minute the car stops I go to unlatch my seatbelt.

“I won’t be a minute,” I mutter, trying to figure out how to get my purse and phone in the back.

“Stay there. I’ll come around and let you out and walk you in. It’s not that I don’t want to trust you, Hel. It’s just I’m not stupid. You aren’t going to get a chance to play me. Your father warned me that you could be high-strung, and you needed a firm hand. I’m going to be that babe and you’re going to love it.”

Grossy-gross-gross!

He gets out and while his back is to me and he’s climbing out, I reach up to the dash and grab his phone. I move so fast that I’m more than a little dizzy and I just barely manage to hide it in my bra before Zervas opens my door.

I put my hand in his and I’m kind of proud I was able to do so without cringing in revulsion. “Would you get me a soda

and something to snack? We never stopped for lunch and I'm kind of famished."

"I can do that," Zervas says. When we get inside the store, I look up at him to see him scanning the room for the bathroom sign. His hand goes against the small of back and he pushes me toward the back. There's a tiny hall just off the section that has cooler after cooler of drinks. His hand moves from my back to capture mine as he twists the knob of the bathroom and takes in a large room with three stalls. He pulls me in there and I wince because my wrist is still sore from where he hurt me earlier. Using his foot, he kicks open each stall door.

It's empty. I'll be outside getting your shit. No funny business, Hel," he warns.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I quip, hoping I sound flippant enough that he buys it.

"I bet you're going to be a tiger in bed, babe. Can't wait to find out," he says, slapping my ass. He pulls me into him and God, I think he's going to try and kiss me. I don't think I could handle that.

"Zervas," I whisper, hoping I sound breathless as I put my hand flat on his chest. "Can you tell me the plan? What comes next?"

His eyes narrow and I start to think he has a brain cell left in his head. I fight to keep from panicking. *Shit*. Okay, I can do this. I know I can. "I only ask because I want to see Marco pay for threatening my family and trying to blackmail me into marriage."

Marco is going to turn my ass red for that lie. Although, the idea is more appealing than scary. I just need to find a way to stay alive and unmarried so I can back to him.

"Dad told me why your old man wanted this deal. I wasn't sure you knew about it," he says, and his gaze is studying me.

I'm not that worried about it, because clearly a bucket of rocks is smarter. Still, I want to stay alive and unharmed. Marco will be in town tomorrow. I just need to concentrate on

that and figuring out how to get free from Zervas. I can do that. No, I *had* to do that.

“Of course, I knew. That’s why I came to Phoenix to get away from him.” That’s not truly a lie, I just don’t add that I was an idiot. Zervas grins. His hand moves from my ass—which gives me the major ick factor. It slowly goes to my hip and up my stomach. Panic fills me yet again because I can’t let him feel the underside of my bra. His phone is one of those foldable Androids and although the profile is slim, but it’s still not easily disguised in my bra. I hid it between my bra and the underside of my breast. That means one wrong touch and idiot here will discover it. I capture his hand and grin at him. “No touching the merchandise until I know this plan of yours is going to work and you’ll help me put Marco Stratakis in his place.”

God, please put him in his place—beside me, his arms around me. If what he feels for me is just a hero complex, I’m finding I’m completely okay with that now. Sure, it’s mostly because I am one at the moment, but I’ve been without him and what we had is something I’ve missed every day since I left.

“We’ll go to one of those all-night chapels in Vegas and fax the wedding certificate to your father. The money will be deposited in my bank, and I can meet with Ivan and pay the fucker off. Then, we’re home free, babe. Our fathers are already making moves to make sure Marcos pays for everything he’s done to my family and yours.”

Shit. That doesn’t sound good. I need to get rid of this asshole so I can call Marco and then find a way out of here. I look at Zervas to find he’s studying me again. I know I probably didn’t hide the emotion on my face right then. The ideal of someone hurting Marco is terrifying. Zervas tightens his hold on me, and I know I have to do something *quick*.

Desperate times call for desperate measures—or whatever that old saying is. I bring my hands up to put them on each side of his face and plant my lips on his. I fight down my revulsion—this is even harder than I thought it was going to be. Then, I try to think of anything sweet, kittens, puppies,

baby ducks—*anything*—as I slide my tongue along his. Unfortunately, as his tongue surges into my mouth, everything hits me as wrong. His breath, the rough feel of his tongue, the way his hands feel against my neck where he's moved them. Seriously, how can a man's hands feel so smooth. Has he never done anything in his life? Marco's hands are the perfect blend of soft and hard. His smell is like the rugged outdoors and his taste even better. When this asshole actually bites my tongue. *Who does that? How does anyone think that's appealing?* He bites it hard, too. It's like he's trying to draw blood. I move my hands to his chest and pull away.

“Damn, Hel. You can kiss,” he practically purrs.

“Hands off the merchandise until I'm sure you're going to help me get revenge and everything is in place,” I tell him, with what I hope is a sexy grin and not revulsion.

“Now, I got to go take care of business so we can get back on the road.”

“Sounds good. I'm definitely looking forward to the honeymoon part of the plan,” he says. “So, get a move on.”

I nod, the fake smile still plastered on my face. “You go get our snacks. We need to keep our energy up for the honeymoon,” I respond, praying he'll do that because if he stays in here with me, I'll never get the chance to call Marco.”

“Don't worry, babe. I can go all night. I'll make sure my girl is fed, though,” he turns and exits the room.

I quickly look around the room, doing this while digging the phone out of my bra. My hands are trembling as I look for a way to get out of here. There's no windows. In the movies they use air vents all the time. Let me tell you right now, real life is not like the movies. You couldn't fit a dog in the small air vent in the ceiling.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

It takes me two tries to call Marco. It seems like forever before it actually connects and the whole time all I can think is this call would be quicker if Marco and I were in the same area

code. *God, I need to get back to Greece.* If I was there, I'd be by Marco's side. I wouldn't even need a phone.

"If you hurt my woman I will gut you—"

Woah. Marco apparently knows the number calling him and he knows Zervas has kidnapped me. I don't know how he knows but right now, I don't care.

"Honey," I whisper, and I try to hold it together, but just hearing his voice has the tears burning my eyes and sliding down my face.

"Ena," he groans. "Are you okay, baby? Where are you?"

"I'm not okay," I tell him falling to the floor. I'm in a bathroom about an hour outside of Vegas. Zervas is outside waiting. I was hoping to escape but there's no windows and there's no freaking air vents. The movies have it all wrong. There's no way to leave the room that he won't see me," I get the words out, but the words are broken by sniffing and hiccups and just altogether fear.

"It's going to be okay, Ena. I will be there. I just need you to keep your head and do as I tell you. Can you do that for me, baby?"

"I can try, Marco. I'm trying. It's just... God, he's so gross and he kissed me, and he actually thinks he's going to marry me. My father sold me to him because his father is going to help get revenge on you. You have to stop them. I'm so sorry."

"Stop worrying about that. We need to concentrate on you right now. I'll deal with the rest later," he says, sounding confident as ever.

"My father sold me," I tell him as fresh tears fall. All this time, I knew he was bad, but I felt so sorry for Melina. I thought I was at least lucky enough that my father wouldn't sell me to someone evil just to make money. Mine is worse, Marco. He's giving Zervas money to marry me just so he can get his revenge. He's *paying* him."

"Ena. Listen to my voice. Do you know where he's taking you in Vegas?"

He's taking me to a wedding chapel. Probably the first one we see. He's supposed to fax proof of the marriage so my father will pay him. He's using the money to pay off Ivan Levkin."

"Fuck," he hisses.

"I'm trying to pretend to go along with it, but I'm not sure how much longer I can do that, Marco. I let him kiss me and he bit my tongue. He bit it. It was all I could do not to vomit. I don't want to go back out there. I don't want to be near him."

I'm losing it. My body is trembling, and I can't seem to breathe for the tears burning my eyes and my nose. Marco sounds so close, but he's not and right now, I really need him.

"Baby, I need you to listen to me. I know it's hard, but I need my woman to stand up, dry her tears and help me here. Can you do that?"

"I want to be home in our bed. I don't care what your reasons are for wanting me there, I just want it all back. I'm so sorry, Marco."

"Ena, stop. Daddy is giving you orders here."

That makes my entire body freeze as if I come out of a stupor. "Marco," I hiss. "I don't think now is the time for our bedroom games."

"It's the perfect time. Now are you listening to me?" he growls and his voice makes my entire body vibrate.

"Yes."

"Who do you belong to, Ena?"

"You."

"Who do you belong to, Ena?" he repeats, his voice firmer.

"You, Daddy," I whisper, not quite believing he really wants to get into this right now. Okay, so it is making me calmer, but right now is not the time for him to get all kinky and hot on me.

"That's my girl. Now do you think I'm going to let anyone hurt my baby?"

“But you’re—”

“Do you think your Daddy is going to let anyone take you away from me?” he asks, his voice so dark that it vibrates through me and centers between my legs.

“No.”

“No one is taking you from me, Ena. Now, I’m going to make sure you’re safe, but I need you to help me until I have things in place.”

“O,” I take a shaky breath and try again. “Okay.” I use the back of my hand to wipe my eyes.

“I need you to keep your phone or his on. That way I can track you.”

“I can try,” I respond, praying that I can.

“Good, baby. I have men already headed to Vegas and I’ll be there myself soon. I just need you hold on for me. It’s going to be okay, Ena. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I just need you to do whatever you can to keep yourself safe for me until my men and I’m there.”

“Okay, sweetheart.”

“That’s my good girl. I’ll be with you soon, Ena.”

“Okay,” I repeat again because that seems all I keep saying. I think maybe if I say it enough, I’ll believe that everything will be okay. “Marco?”

“Yeah, sweetheart,” he responds, his voice gentle and that makes my eyes burn again.

“If something happens—”

“Nothing is going to happen, Ena,” he growls.

“If it does, I want you to know that I love you. You’re the best part of my entire life, Marco—the very best.”

“Stop that shit, Ena. This is not goodbye. I will be there.”

“I know,” I answer, and I do know. He will be there. He won’t stop until he gets to me. I also know that he’s in Greece and that’s not exactly a short flight. He’ll be too late, and I

won't marry Zervas. I can't do that. Even if I went through with that, I'd never let him touch me. I'd rather die than have his hands on my body, violating me. I'd fight to the death to keep it from happening, but I'm not joking. I'd prefer death than let him rape me and ruin the memories I have of Marco.

“Ena, you have to know that—”

“You stupid bitch!”

I cry out because Zervas is there. I was so engrossed in my conversation with Marco—letting my voice calm me—that I didn't hear him come in. That was a mistake because now his hand is wrapped in my hair, and he's yanked my head back so painfully that I leave the phone on the counter and reach up to try and pulls his hands from my hair. That was yet another mistake because he pulls me off the floor so that I'm dangling just from that hold and now I have nothing to hold onto. The pain is so intense that I can't keep my tears at bay any longer.

“Let me go,” I cry. I try to kick out but that just makes the pain that much more intense.

“You stupid bitch! You thought you could play me? You're such a stupid cunt. I expected more from you, Hel.”

He lets my feet hit the ground, dragging me by my hair as he goes to where I left the phone lying. He crouches down to pick it up. “Who the fuck is this?” he snaps.

Zervas must have switched it over to speakerphone. I was afraid to because I didn't want him to hear me. Now, though I hear Marco's voice loud and clear.

“You let her go right now and I may leave you breathing. You touch her and I'll make you pay in ways you couldn't imagine,” he threatens, his voice cold and deadly.

“Marco Stratakis,” Zervas spits out. “You aren't going to do anything,” he laughs.

“I will. You touch her and you sign your death warrant.”

This just seems to make Zervas laugh harder.

“Marco,” I wheeze. “I love you.” It's probably not smart to say that in front of Zervas, but at this point, I don't really

care. It may be my last chance to tell him how I feel, and I need to tell him.

“Remember what I told you, Ena. Be strong for me,” Marco says, but he messed up because beneath the anger in his voice, I hear the pain. I close my eyes.

“I’ll be okay, Marco. I’ll be okay,” I lie.

Zervas laughs again and this time it sounds even more maniacal. “Yeah, she’ll be alright, Marco. I’ll take *real* good care of her. I’ll treat her so good that I’ll have her begging.”

“You touch her, and I’ll drain the blood from your body drop by drop while you’re still fucking breathing!”

“Oh, I’m going to touch her. I don’t care that I’m going to have Stratakis leftovers. When I’m done with her you won’t have the stomach to touch her. I’ll fuck every hole I can find on her body—”

“You motherfucker—”

“You’re not going to touch me!” I scream, wrenching my head free, ignoring the pain as my hair rips free from my scalp.

My body slumps to the cold tiled floor. I ignore it. I lunge at Zervas, holding onto one of his legs, knowing that’s the best way to try and prevent him from kicking me. “You’re not touching me!” I scream again.

“Ena!” Marco yells, but I can’t respond.

I try to pull back and punch him in the crotch, but I know it’s a weak hit and it won’t do anything. He’s grabbing my hair again, but I don’t think about that either. I sink my teeth into his leg and use my fingernails to claw at him wherever I can reach him. He growls out so I know I’m drawing blood. I just keep at it. I know it’s not going to do much. I know my situation is helpless, but I don’t care. The most revolting thing is that I can tell what we’re doing is arousing him. My hand brushes against the evidence of that and as much as I don’t want to, I can only think of one thing that might hurt him enough that I can get free. Maybe there will be people out in the gas station who will help me. With that thought, I move to

bite down on the outline of his cock. I bite down hard and try to tear. He pulls on my hair again and I fight him with everything in me. I move down seeking and finding the area that's softer—more vulnerable with my hand and then I bite down there and pull with all my might.

“You fucking cunt!” he screams.

His hand pushes against my head, but I refuse to let go. I keep biting, releasing quickly, only to slam my teeth back in and shake my head like a rabid dog. He yells out in pain. I know a moment of victory. Knowing I may never get another chance, I grind my teeth one final time. The pants feel wet, and I can't tell if it's from my mouth or if he's bleeding. I hope like hell it is the latter. I release him and quickly push back as he bends down to hold his junk—which I hope has been ruined for life.

I scramble up on all fours, barely standing as adrenaline and panic crash through me. I run for the door, screaming. “Help me! Someone, help me! He's trying to kill me! The words are torn from my throat as I wrench the door open. “Help me!” I scream again. I see everyone staring at me in shock. “Help me!” I yell again. I made a mistake though. I stood still to watch them. *Why didn't I keep moving?*

“You, stupid, stupid bitch!” Zervas growls! And then his fist is coming at me. I try to turn to shrink away from it, but that, too, was probably a mistake. It exposes me to more damage because his fist slams into my temple. Pain sears through my body and I instantly go woozy. I try to fight it, but I already feel my body going limp. I'm going under and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

“Marco,” I breathe and then thankfully, darkness swallows me.

I welcome it.

Chapter 39

Marco

I thought I had felt pain and terror before. I'd been dealt that shit from a young age and the memories haunted me, formed who I became. Still, listening to Helena scream out in fear and pain destroys me. There's not a fucking thing I can do either. I'm stuck in a fucking plane, way too far from Vegas. I can't reach her, touch her... *I can't do a damn thing.*

I'm stuck doing nothing but listening. I know DeLuca has already dispatched the law there to that gas station. They're using the cell connection to keep it going. I've never believed in law enforcement before. It's usually just as crooked as the rest of the world—maybe worse in some areas. Now, I'm praying they get there. At this point, I'm praying anyone can save my woman because I fucking can't get to her!

The reality of that burns.

I hear the sounds of them struggling. I know my woman is defenseless and scared out of her fucking mind.

“Marco, man—”

I hold up my hand up to stop Sebastian from speaking. I turn the mic off on my cell. “Call Levkin. Tell him I want Zervas Cirillo and my woman, alive. They're an hour outside of Vegas. They intercept them and when I get there, I'll pay them double what they're owed. Bonus for them, when I'm done Cirillo won't be breathing so their headache disappears.”

“Man, you know the Levkins. That won't be enough.”

“Tell them negotiations will be available but only if my woman is safe and Zervas is delivered on a platter to me.”

“Marco—”

“Do it.”

He frowns but nods.

I turn the Mic back on. I need Helena to be able to hear me. Before I can speak, I hear Zervas yell. “You fucking cunt!”

I hear more scrambling.

“Ena—”

I stop because I hear my woman screaming for help. My woman begging for someone to save her.

My. Woman. Begging.

“Fuck!” I scream. I may have thought I knew all about pain and fear before, but I didn’t have a fucking clue. My body is trembling as my heart is being torn to shreds. Helena is everything to me. If she hadn’t come into my life, I would have died a soulless corpse years ago.

“You, stupid, stupid bitch!” Zervas rages.

I hear the sickening sound of flesh on flesh, and I know. *I know!* I don’t have to see it, but I know he’s hit her. He fucking hurt her. I know this because Helena’s screams go quiet. I hear her tortured whisper of my name. “Marco...”

“You better go into hiding right now motherfucker, because when I find you—”

“Sorry, man. I can’t talk now. Your pussy just took a sweet right hook and is currently resting in my arms. I have to decide if I’m going to fuck her while she’s out or wait until she wakes up. You should know, though, by the time I’m done I’m going to fuck every hole she has. Then, depending on if she is worth the effort, I may strip her skin off piece by piece and fuck her bones—just because I can.”

“You motherfucker. You are a dead man, do you hear me, Zervas? You’re a fucking dead man!”

He clicks his phone off before I finish screaming at him. I stand up, looking around the small office on the jet and

scream. I yank the lamp off the desk and throw it across the small room. It shatters into pieces, but that doesn't make me feel better at all. I grab each side of the damn desk and pull on it, ripping the secured metal receptacles that hold the legs of the desk and are anchored to the floor free, and toss the desk over on its side.

“Marco, you need to get a grip. There are things to do. You need to hold it together at least until we get your woman back.”

I look over at Elias and I know I look completely lost because I am. “She was begging for her life to fucking strangers, Eli.”

“Brother—”

“She was begging!” I growl, my hand shaking.

“Lock it down, Marco.”

“He hit her. You know how delicate my woman is. He took his fucking fist to her, Eli and knocked her unconscious.”

“You have to get control until we get her. Then you can scream, rage, tear him apart piece by piece. You just need to lock it down until we get her.”

“This is my fault, Eli.”

“Marco—”

“I wanted her to have her house. I wanted to give her time to spread her wings, find her footing in a field she loved to work in. I wanted her to experience that before I brought her back here and tied her to me. Tied her to a man who wasn't fit to even breathe the same fucking air as her.”

“Bullshit. You're the best man I know, Marco. If it wasn't for you, we'd have all been dead by now and you know it. You held this family together.”

“I'm not a man. I'm a monster. His blood boils inside of me constantly. It marks everything I touch. She only ran to Arizona because I didn't give her a choice. I was forcing her into marrying me. I—”

“Jesus Christ, Marco. She had one chance to call for help. One chance and she didn’t call the local cops. She didn’t call Melina or anyone else. She called you. *You* brother. She loves you and if you want to blame anyone for this shit, blame me and Gio. If it wasn’t for the two of us, she would have never left. She was happy. She loves you.”

“She told me,” I whisper. “She told me and fuck me, Eli, I don’t think I said it back to her. I didn’t tell her that she’s my entire fucking world.”

“Marco—”

“I didn’t tell her.”

“Man, we have EZ and his crew already in Vegas. Sebastian is scheduling a phone conference with the Ivan Levkin and his brothers. Antonio said Niko, Victorio and Lodi and a crew of 15 men are due to touch down there in the next hour. Antonio has even put a call into Levkin himself. We *will* get her back and you can tell her how you feel then.”

I nod and try to clear my thoughts, but in my head, all I can hear is my woman begging someone to help her.

And no one did.

Chapter 40

Helena

For a minute, everything is a blank. My head hurts and it's hard to move. Slowly memories begin trickling back in. Everything moves through my mind from talking to Marco, to Zervas discovering what I was doing, begging someone to help me, and finally Zervas hitting me. The sun has set, so the car is dark except for the glow of the dash lights up front. It hurts to move, but I don't want to do that anyway. I'm in the backseat lying across it. I'd rather Zervas think I'm still knocked out. I move my mouth a little and jaw to tentatively try to figure out the damage. Pain radiates around my cheek and jaw and further up to my eye. The skin feels tight and hot. I know there's swelling. I try to blot out what's going to happen to me. I can't think about it. If I do, I'll go insane. My head is lying on my purse. My phone is under it. I remember Marco asked me to make sure I kept it turned on so they could track me. I reach under my purse very carefully, trying to not make any movements that catch the eye of Zervas—just in case he's watching me in the rearview mirror. I wrap my hand around my phone and think about my options. It is turned off because I had it in my drawer at work. I've always made a habit of not using my phone at work. It was a new job, and I didn't want to appear unprofessional. Now, if I wasn't terrified, I would laugh at that. I turn my phone off and by memory I move my fingers to the side of the phone and pray I have the right button in my hand when I pull it toward me to put the phone on silent. The only people that call me should know what shape I'm in. Thankfully I already have my texts on do not disturb. I did that when I first got here and never changed it back. I was mad at Marco, and I just didn't want to

deal with any of it. Then after we started talking more often, I soon discovered Marco wasn't a texting kind of guy and really Melina doesn't like texts that much either. She just does it for me. So, I just left it.

I flip my phone in my hand and slide it carefully into the pocket of the blazer I'm wearing. I have no idea if it will help, but Marco asked me to do it and I'm going to try. Fear begins to claw at me again when I notice the vehicle has slowed down and is turning into somewhere—I'm afraid to look where exactly. Instead, I begin silently praying and do my best not to move and keep my breathing steady so that Zervas will think I'm still unconscious. When he opens the door it's all I can do not to move. It gets almost impossible when I feel his hand on my cheek, I try to blank my mind and pretend I'm somewhere else.

“Damn I really knocked you out, Didn't I, Hel? That's good. You'll think twice before you piss me off again.” He leans down because now I can feel his breath against my ear. Next, his voice drops down into a whisper. “I think you're just pretending, but I'm going to go with it because I don't need some nosy bitch in the hotel calling the law. So, you sit tight. Just know I parked you right in front of the door and I can see every move you make. You so much as try and open this door? I'll let you get two steps away and then I'll shoot you with this gun I'm carrying. I won't even think twice. Without your money, I'm a dead man, so I have no fucks to give. You do what you're told and *maybe* when this is over, I'll grant you one last wish and that wish will be to leave the people you care about breathing. I have a list. You don't get around many people, but I know that bitch Liberty is someone you like, as is Melina. If you think I can't get to them, you're wrong. Levkin already has people in DeLuca's organization. I can get to her anytime I want. That's how I'm going to get to Stratakis. So, the choice is yours. Now be a good little dog and continue to play dead.”

With that he slams the door. I ignore the tears stinging my eyes and carefully glance out the window. The parking lot is well lit, and it's not pitch black outside yet, either. I can see him fairly well and unfortunately, he wasn't lying. I am parked

right outside the double glass doors of the hotel. I read the name on the sign above—*The Strand*. We're not on the strip and this place is obviously a small hotel. I pull my phone out and quickly hit redial, knowing Marco was the last person I talked to before I went to work this morning. Now, I'm just praying he can still get my calls.

"Ena. Fuck, please tell me this is you."

"It's me," I whisper hoarsely, tears immediately sliding down my cheeks.

"We're tracking your phone baby. You need to hide it keep it with you somehow if you can."

"I'm at a hotel, he's inside checking us in. It's not on the strip, but I do think we're in Vegas."

"What's the name of the hotel, baby?"

"The Strand."

"Okay sweetheart. I'm getting closer. I'll be there soon, but I'm sending EZ and his men to you now. You're going to be okay."

"EZ? You know EZ?"

"I do. I'm the reason he sought you out," he says. I digest that information. I guess it should have hit me sooner that he did. I should have realized that's how he knew I'd been kidnapped. "Are you okay?" Marco asks.

"Scared, but I'm okay," I whisper.

"Good. You're doing so good, baby. I promise you that this shit is almost over. I have men coming to join EZ and his crew. That motherfucker won't know what is about to hit him and he won't touch you. I just need you to try and go along with him for now so that he gives you a little freedom. Can you do that for me?"

"I can try."

"That's my girl. I swear to God when this is over, I'm taking you to an island where we're the only two people there and we're not leaving."

“As long as I can feel your arms around me again, I don’t care,” I admit. “Are you sure EZ can get here soon?”

I hear him ask someone how far EZ is from here, but he must have put his hand over the receiver because his question is muffled. “Ena,” he says after turning back to our conversation, “he’s about twenty minutes away. This is almost over. You keep yourself safe, please. I need you safe, Princess.”

“I’ll try,” I promise.

“Leave our call connected but hide your phone. Okay, sweetheart?”

“I’ll try.”

“Good girl. Now hide the phone while he’s still gone. I’ll be listening. I’m with you and when I get there, Ena, I’m never letting you leave me again.”

I close my eyes at the sweetness of his promise. “Okay.”

“It’s almost over, sweetheart.”

Almost is not really good when you’re dealing with a nutcase like Zervas. I don’t tell Marco that—mostly because I figure he already knows. He’s trying to give me hope. I’m doing the best I can to hold onto it, but I have to admit, I’m kind of failing at that. “I’m going to hide the phone now,” I tell him. “I love you, Marco.”

“Fuck I don’t want the first time that I tell you I love you to be like this,” he growls.

I moisten my lips. “Do you... uh *love* me?”

“Princess, you’re the breath in my lungs.”

“Oh...” I whisper, those words burning through me.

“You’re the blood running through my fucking veins, Ena.”

“You love me.” The words come out a mix between a sob and a whimper.

“Endlessly. Now, hide the phone, Princess. Keep yourself safe until my men get there and I can be with you.”

“Okay,” I whisper, thinking that apparently is my new favorite word, but for the life of me, I can’t force myself to say anything else. “I’ll get through this,” I add.

“You will. You absolutely will,” I hear Marco say as I put the phone back in my pocket.

I don’t tell him that I will if only to see him one more time. I need to look at him as he’s telling me he loves me. I need the chance to grow old with him...

God, please give me that chance.



Marco

I click the mic off on my cell and look over at my brothers. “Give me a fucking phone,” I growl. All three of them are handing me one, but I just grab the first and then I dial EZ’s fucking number by memory.

“Yo.”

“The Strand. Hotel near the strip, but off the beaten path,” I snap.

“We’re on it. Your brother already gave me the info. We’ve met with the men you sent, too. Looks like a fucking convoy going to war what with our bikes and the SUV’s on our tail. We got this brother.”

“Protect, Helena. Make sure she’s safe, EZ. That’s all that matters.”

“Man, I happen to like your woman. More importantly, *my woman*, likes yours. I got this and when I tell you that, I’m saying you have my word I will bring her to you alive and breathing.”

“If he hears your bikes—”

“This is not my first rodeo, *ese*.”

“I want updates.”

“Respect, brother, but you aren’t going to get those unless you let me go.”

“Later,” I snap and click the phone to hang up.

“It’s going to be okay, Marco.”

“You don’t know that, Gio.”

“You’re right,” he says with a sigh. “I don’t.”

“So—”

“But I do know that woman has waited a fucking long time for you to love her. There’s no way after hearing you say all of that, that she will go down without a fight. It will be okay.”

I grunt.

Chapter 41

Helena

“Lovely place you chose,” I whisper, looking around at the fake wood paneling and shag carpeting. The showstopper, however, is the mirrored tiles in front of the bed. Okay, it might be a tie with the bed itself—which is heart shaped with a fluffy pink headboard that is also in the shape of a heart. If this thing has a vibration attachment or goes around in a circle, I’m going to scream. I’m going to try very hard not to die tonight, but if I do, I don’t want it to be on a reject seventies bed that probably has enough bedbugs to start their own colony on a planet in another galaxy. Perhaps they’ve even developed superpowers by surviving enough bodily fluids from the bed that they are now invincible and will come back to Earth to destroy our planet because it’s clear from their point of view that the inhabitants are nothing but pure stupidity.

“If you hadn’t been a bitch, we could have been living it up at that Mirage. So blame yourself, Hel.”

“Whatever,” I murmur, still staring at the bed.

“What are you thinking when you look like that? Deciding you want to give me a go after all?”

“Actually, I’m thinking how you will be single-handedly responsible for the entire nihilation of the planet Earth.”

“Huh?” he asks, understandably confused.

“What’s next in your grand schemes, Zervas?” I ask, not about to explain and trying to figure out how to stay alive and

away from any part of Zervas while I wait for my rescuers to show up.

He tosses a bag at me. “Grabbed these at a store while you were unconscious. You’re going to use them to make your face look better. Then, we’re going to drive down the street and get this damn wedding over with.”

I catch the bag by pure reflex alone—well, that and desperation. If I hadn’t have caught it, it would have hit my face. That hurts enough already. I open the yellow bag and stare down into it and see a bunch of cheap makeup. I know it’s cheap because never in my life have I seen tags that say a dollar on a freaking compact.

I turn around to the mirrored wall and wince at my own reflection. “Um... I don’t know what you think makeup can do, but I can tell you right now, there’s no covering what you did.”

“Just do what you can. If anyone asks, I’ll throw extra money at them and tell them you’re stupid as fuck and ran into a doorknob.”

I want to ask him how my face was supposed to hit a doorknob when I’m five-nine. I don’t do that because I’m supposed to be trying not to anger him and I’m also worried what will happen if his brain actually tries to think and converse at the same time. How did I ever think this guy could run a gallery? It’s clear that Melody was the brains of the operation. Right now, I’m wondering how I ever thought Zervas was funny and a blast to be around.

I had to be drinking.

“How did you ever hide who you really are from me?” I question. I’m asking myself more than I am him. I just can’t believe I’m that blind—*that dumb*.

“You’re a woman.”

“What kind of answer is that?” I snap.

“I’m good looking. I can make a woman believe anything I want. All I have to do is tell you what you want to hear.”

“What I want to hear?” I ask, wondering if your head can explode from listening to his bullshit.

“Yeah, Hel. You were easy. You just want attention.”

“I just...”

“You’re desperate for it. You need a man to stroke that ego of yours. Your dad treated you like a princess and because of that you’re as high maintenance as they come.”

“You know nothing about me,” I laugh. The ideal that my father treated me like a princess is ridiculous. He barely looked at me and now he’s all but sold me to an imbecile who has already raised his hands to me and is in trouble with the Russian mob.

“I know you’re not happy. Listen, this doesn’t have to go bad for either of us. We’ll get married and have separate lives. People do it all the time.”

“You’re delusional,” I whisper.

“Listen, you want to give a regular marriage a go. I’m not against it. We’re both hot. It could be good. Long as you keep your damn mouth in check.”

“My mouth in check?”

“Don’t worry, Hel. I have something you can do with that mouth to keep it busy.”

“I’m going to enjoy watching Marco get hold of you,” I mutter.

“Stratakis?” he sneers. “That asshole isn’t going to do shit. He doesn’t have the balls.”

“Speaking of which, how are yours?” I snap, forgetting I need to try and keep the idiot calm until help arrives.”

“Sore as fuck. You suck my cock you will keep those teeth to yourself, or I’ll knock them out.”

“Hell will freeze over before I get anywhere near your cock.”

“So, you don’t want a normal marriage? Works for me. You’d probably freeze a dick off the moment it got inside of you. I warned Ivan of that. He’s still going to give you a go, though.”

“I...he...*What?*”

“Ivan. He wants you. That’s part of the deal. He gets to fuck you till he gets tired of you.”

“Part of the deal? Did you tell my father this deal?”

“Why would I? It wouldn’t have mattered, though. Your dad is tired of dealing with your dramas. He was happy as hell to give you to me. Told me make sure I used a firm hand with you. He’d probably pat me on the back for that face of yours right now.”

“I hate you.”

“Go fix your face before I decide I want in there before Ivan does. Hell, maybe we can do you together. You want attention. This way you can have our undivided attention. Ever had your ass fucked? I bet you’ll be tight as hell back there.”

Bile rises up inside of me and I struggle to keep from hurling everywhere. Then, I realize my phone is on. If Marco is hearing this... *oh God*. “I’m going to go put makeup on,” I whisper.

“Make it look good. I don’t need no bullshit to hold us up tonight. I need to get you and Ivan’s money to him soon.”

“When Marco kills you, I’m going to cheer him on,” I warn him. The idiot just laughs. I take the bag and go into the bathroom. I lock the door to be safe.

“Don’t lock the fucking door!” Zervas growls.

“Where am I going to go, Einstein? There’s no escape. I’m just going to get ready. I can’t hide in the bathroom for the rest of my life.” I shake my head. I really do hate him. *I am just going to stay here until they come and get you!*

“You better be out in twenty minutes. I called the Graceland Chapel! Elvis is going to marry us. Which reminds me. We’re going to put it on your card.”

“You maxed out your cards, too?”

“No, but it’s the brides side of the family that pays for the wedding,” he explains.

Oh. My. God.

I take my phone out and put it on the bathroom counter. I turn the water on in the shower. “Marco if they don’t come soon, I’m going to unlock the door and bang the idiot over the head with the back of the toilet bowl,” I hiss quietly.

“Keep your ass in there out of trouble, Ena. They’re already in the hall. It’s almost over, baby.”

“I love you,” I whisper.

“Love you, Princess.”

I jerk up as I hear a banging on the door and it’s probably my overactive imagination, but it sounds like wood giving away.

“What the fuck?” Zervas screams. “Open the fucking door, Hel.”

“Not a chance!” I scream and then quieter add, “I think EZ and the gang are here, honey.”

“They are. Stay clear until they get the asshole.”

“Okay,” I murmur and then let out a squeal as I hear a gun go off and see a hole in the bathroom door. I duck down behind the bathroom sink as Zervas shoots again.

“Open this door you stupid cunt!”

He shoots again, splintering the bathroom door. He lifts his gun to do it again, but this time I hear the sound of the front door slamming against the wall and I know EZ and whoever has made it inside. The gun goes off again, but luckily—for me at least—Zervas is aiming it at the front of the hotel room this time. I can see it all pretty good because the bastard has a pretty good hole in the door now. It’s a wonder he didn’t shoot me before I took cover.

There are two more shots and I see Zervas go down. It looks like they shot him in the knees. His gun drops to his

side. I know Marco told me not to move, but I can't help it. I lift the lid of toilet bowl and unlock the door and then before Zervas can do much more than turn to look at me I slam it against the side of his face. I admit it's not a good hit—the lid is *really* heavy. Still, Zervas' head swings to the side with the blow and he goes out almost immediately. That makes me feel good. When I look up there are guns pointed in my direction, but they're immediately pointed down and the men put them away. I grin at Zane and Levi because I remember them. Victorio is also there and there are a quite a few more some dressed in cuts like EZ—who is just sitting on the bed watching me with a big smile on his face.

“Hi guys,” I grin.

“Shit. Are you sure you're going to marry, Marco?” Levi asks and I giggle.

“Yeah, I'm sure. Oh shit! Marco. He's on the phone. I drop the toilet lid on Zervas' lap and kick his gun away for good measure then run back to the bathroom to get the phone. Crisis over. Time to put this awful night behind me and make Marco tell me he loves me a couple hundred more times.

Or maybe more... I smile with that thought. Marco Stratakis loves me. Dreams really do come true.

Chapter 42

Marco

“Where is she?” I growl, busting through the doors of the Titans’ clubhouse.

Their clubhouse looks like an old roadhouse and is made of cinderblocks and painted gray on the outside and covered in graffiti—most of which has to do with motorcycles and women with big ass boobs. I could have sworn one of the women was Dolly Parton. I mean it was cool as artwork goes, but unusual to say the least.

“I gave her a room in the back. She was sound asleep after the club doc gave her some meds for her headache. I posted Ghost at her door but for some reason Victorio wanted one your guys there. So, some dude named Levi is by the door, too. Just saying though, man, he seems to want your woman. I wouldn’t let him guard Libby’s door if the roles were reversed,” EZ warns.

I clench my jaw. “Eli, go take over for Antonio’s man.”

“You got it.”

“I see you learned from your earlier mistakes,” he taunts.

I flip him the bird, which makes him laugh. “Where is your woman?” I ask, deciding I’d like to see her. She has to be insane to deal with this asshole.

“It’s painting night.”

“Painting night?”

“Yeah, Libby works better late at night. So, on nights when she feels. Like painting she works in the studio I had made for

her and then comes to bed later. She visited with Helena for a bit first. Your woman looks a little rough, but she's good. You should have seen her lay Zervas out. It was epic shit."

"Sure as hell was. I thought she killed the motherfucker at first," another man says. He's got wild looking hair that has a reddish tint to it with browns mixed in.

"I was hoping," another man answers, but I mostly ignore them.

"Can we have our meeting after I check on Helena and get her settled?" I ask.

EZ nods. "Have at it man. We're not going anywhere. The boys here like to unwind after a job like this."

I nod, but don't look back. I start going in the direction Eli disappeared to. I look at Elias who is talking to the other two. I give Levi a hateful look. He has the grit to smile at me. "Everyone leave but Elias," I growl, wanting them far away from here—especially Levi.

When I get inside, Helena is sleeping. The room is dark except for the small light by the bed which is dimmed. My woman is beautiful resting on her pillow. I can't resist walking over to her and leaning down to kiss her poor, swollen cheek.

"Marco?" she says softly turning back to look up at me.

"It's me, Princess. I'm going to go meet with the men. You go to sleep, and I'll be back to climb in bed beside you.

She lets out a little yawn. "Okay, sweetheart. You know I use that word a lot around you."

"What word? I ask while smiling and running my fingers through her.

"Okay. I couldn't stop using it tonight. I think, you turn me into simpleton."

"I think you're loopy from lack of sleep. Rest baby and let me get this meeting out of the way."

She leans up and kisses me again and I take my time it back to her, using this moment to reacquaint myself with her

taste—it's even better than I remember.

“Hurry back to me,” she responds.

“Always.”

I tuck her back into the covers and turn out her light. She's out before I even get that done. Damn, I wonder what it was the club doctor gave her. Whatever it is, it's definitely potent.

As I close the door, I'm relieved to see everyone is gone but Elias.

“Make sure no one gets to her, brother,” I tell him.

“I will. You can count on me,” he says and I clap my hand down on his shoulder.

“I know that. I've always known that.”

I walk back out and when I make it to the front room, it's empty. Except for EZ. I frown looking at him.

“They're waiting for us in church. You ready?”

“To go to church?”

He laughs. You could stick around Phoenix, and I could make you a biker in no time, Marco.”

“No thanks. The only thing I like riding is my woman.”

EZ laughs but does it while leading me into a small corridor which I didn't even realize was there. He opens the door, and we step inside.

The room is devoid of furniture except for a huge-ass, round table. The table looks like it has been carved out of a tree and stained clear with something that makes it shiny as hell. There's florescent lighting above the table. It's an old florescent light and it's humming. Around the table are several men I don't recognize—all with vests similar to EZ's. There's also Antonio's men—Victorio and Lodi. Along with them are Sebastian and Gio. EZ takes a seat at the head, and I grab the one next to my brothers.

“Helena good?” Victorio asks.

“She is. You have my gratitude,” I murmur.

He shrugs. "Family," he says, and my chest gets tight. I'm hearing that word a lot lately and it's something I never truly had until recently. Hell, Antonio even managed to give me back my brothers in a way that we're united. Until that happened, I'm not sure I ever had a true family. We were too busy just trying to survive to think about anything else.

I nod at him, unsure of what else to say.

"Okay, first matter up for discussion, What are we doing with that shit-for-brains-currently bound and gagged in our shed out back," EZ asks.

"You have him guarded, don't you?"

"EZ looks at me and smirks.

"I keep telling you that this is not my first rodeo, *ese*. I have three prospects on the asshole. Although, the fucker was out of it most of the night thanks to the way your woman laid him out with the back of the toilet bowl," he laughs.

"Jesus," I respond with a grin, wishing I could have seen that. "I would have liked to have seen that."

"I wouldn't mind a replay myself," the man beside EZ states. "You have a hell of a woman there."

"That I do," I admit, reading the patch on his vest that says his name is Shadow.

"So, what are we doing with the asshole. Do you want to finish him off here? Please God, tell me you're not going to turn him into the cops."

I roll my eyes at EZ and the bastard laughs.

"I'm taking him back to Greece. Zervas is going to be a statement. Everyone is going to know that Helena is off fucking limits when I'm done."

Levkin is going to be pissed that they didn't get a payment or Zervas out of the deal," Shadow adds in.

"I'll handle Levkin. After hearing what he had planned for my woman, he's lucky he's breathing."

"Come again?" EZ says, suddenly on alert.

“Helena kept her cell on so I could hear Zervas talking to her. His grand plan was to marry my woman and then her father was going to wire him money to pay Ivan off. He was to deliver it with Helena because he wanted to fuck her until he got tired of her. She was to be part of the payment.”

“I’m thinking Levkin needs his own statement,” Victorio says. “I’ll be glad to hand deliver one.”

“That won’t be necessary. Me and my men can deliver that one. Ivan knows Helena was claimed by the club. That’s disrespect on a whole new level.”

“Victorio, I know you need to get back. I appreciate you helping. It killed me not to be here myself. I owe you man,” I tell him once again because I do.

Victorio shakes his head. “It wasn’t a problem, besides, I needed to head out this way for a bit. Angelina lived out there and there are a few things that I need to look into.”

“Anything me and the boys can help with?” EZ asks.

“Maybe. I’d appreciate at least a place to lay my head for a couple of nights while I follow some leads.”

“You got it,” EZ responds. “After this is over, Ghost can take you to one of the empty rooms. I’ll have one of the candy girls put clean sheets and shit on the bed.”

I let out a sigh. I’m not judging, but I find I don’t want Helena in a place where women are referred to as candy. “I’m leaving in the morning. I need to get my woman home. I’ll deal with Levkin and the other shit from there.”

“Sounds good,” EZ mutters.

Before he can say anything else, a woman with long hair the color of flames comes into the room. Her hair is curly and unruly, and she has curves that go on for miles. She appears to be about my brother Sebastian’s age—somewhere in her thirties. Still, she is gorgeous. Not like Helena, but definitely pretty. I also figure this must be Liberty, because she’s definitely pissed and that anger seems to be directed to EZ.

“Libby, darlin’, I told you that when I’m in church with the boys, you aren’t allowed in here.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining when I came in last night. You even made the boys leave.”

“That was because I was bending you over the table and pushing that dress up you were wearing so I could watch you taking my cock. Didn’t think you wanted the boys to see it, baby doll.”

“Keep it up and me and my ass will be gone,” she huffs.

“You could try that, but I’d just find you and drag you back.”

“You’re an asshole, E.”

“Is there a reason you’re here to give me shit, woman?”

“I want to know why you’ve had a prospect on following me all evening.

“Libby, that’s not a prospect. You’ve had Ghost or Rage all day. They’re two of my best men, fully patched. We’ve had some trouble and with the Levkin brothers in the mix, I’m not taking chances with you.”

“I told you, I don’t like people around me when I’m painting—especially people I don’t know.”

“You’ll get to know Ghost. He’s moved up here from Miami and my cousin’s club down there. He’s a good man and I trust him to keep you safe.”

“He doesn’t talk,” she mutters. “No offense Ghost.”

Ghost grunts in reply, and I have to fight my grin.

“Ghost is quiet. He doesn’t speak unless he wants to.”

“Whatever, I told you I didn’t want a guard on me. Remember?” she says saucily. She’s wearing some kind of dress that looks like it’s from the seventies with wide sleeves that fans out and for some reason I can’t seem to take my eyes off her—probably because she’s giving EZ hell.

“And I told you that you’re getting one.”

“God, why did I marry you again?” she gripes.

“Now that’s an easy question. It’s because I fucked you with my cock until you would have agreed to anything I asked.”

She narrows her eyes at him, picking up an empty beer bottle beside Lodi and hurls it in EZ’s direction. Everyone ducks and I watch as it sails by EZ, barely missing him. He pinches the bridge of his nose and stands up.

“Sorry boys. If you need anything talk to Ghost or Shadow. I got a woman to tame.”

“In your fucking dreams,” she growls. He strides over to her and bends down low enough to put his shoulder to her stomach, then, throws her over his shoulder. Immediately, she begins slapping her hands against his back, beating on him. “Put me down you asshole! We are not having sex. I’m pissed off at you.”

“Baby doll, that’s the best time to have sex. You’re a wildcat in bed, but you’re even better when you’re pissed,” he purrs. She starts beating on him again and the bastard starts whistling.

“You fucking asshole put me down!” she yells, just as the door closes.

“He’s never going to tame her,” Ghost says. It’s then I realize that his voice is hoarse and almost sound strained at times.

“He sure ain’t. Those two go at it constantly,” Shadow laughs. “I happen to think that’s why he chose her, though. EZ is a little insane.”

“My old Prez in Miami—Marcum—was the same way.”

“Well, if we’re done for the night, I’m going to get in bed. Eli, in the morning set up a conference call with me, EZ, Victorio, Niko and Antonio, then fix it so we can add the Levkins and set them up about thirty minutes later. It will need to be tomorrow evening when we get back to Greece.”

“I can do that in the morning, as soon as we get off the plane,” he says.

“Yeah, Eli, Sebastian and I are going back tonight on Antonio’s jet. Victorio arranged it. We’re going to take Cirillo with us. That way he’s not in the same plane as Helena. I think she’s had enough of him,” Gio explains.

“That’s good. Call me when you get underway and watch your backs.”

“You know it,” he says.

I say my goodbyes to my brother and bid the others goodnight, then walk back toward the room Helena is in. It’s been so long since she’s been in the bed beside me, I can hardly wait. I don’t think I’ve slept more than a couple hours a night since she left me. Zane is at the door when I get back. I nod. I don’t know him as well, but he seems to contain himself a little better than Levi around my woman. “You’re off for the night,” I tell him.

“You got it,” he says.

I watch him walk away before slipping inside and locking the door. I strip down quickly and slide into bed behind Helena, spooning her body and pulling her back into me. She’s got on pajamas. I’m not a fan. I’d rather have her naked, but I can wait until we’re in our bed back home.

“Hey, honey, is everything is okay?” she asks, her voice filled with sleepiness and warmth.

“Yeah, baby. Just seeing to some last-minute shit before we head back in the morning.”

“That sounds good. There’s so much I want to talk about with you, but I’m so tired.”

“You’ve had a hard day, Ena. Get some sleep. Besides, we’re leaving extremely early in the morning. I want to get you back home.”

“Honey, I’m not sure that’s doable. I have an apartment here and all the stuff in it—”

“Victorio had some men clean it out and pack your stuff, Princess. It’s already on the jet except for an outfit of clothes that’s lying on the dresser over there. I told them to find something comfortable for you to wear home.”

She sighs out. “I forgot how talented you are at taking over.” She doesn’t sound all that happy about it either.

“I just want you home where I can take care of you,” I answer honestly. I stretch my neck so that I can kiss her swollen eye. “I’m going to make that motherfucker pay for doing this to you, Ena.”

“Marco—”

“Don’t worry. It’s not your job to worry. I’m going to make it where that bastard never bothers you again.”

“Honey, he’s not worth you getting into trouble over.

I laugh, moving so I can kiss the outer area of her ears. “Are you worried about me, baby?” I’m joking and teasing her, but it’s clear with her next words that she’s not in the mood for that.

“I thought I had lost you forever tonight, Marco. I don’t ever want to experience feeling like that again.”

My heart stutters in my chest. “You’re never going to lose me my love. I’m right here with you and I’m not leaving,” I vow.

“I love you, Marco. I’m so sorry I ran away.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here to rescue you. It almost killed me, but I can swear to you that I’m never going to be without you again.”

“I really like the sound of that.”

“I do, too.”

She turns so she’s on her back and my lips finds hers. I groan as we connect, giving myself over to our kiss. I’ve ached without her, and the kiss is gentle—I need to be careful with her injury—still as the taste of her mouth explodes around my tongue, I know there’s never been anything better.

“You know, you could make love to me. I wouldn’t complain at all,” she tempts me.

“I’m not doing that until you’re home and healed better.”

“Marco!” she protests.

“Honest to God, baby, I don’t think I have it in me to be gentle right now and that’s what you need, Helena.”

“Maybe gentle is overrated, Daddy.”

Her sleep filled voice, filled with desire for me and that one word rolling off her tongue wraps around me in the sweetest of ways. Still, I remain steadfast, knowing I need to do it for her. In retaliation, I take my hand and swat her ass gently. “Behave, woman. The next time we make love it’s going to be in our new house, in our new bed.”

“Our new house is done?” she gasps.

“No, not quite. But the bedroom is and a few other rooms besides that. It’s good enough for us to live in.”

“I can’t wait to see it, Marco.” The smile on her face is filled with happiness. I make myself a promise to do everything I can to make that smiler permanent for her.

“Don’t expect much, Princess. I left it kind of plain because I wanted you to decorate it.”

“Now that, I can definitely do,” she says gleefully.

“I knew you could,” I laugh.

“Have you talked to her father or Mr. Cirillo?” she asks, her voice getting more somber.

I sigh and adjust her so she can see me easily. “Not yet.”

“Marco, you shouldn’t wait. They’re planning on coming after you. They’re dangerous.”

I gently cup her neck and shake my head at her before softly kissing her lips. “Ena, stop worrying. I have this. I’m going to deal with it all. It’s just that right now I’m worn out. I haven’t slept in over twenty-four hours. I spent the day terrified that I was going to lose the woman who is my entire

life. Right now, all I want in this world is just to sleep with you in my arms. Then, I want to wake up and get us on that jet so we can go home together. Once we're there, we can talk about what's next."

She stares at me, and her face goes soft. "I can agree to that," she murmurs.

I kiss her again. "I love you, Princess."

She angles her head to place a kiss above my heart and my lips stretch into a smile as she inhales against my chest like she's breathing me in. "I love you, too, Marco."

I give Helena a squeeze and she snuggles into me. I hold her close and her breathing evens out in no time. Only when I know she's asleep do I allow myself to follow her. I also do it, thanking my lucky stars that tonight is ending the way it is. I couldn't face this life without my Princess by my side.

I just couldn't.

Chapter 43

Helena

At the airstrip, we boarded a helicopter. It's not my favorite form of transportation, but I do like being able to look outside more. As we approach our destination, it's too dark to see everything, but I'm still smiling. From the floodlights and the ones on the helicopter, shining out as we land, I can look over my new home. It's exactly how I described it to Marco that day—only better.

“It's just like... it's...”

“Of course, it is, Ena. It's our home. Everything you described and imagined was perfection. It included all of my family and yet, left room for the families each of us will create. I want it to be everything you dreamed and more,” Marco responds.

My heart is doing somersaults as I look at the man beside me. Tears are stinging my eyes, but I don't think I can handle anything emotional right now. So, I just grin at him. “Well, you did a great job.”

That was the right response because Marco is still laughing as everything is shut down and we disembark. I stay close into his side as he leads me across the sidewalk that connects the helipad to the main office entrance. The minute we walk inside, my gaze moves all around the new building. It needs some interior designing yet, but all you can see is luxury. There's a huge reception desk in the middle and behind it are several corridors. We pause at these when Gio and Elias come out to greet us. They both surprise me by coming up to me and giving me a hug. Each of them place a kiss against my temple

before they step back, hug me again and whisper words that I didn't even realize I wanted to hear.

“Welcome home.”

Yet again, tears sting my eyes. I give them what I'm sure is a watery smile. “Thank you.”

“We missed our sister,” Gio whispers and my heart squeeze in my chest. A surprised gasp leaves me, and Marco pulls me into him, hugging me close as he begins talking.

“I'll be back in an hour for our conference calls. Is everything ready?”

“Of course, brother,” Elias answers. “Now stop interrupting us as we welcome our sister home.”

That's it. I can't really take much more. I start crying. “I missed you all,” I confess.

The all but pull me out of Marco's arms and hug me again. Sebastian shows up and hugs me, too. “We love you, Helena. None of us could imagine a future without you in it. I personally couldn't have dreamed of a better match for my brother than you, but you enrich all of our lives.”

I lose it and lean on him as I try to get control. “I love you guys, too,” I all but wail and through my watery words I can see Marco smiling at me. This smile of his is completely new. It lights up his entire face and here's not one trace of the reserve that used to be there. There's nothing heavy or dark weighing him down. I force myself to get control and shake my head as I use the back of my hand to dry my tears. “I'm a little over emotional. It's been a rough couple of days,” I try and joke. “So, if you could all kind of tone down the kindness so I stop crying, I'd appreciate it. You're just being too... *sweet.*”

They all start laughing. Marco's laugh is the sweetest. “Ena, my brothers are annoying assholes, not sweet.”

“You're lying, they *are!*”

He shakes his head and before I realize his intention, he picks me up.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to the private elevators. Then, I’m going to carry you into our new home, take you to the shower and enjoy pampering you and helping you wash away this fucking day. Then, I’m planning on putting you to bed before coming back for my meeting. Incidentally, that, too, I’m going to rush through, all so I can finally sleep with my woman in our new bed.”

My eyes go wide as he explains everything. “You’re going to help me shower.”

“That’s going to be my favorite part.”

“Oh, well, if that’s your plan, I only have one word.”

“What’s that?” he asks as we make it to the elevator.

“Hurry,” I whisper.

His grin deepens. He kisses my forehead, and his eyes hold a promise that I can’t wait to see him deliver on.

Only Marco has the power to turn the worst time of my life into the best.

Chapter 44

Marco

I look around our new conference room with satisfaction. I may not like the reason I'm here—or some of the people I'm dealing with—but there is a sense of pride. The deep mahogany wood of the table, the sleek lines and silver accents scream that my family has finally moved from the past. The large monitors that came from the ceiling with but a push of a button back that up. One monitor has a view of Antonio and Niko—both of whom are in Miami. The next one has Victorio and EZ who are in the room EZ weirdly called “church.” The last monitor and my least favorite, has Ivan Levkin and his brothers, Mikhail and Viktor.

I stop thinking about how things have changed since my father was in charge and turn my attention back to the meeting. I left my woman in bed, after washing every inch of her body and slowly getting her off with my fingers. I'm dying to make love to her, and I know she seems receptive. I also know she's been through hell. I'm not going to rush it. When I make love to her, there won't be anything in her mind but the two of us. That means, I want to give her a few days to get used to being home and feeling safe. I also have anger that I need to work through—which I will be doing soon.

“Zervas was ours to take care of,” Ivan insists stubbornly for the third time. At this point, he's starting to sound like a petulant child who is pissed he not getting his way and I've about had it.

“Well, there's a simple remedy to that. Once I'm done with him, I'll be glad to ship you the pieces that remain of his

corpse for your disposal,” I reply drolly.

“How is that supposed to pay the debt that Zervas owed me. You and I had an agreement that you would double what was owed if we protected your woman.”

“I did. I agreed to that very fucking thing, but since that situation was contained before you had to get involved, that wasn’t necessary.”

Levkin shrugs. “That is not our concern. It doesn’t matter if it was necessary or not, a deal was struck in good faith.”

I was waiting for this, and I smile as Ivan gives me an opening. “You know what, Ivan? That is very true and it would be something I would be willing to consider if I didn’t Zervas on tape admitting that you demanded to fuck my woman until you tired of her after that piece of shit forced her into a marriage and fleeced her father for money to pay you off.”

Ivan is unable to hide his shock completely but covers it up after a moment. He manages to have a look of disdain on his face as he responds. “You take the word of a lying piece of shit like Zervas over me?”

“Normally, maybe not,” I admit again.

“Then—”

“However, there’s one thing you should know going forward when you deal with a piece of shit who has no brains. They sing like canaries when they get caught. To help that along I had my brothers inject him with crap that made sure everything he said was truthful answers to the questions they asked. Since, he’s pretty much confirming everything he said before about you—plus more, I’m sure you can see how I might not give a fuck how upset you are at this moment.”

“This is absurd!” Ivan barks.

“That’s what I thought,” EZ responds, entering into the conversation. “Especially since you and I have business dealings and you knew already that I had claimed Helena as club property. There’s no way you would ignore that claim, right, Ivan?”

I watch the screen as Mikail and Viktor's bodies tighten when watching their brother. Then, Antonio enters into the fray.

"Niko? Didn't you have this exact conversation with Ivan?"

"That I did," Niko confirms, and this was before Zervas took Helena with this insane plan. So, I'm not feeling too great about the promises you gave me Ivan.

Ivan lets out a growl and says he has had enough of this conversation. It's going nowhere and I'm tired of being marked a liar. I want proof that Cirillo is dead.

"You can have it, but I need you to listen to me Ivan. I may be in Greece, but I think that you get my family has a wide reach. Helena belongs to *me*. If you so much as breathe in her airspace or look at her again, I will rain down hell on you and that's a promise."

He looks at me and the hate on his face is clear to see. I don't flinch. I give it right back to him.

"I'll also want a meeting next week to see how my club will proceed going forward in dealing with the Levkin family."

"There will be no meeting!" Ivan yells, slapping his hand down.

EZ ignores him and continues. "Mikail and Viktor, I'd like you present. Contact me and let me know a convenient time. I'll only be dealing with the three of you together at this point. I don't like the fact that my claim on Helena was ignored either. She means something to my wife and my friend. You know that Titan's property isn't to be touched that is the basis of our deal in the first fucking place."

Ivan snarls, "You are overstepping and mistaking his importance!"

EZ laughs. "Man, try me. You think I give one fuck about showing you that my crew and I can back up our demands, then come at me. My boys will enjoy it and when it's done, we'll make sure Mikail is at the head of your family. And you?" he scoffs. "Fuck, I'll let my boy Rage play with your

bones. You'll love how he likes to make the bones of pretty Russian men into cock rings."

Ivan ends the conversation by turning off his connection. I find myself joining my brothers, Antonio and Niko in laughing.

"EZ, please tell me there really is a Rage in your crew," Antonio questions—still laughing.

It's Shadow who is there with him that responds. "There is and I've seen the bones. It's creepy as fuck."

"Stop," EZ replies with a smirk. Rage is really a teddy bear."

Yeah, if that bear is seven feet tall, over three hundred pounds, and has anger issues," Shadow replies.

I find myself laughing again.

"Victorio, are you coming home tomorrow?"

"I have a meeting with a realtor on that matter we discussed a couple days ago," he replies in answer.

"Good. Let me know what you think."

"Will do. I need to finish up some information here. So I may be a week or so. You still have a man on my angel?"

"You know it. Her and Melina are still enjoying their visit."

"Good," Victorio responds.

"Marco?" Antonio questions.

"Yeah?"

"Melina will want to talk to Helena, but I told her tomorrow so the two of you would have time to rest."

"I'll tell Helena. Antonio, thank you for—" I stop talking when he holds up his hand.

"We're family. Your name may not be DeLuca, but in my book, it is, Marco. Just. Like this asshole," he mutters, elbowing Niko.

“Petrova is sexier.”

“Motherfucker that’s not even your real name,” Antonio responds rolling his eyes.

“It’s the one my wife and baby has. It is me.”

“Fair point,” Antonio responds. “Anyway, welcome to the family, Marco, Elias, Sebastian and Gio. I owe each of you more than I could say for keeping my Melina safe until I found her. She is my world.”

I nod, my throat tight as my brothers have much the same reaction. They respond to Antonio, but fuck if I can concentrate on what they are saying. EZ breaks the moment up by slapping his hands on his desk. Okay, enough of this shit. I have a woman waiting on me and she’s better company than you assholes.”

“I need to check on Angelina too,” Victorio adds.

“I’ll check in with you in a couple of days,” I tell Antonio and Niko.”

They say their goodbyes as my brothers shut down the monitors and the four of us stare at one another.

“Times have changed,” Sebastian says, proving he is the master of understatement.

“It feels damn good,” Gio answers and I nod.

“It may take me a bit to get used to it,” Elias confesses.

“It will come,” I tell him, standing up. “We owe much to Antonio, but the truth is this building and the homes we’re building, in fact everything you see around us, came from money that the four of us earned—even while our fucking father was still trying to control us and destroy what we were already putting together. We may be part of the DeLuca family now, but our family is strong and good. We’ll never be what we once were again. We’re better.”

They all nod and in that moment, it seeps into me that it’s the fucking truth. The past is gone. Now, we have a future to build.

Luckily for me, that future contains Helena. That thought makes me smile. Then again, everything about Helena makes me smile. My life is completely different and so much better. I walk out of the room and go to join her in bed. *Our bed.*

Chapter 45

Helena

Two Days Later

My hand slaps against Marco's pillow, finding it cold. I sit up and try to focus on the clock.

One in the morning.

I look around the room, but I already know that Marco is nowhere around. He's happy. I know he is. There's a lightness about him that has never been there before. I also know that other than using his hands or his mouth to get me off, he hasn't touched me. *That's getting annoying.*

I have asked him about it, and he told me I needed time to work through everything and he wants me to feel safe without the specter of what I've been through hanging over us in our bed.

I'm not sure what that means, exactly. I think he has it in his head that the fear I experienced is still haunting me. Zervas doesn't have that kind of power over me. I need to make sure Marco knows that. I also have a pretty good idea where my man is right now. With that thought in mind, I stand get out of bed. I leave my silk nighty on because I know Marco loves it. Truthfully, I do too. It feels soft against my skin and the soft sage color matches my coloring perfectly. It covers me but leaves nothing to the imagination. I do, however, grab the matching robe—which has long sleeves and falls to my ankles. I put it on, knowing it covers *everything*. Marco will like that

because my man tells me repeatedly how my body is only for his enjoyment. A smile plays on my lips. *God, I love him.*

I slide my feet into my slippers and then walk outside of our room. There are signs of construction everywhere, but our house is looking better and better. I can't wait until I can get the designers started on painting and making this place into a real home. I love everything that has been done. The plans are exactly how Marco and I would discuss late at night in our bed—before building ever started. He never planned on letting me go, ever. The truth in that settles over me.

I'm right where I belong.

I always knew it, even as a kid. Marco is all I've ever wanted. I walk out of the courtyard, the moon shining down from above and the smell of ocean air greeting me. *Home.* Then I make my way back into the main entrance to the compound and find the elevator. Gordon and another guard that I don't really know are standing there.

"I'm looking for Marco," I murmur.

Gordon looks uncomfortable. "He asked not to disturbed Miss Kratos. You should go back to bed. He probably won't be much longer."

I cringe at the mention of the name Kratos. I don't want that name anymore. With everything my father has done, that name is disgusting to me. I put that thought out of my head and study Gordon, doing it while shaking my head in disagreement.

"I need you to take me to my husband, Gordon. Now."

"That's not possible and unless I've missed something, you're not married yet," he has the bad manners to point out. That's when I'm done.

"Hand me your phone."

"My what?"

"Your phone, Gordon. Hand me your phone." I don't try to keep my anger out of my voice. This is bullshit. Marco better marry me soon. If he doesn't, I'm going to petition the court to

have it changed. That way, I'll never called by my father's surname again.

I hold out my hand and wait. Gordon carefully puts his hand in it, watching me closely.

"Give me the code," I mutter, glad that dimwitted Zervas didn't have a code on his phone, or everything might have gone even more sideways. Once he gives it to me, I click it over to phone and dial my man.

"Gordon."

"Afraid not, honey," I correct him.

"Ena, what are you doing awake?"

"Well funny story about that, and by that, I mean, not funny at all."

"Ena—"

"I woke up without my husband and then, Gordon here was good enough to remind me that I don't yet have a husband."

"I will be," he growls. "Hell, we can do it tomorrow."

My heart beats harder with his words and my lips stretch into the biggest smile I believe I've ever had. "We can discuss that if you want, but unless Gordon here brings me to you right now, there will be no wedding."

"I'll be up there in a minute, Princess," he says and I immediately know what he's doing. I can't allow it. I am not a child. I'm not sure I've ever been. My father and brother never protected me as a kid. I didn't have a Marco looking out for me like Melina did. That means, I saw more than I ever should have. I *know* what Marco is doing. I also know that I can't let the dark in his life get a chance to settle into his bones again. It's my job to stop that.

"No. I want brought down there," I argue.

"No way. I'm coming to you," he insists stubbornly.

"Marco," I exhale, frustrated. "I *know* what you're doing. You also *know* that I do. I won't have secrets between us. In

fact, I won't be separated from the life you live ever again. I wasn't here to help you when you had to deal with your father, but I'll be damned if I'm not going to be by your side for everything you face while we're together."

"Ena—"

"Just to put it out there, sweetheart, I plan on that being here for the rest of our lives and into the next one, so tell Gordon to bring me to you."

"Fuck," he grumbles, but the way he does it makes my body come alive.

"Put him on the phone."

I smile my victory at Gordon who smirks at me. I switch it over to speakerphone. "He can hear you now, honey."

"Elias is standing by the elevator. Bring her down to him."

"Sure thing, Marco," he says, and I hang up, handing the phone over to Gordon.

He laughs. "No wonder you and Mrs. DeLuca are so close. Have you met Niko's woman Emilia? The three of you are a lot alike."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I mutter.

"It was meant as one," he says, and I feel that move over me.

He takes me to the elevator and pushes the button that will take us to the basement. It's a short ride—just one floor down. Once the door opens, Elias is there waiting. I walk out and he wraps his arm around my back. He looks worried and I know why the minute he begins talking.

"Helena, you need to know that Marco is still the same man you love. He is just doing what needs to be done. This is the world we live in—were born into. In our world if you don't make a statement that you can't be fucked with—"

I put my hand over his mouth to stop him. "There is nothing Marco could do that would make me love him less. I may be young, but I am under no grand illusion that my man

sells cookies, goes to summer camp, and sings Kumbaya all day long, Elias.”

“Kumbaya?” he laughs.

“Exactly.”

He shakes his head and says okay, you asked for it. He opens a white door, but I can tell it is heavy metal just by the way Elias pushes to open it.

My nose curls at the contrasting smell of bleach and filth. This room is white granite—all one solid piece along the walls in front of me. The floors are the same material and there’s a big drain in the middle of the floor. There’s also bars around the front which are slide open. It’s like a jail—but a very expensively built jail.

When I get to Marco, I’m not really looking at him and that’s because my gaze is on Zervas. He’s on this huge, thick wooden stand, his body pressed against it. His hands are over his head in a “V” position and each of his wrists have a metal cuff around them that is connected to metal inside the wood. His legs are in the same “V” pattern, with similar a similar cuff on his ankles. He’s also naked and obviously has felt Marco’s wrath for a while. He’s been burned over his body. His eye and cheek—incidentally the same one that Zervas hit on my face—is swollen shut. His cheek has had the skin stripped off probably by razor blades and it’s clear those are just a few of the highlights of the hospitality my man has bestowed on my former boss.

I force my gaze away from Zervas to concentrate on Marco who is standing in front of me, arms crossed. His face looks resolute. “Ena, I’m not hiding this from you.”

“I appreciate it, sweetheart.”

Something flickers over his face, but he keeps going. “In return, you can’t ask me to stop either.”

“This isn’t exactly going to get Mr. Cirillo or my father off of your back, Marco sweetheart,” I feel compelled to point out.

That’s probably the wrong thing to say because Marco’s face gets scary looking and red with anger. “Toban Cirillo has

already signed his death warrant. What happens to your father will be at your discretion, but either way he will be negated to the point that he's not a real threat and I won't make that easy on the bastard."

I rub my lips together as I look at my husband and take in his words. Then, I sigh. "Are you almost done?" I ask.

Surprise flickers over his face. "Honestly, I wanted to make his pain last longer, but I'm growing tired. I'd rather be in our bed than dealing with this shit."

"Then, I suggest finish him off and come to bed."

Marco's surprise moves into shock. I don't hide how I feel. I can't feel guilty about it. I don't know if it makes me a bad person, maybe it does. I grew up in a household where my father did evil things to others—and the ones he did that too, were good people—father just wanted something they had. I know that whatever Marco does, it will be deserved upon the people he inflicts it on. I find that's not hard to live with at all. So, maybe I am a bad person.

Or maybe I am the perfect wife to my mafia husband.

Chapter 46

Marco

“Just like that?” I question, Ena, not quite believing what she’s saying to me.

“Marco, I’ve always known who you are, what you do. Did you really think I didn’t know exactly how your father disappeared even before I came to live here?”

My heart freezes in my chest. *Fuck*. “Are you saying you can love the monster inside of me.”

Her face pales and then I see anger lighting her eyes. “You are not a monster!”

“Ena—”

“You are a man, Marco. *My* man. You are the man who makes the real monsters disappear.

I stare at her, replaying her words in my head. I close my eyes and let what she says seep inside, sinking all the way to the bone, and into places that I never thought I’d allow anyone to touch.

“I love you, Ena,” I respond, my voice gruff and full of emotion that I can’t allow myself to release right now—not here. She deserves that when we’re alone in our bed—*in our home*.

She moves into me and goes up on her tiptoes. I washed my hands and put on a clean shirt while Elias was collecting her and that’s the only reason, I allow myself to hold onto her hips as she leans in to kiss me. I return the kiss, letting her goodness wash over me. Unfortunately, Zervas groans and

interrupts the moment. I look over to see him try to hold his head up.

“Oh, God,” Helena whispers, sounding horrified.

My body goes rigid as I look at her. “Ena, I warned you. I can’t change—”

“Oh my God!” she interrupts.

“Damn it, Ena,” I snap, knowing this was a bad ideal.

“Oh my God!” she says again, but this time she’s screeching.

“Fucking hell, woman. You said you were okay with this,” I growl.

“Did I do that?” she asks, sounding sickened.

I look at her, not quite understanding what she’s asking. She’s pointing at Zervas.

“What are you talking about?” I finally ask, because I’m clueless at this point.

“That, Marco!” she squeals almost hysterically. “That hunk of flesh out of his balls where it’s bruised and has teeth marks. Was that me?”

I find myself relaxing. Hell, I even smile. “Well, baby, I cut the flesh off since it was turning colors and kind of hanging there, but yeah. I’m pretty sure you did the damage.”

“Gross. You need to cut the rest of it off. I don’t want my teeth marks on him. I don’t want anything of me on him, Marco.”

“Baby, it won’t matter. Except for his heart the rest of him will be nothing but ash.”

“His heart?” she asks, turning to look at me.

I should probably shut up, but I decide to let her have it all. In for a penny, in for a pound or whatever that saying is. “Yes,” I answer. “I’m sending his heart to Ivan.”

“Did you hear what that man had planned for me?” she mutters. “We should cut off Zervas’ middle finger the one with

that ugly gold and ruby signet ring he wears. Then, put it in the middle of the heart.”

There is very little in this world that could shock me these days. Still, my woman has just done it and she did it in a way that makes me laugh out loud. Hell, I can even hear my brothers laughing behind his.

“Fucking hell, woman. You want me to send Ivan Levkin a heart that is basically saying fuck you?”

She gives me the biggest grin I’ve ever seen and giggles. “Is that too much?”

I shake my head, laughing. “Sebastian, hand me the knife.”

Her eyes dilate and her eyebrows go up. “Wait!” she cries, panicking.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, wondering if I’ll ever understand this woman.

“I may *want* it done, Marco, but I didn’t say I wanted to watch,” she mutters. “That’s disgusting.” She scrunches up her face as if she’s imagining what I’m going to do. Shit if that doesn’t make me laugh harder this time. It takes me a minute to get myself under control before I can respond.

“Okay, Princess. Elias can take you back topside but since you’re here, I have a question.”

“What’s that?”

“I need to know what hand he used to hit you with.”

“His right one,” she confirms. “Why?”

“Because that’s the one I was already planning on cutting off. Now, I’ll just make sure I make use of the finger, too.”

She grins at me. *Helena fucking grins at me.* Jesus.

“Okay, sweetheart, but hurry. I want to talk about our wedding. I want rid of the Kratos name. I’m actually thinking we could get married tomorrow and then have a family ceremony later, when Melina and the baby can travel freely.”

I listen to her, but I do it while realizing that this woman is everything I've ever needed in my life. Hell, she's more than I could have ever imagined. Helena makes him feel normal and alive. Even now, knowing what I've done and what I will continue doing, she's looking at me as if I hung the moon. For her, I would do it, too. I would find a way to do that very thing if she asked. For my Princess, I would do anything."

"Ena, go upstairs, strip naked, and wait for me on our bed. I want you open to me just how I like and waiting. Understand?"

Her eyes go round, and I don't miss the tremble that moves over her beautiful body. Then her lips deepen into a smoldering smile that I feel in my cock. She'll grin.

She steps into me and leans up to whisper in my ear. "Yes, Daddy," she breathes and now it's my time to tremble with hunger. *God this woman undoes me.*

I stand there as she walks away with Elias feeling things that I can't even begin to decipher. Sebastian brings me a knife and I take it, barely able to tear my eyes away from where only a second before Helena disappeared.

"Fuck," Gio says. "I hope I can find a woman just like her."

"Sorry, brother. There's only one Helena and I'm not giving her up," I mutter. I walk over to Zervas, grabbing a rubber glove of the small wooden table by him. Once I do this, I use the knife to slice off half of his ball sack, letting it drop to the floor. Zervas groans, but he can't do much more than that. With the blood he's losing, he's a short timer anyway. I kick the flesh across the floor to my brother. "Take that to the incinerator and dispose of it separately," I mutter to Gio.

"Damn it. I don't want to touch that shit," he snaps.

Sebastian starts laughing. "Are you squeamish, brother? You can always use a dirty rag or a plastic bag."

"Fuck you," Gio mutters, but he grabs one of the rags they've been using.

I dismiss them from my mind and turn back to Zervas. His head is down. I'm pretty sure he's just passed out, but there is the disappointing possibility that he's already dead. I slap him in the face, a few times, hard. "Are you still with me, asshole?" He doesn't lift his head or open his one good eye, but I'm pretty sure that's beyond him at this point. He does whimper and I suppose that's good enough. "I warned you what would happen if you touched my woman," I remind the dumbass. "Now, I'm in a hurry because I'm going to go fuck my woman and celebrate the fact that you're no longer breathing the same air as us. So, I'm going to do you a favor and end you quickly. Just to show you that what you did is still pissing me off, however, I'm going to make it really hurt."

I put the knife down on the table and look over at Sebastian.

"I need the sledgehammer."

Sebastian's eyebrows go up in surprise, but he fetches it. I grip it in my hands and flex them against the handle. I aim and lightly tap at Zervas' wrist. Then, I draw it back and swing it hard. Zervas tries to scream. I know he is, but the sound is raw and kind of quiet.

I ignore that and do the same thing again and again—*and again*. When I finish, secure in the knowledge the bones won't be a hindrance into cutting his hand off, I put the hammer down and go back to slapping Zervas on the face again.

"Hey asshole you need to stay awake. This is just getting interesting."

I frown when he doesn't come around. I grab a bottle of water from the table and pour it over his face, then slap him harder. He lets out a whimper.

"Just to show I can be a nice guy," I mutter as Sebastian and Gio laugh in the background. "I'm going to cut off your arm after you die. I have to confess, Zervas, I'm mostly doing this because I figure if I cut out your heart first it might be less messy. But don't worry I broke all the bones in your hand first. That will make the cutting easier. So, hey, if you *were* alive when I did it, you wouldn't have as much pain. You're

welcome by the way, motherfucker,” I growl slapping him across the face again. I pick up the knife and stabs him somewhere above where the heart should be. I’ve never been to medical school, but I figure this can’t be hard. I begin cutting downward, sawing my way through his body. “Fuck, I’m going to need a new knife. This is harder than I thought.”

Sebastian brings me a new one and I start work on Zervas again.

In the end, it takes four knives and the bastard’s heart is kind of cut up but with my brother’s help we get it out. I take an axe and use it to cut off the hand. Sebastian grabs the ring we need and after I chop off the middle finger, I thrust the ring down on it. I push that into the heart and look down at our gruesome handiwork. Elias puts the heart in a cooler and I sigh.

“We done?” Gio asks.

I nod. “Make sure the package goes through the cleaners and it’s safe, then give it to the handlers to deliver,” I growl. “I’m going to use the shower house down here and then go make love to my woman.”

“It’s time like this, I’m thinking we should think about having candy around like EZ’s club.”

“No way. What you do in your own homes is your business, but I don’t want to see it. I don’t want my wife to see it, or the children we have,” I mutter.

They laugh and slap me on the back I grumble under my breath and make my way to the showers. I’m ready to put this behind me and look to my future.

My future with Helena.

Chapter 47

Marco

When Helena was sixteen, I was resigned to getting married. I wanted a normal life, so I was looking forward to it, even if I didn't know my wife. I knew I would respect her, and we could have a good life—if I managed to contain my father. Inside, however, even I didn't think I would be successful at that. Buried inside of me, I assumed I'd fail and die at the hands of him or my brothers one day. My main goal was just to stay alive long enough to make sure my sister was safe.

Because of that belief, I made every mistake I could make—including breaking Helena's heart and not taking her in my arms that day in the plane when my brother tried to not only kidnap her but end her life.

I had dreams, I just had no hope.

Now, as I stand on the beach, Gio and Sebastian at my side and Elias walking my beautiful bride to me, I can barely breathe. Helena is breathtaking. She's wearing a simple ivory dress that hugs her body. Her hair is down and blowing in the wind with small twisty curls on the ends. She's barefoot and honestly, she's perfection personified.

I don't deserve her. I know it. Yet, somehow, despite everything I've done and the man I am, she loves me. She's smiling at me now, her eyes glowing with unshed tears. *Tears of happiness*. I still don't think love describes what she means to me, but every single time I tell her, she smiles with so much pleasure that I don't miss an opportunity to tell her at this point. I say it as often as I can.

When she finally makes it to me, I lean in and kiss her forehead. “You look beautiful, Princess.”

“You look just as I imagined you would all those years ago, honey.”

“Ena...”

“Back when I was just a child falling in love for the first and last time in my life.”

“In all my life, I never thought I was a man who would receive miracles. Somehow, against all odds, fate gave me you. You’re everything to me Ena. You’re everything.”

“Stop it, Marco. You’re going to make me cry. You need to let the priest marry us so we can start our lives together—without my makeup being ruined.”

“You’re barely wearing makeup.”

“That’s not the point,” she whispers.

“There’s no going back now, Helena. You’re mine forever.”

“Marco, don’t you realize there never was? We were born to be together. You just had to wait a while for me.”

“That just makes me appreciate you more, sweetheart.”

She leans into me, bringing her face up for a kiss and I can’t stop myself. I kiss her with everything I’m feeling, because finally, today, she truly becomes mine in every single way.

“I’m afraid that part is supposed to come after the ceremony is finished,” the priest interjects.

Helena throws her head back and laughs. The sound is so full of joy that I savor it.

“That’s okay, we can kiss then, too,” I assure him. She leans into me, her arm going around me, and I hold her close as the priest begins.

The entire time he’s speaking I’m just going over it all in my mind and I realize that as hard as it was, as much shit as I

had to wade through, I'd do it all again. I would withstand every beating, every torture my father and the twins shelled out—all of it. *All. Of. It.* I'd do it all over, again and again. I'd do it gladly as long as my reward was Helena and the joy she alone brings into my life.

She makes it worth it.

I look down at my woman and she mouths the words, "*I love you.*"

Just that simple thing wraps around my heart and sends heat and joy through me simultaneously.

Fuck, yeah, I'd do it all again, as long as I get Helena in the end, I wouldn't even think twice.

She is everything to me.

Chapter 48

Helena

The wedding the dinner it was all beautiful. I loved every second of it. The shared courtyard proved it was a great idea that will only get better once all the brothers have their own home. I know Marco loved it. I could tell by the way they laughed and talked and even though dinner was a catered affair this time, I could already see the family having barbecues and birthday parties. That's what I wanted. I wanted a space where we would grow closer and become a family that I always wanted and the one that Marco and his brothers (*and Melina when she was here*) deserved. Everything about today was beautiful, but when Marco led me to our house and we told the others goodnight, I was ready.

No, I was *more* than ready for our wedding night. We had made love once since my return from Phoenix. Still, I know Marco was holding back from me. That one time was beautiful. I loved every second of it. Then again, there's nothing to dislike when Marco is worshipping my body. Still, there was none of the control and playing that Marco liked. He didn't try to dominate me. He didn't try to push me, and not once did he refer to himself as daddy and I found I missed it.

Like a lot.

That means, I was intent on making tonight different. Marco doesn't need to handle me with care. He loves me and that's all I need to be happy. The shit in Phoenix was bad, but it could have been so much worse. I'm alive, I wasn't harmed, and I have the man that I love with me. I don't need anything else.

By the time he carried me to our bedroom, my body felt like it was on fire, and now we're here. The time for waiting is over. So, I let him watch as I slip my dress off. He takes his clothes off at the same time. We go piece for piece, but since all I have is a dress and a small lace thong, I'm undressed way before him.

That means while Marco finishes, I get on the bed and watch as he takes everything off until he's standing in front of me in nothing but his slacks, the buttons undone at the top and he's looking down at me with that cocky look that I love.

I'm lying on the bed by this point—completely naked, legs spread, and knees bent for my man. That's the position Marco likes, and that's the position I'm going to give him. He slowly undoes his zipper, and I can hear the raking of the metal teeth echoing in the room. My breath is frozen in my lungs as he pushes his pants down, kicking them out of the way. He's completely naked now. He's gorgeous from his golden, tanned skin to the smattering of chest hair across his pecs and torso. I itch to bury my face in it, and I know before the night is through, I'll do that very thing.

My gaze drops down as I take in his cock. I bite down on my lip as desire shoots through me, making my body quake and making me so wet, that it's all I can do to keep from touching myself. He crawls up on the bed and I know I'm supposed to remain in position. I'm seriously trying but I can't move my gaze from his long, thick, *beautiful* cock. It's covered in the hard ridges of veins that are pushing out like a damn road made that I want to follow with my tongue and even though, I know it's not what my man gave me permission to do, I take my shot.

I go up on my knees, unable to tear my gaze away even to look at Marco's face. Instead, I keep my focus on the part of his anatomy that has me spellbound. I reach out, taking his beautiful girth in my hand, my fingers barely able to reach around him. I stroke him once, holding him securely, and I'm instantly thanked by his groan that seems torn from him in a way it vibrates in my core.

“You want Daddy’s cock, Princess?” he purrs, his words dark, dirty, and fucking delicious.

“Mm,” I answer. It’s not a word, but since the wet, slicked head of his cock is at my lips, I figure he knows my answer.

I feel his hand flip my hair to one side so he can see what I’m doing. His body shifts as he moves us, settling in as he mostly lies on the mattress, giving me a chance to stretch against him as my tongue slides along his head, gathering the evidence of his desire on the tip of my tongue, moaning as I take it in my mouth and swallow it down.

Just like that, my control snaps. I moan as the taste of him explodes on my tongue and I don’t delay, I stretch my mouth and slide down hard and fast on his beautiful cock, not stopping until my nose is buried in that masculine nest of curls at his base.

“Fuck, Ena,” he hisses, his fingers tightening in my hair, tugging until the point of pain. “Give me more, baby. Give Daddy more.”

I take my time, sliding back up his cock. I use my tongue to stroke over his shaft, loving him without words and in a way that is as old as time, but each time with him feels special and brand new—and something only we can share. My tongue dances along the slit on his head, gathering more precum as I feel his fingers slide between my legs. I gasp as they rub against sticky, wet covered lips of my pussy, wanting him do give me more.

Before I can beg him to do that, he uses the control he has by fisting my hair to push me back down on his cock, swallowing him again. I relax my throat, taking him to the hilt again, whimpering around his shaft because the feel of him controlling me excites me more than anything else I’ve ever experienced. He starts a rhythm that he wants, and I give it to him, exactly like he demands. Up and down, the sound of my mouth moving on him like a song that I never want to stop. My body is trembling with need. I feel like one touch from him at this point would set me off.

Then he pulls me off of him, breaking our connection. I cry in reaction, not wanting to lose him. “No!” I whine.

“Daddy’s in control, Princess,” he growls. I bite my lip to keep from protecting further. “Good girl,” he praises.

Before I can respond he turns in the bed. Then, his cock is at my mouth again, but his mouth is at the very center of me.

“Yes,” I hiss.

My hand encircles his shaft again, as I line his cock up. I take him inside my mouth, sucking on him as he thrusts down. My hand moves up to hold onto his ass, my fingers biting into his cheek to hold on as he fucks my mouth relentlessly. I might have started in control, but there’s no doubt that he is the one in command now. Fucks me hard, and I’m lost to the pleasure as I feel his hot breath against my pussy, his fingers pulling my lips apart and then he buries his face there, stealing my breath.

I cry out, the sound garbled and muffled because my mouth is stuff full of him. He rides my mouth hard, giving no quarter and I love every second of it. He seeks out my clit, which is throbbing to the point of pain. He sucks it into his mouth at the same time his fingers thrust inside my pussy. My hips surge up from the pleasure, grinding against his face as my mouth moves up and down his cock like a wild woman. There’s no control, there’s no thought, there’s no fucking rhythm at this point. There is only blind need. I keep one hand on his ass, as I move the other to his balls, cupping them gently, rolling them in my hand grinding against his face.

“I’m going to come,” he warns.

I moan, just wanting more and doing that while praying this never ends. He tries to lift off of me, but I protest.

“Please, Daddy. Give it all to me,” I whimper, pushing up toward his mouth, which is now off of me. I writhe on the bed, needing more than he’s giving—all while knowing that he’s the only one that can cure the ache inside of me.

“You’re going to come on my cock, Princess. My cum is going to paint your womb. You can swallow it down some other time.”

His words make my pussy feel as if it's vibrating—so strong are the tremors they cause. He moves his body this time, before going back to straddling me, leaning on his elbow, looking down into my eyes. Those blue flecks in his that I love, shine bright.

“God, you're beautiful,” I whisper, completely starstruck.

His lips spread into a smile and then all thought dissipates as I feel him at my entrance. My eyes close as pleasure washes through me, with just the head of his cock inside of me.

“Look at me, baby. I want to watch your face when I push inside your sweet pussy.” Immediately, I pull back and look at him, giving him what he wants. “Who do you belong to?”

“You,” I breathe, gaining another inch of him.

“Who do you belong to, baby?” he asks again, his voice graveled and sexy.

“You, Daddy.”

“That's right. You're all mine, aren't you?” he purrs, sinking in deeper—but nowhere near enough.

“All yours,” I pledge.

“You're never leaving me again, Ena. You are never leaving me,” he groans, as he sinks all the way in.

My eyes close because in his voice I can hear the pain I caused by running away. It's a pain that I will be doing my best to mend for the rest of my life. My hands go to his back, holding tight and I hold him close. My pussy stretches around him, as I tremble with the need to come.

I lean up to whisper into his ear, the move unwittingly sinking him in even deeper. “I'll never leave you again, Marco. I can't breathe without you. I love you,” I confess. His body trembles beneath my fingers. I hold him closer. My confession means something to him. He pulls back, and I force myself to look into his beautiful eyes. They're shining as they look down at me, but it's the raw emotion and hunger on his face that speaks to me the most.

“Mine,” he groans.

“Yours,” I reiterate.

“Mine,” he says again, and then it’s like his control breaks, because he moves to pull my leg up higher on his body, while lifting my ass by shoving a pillow under it.

Then he’s fucking me hard. I tighten around him, giving my body to him the only way I can. He fucks me harder, his hand coming up to cup against the side of my neck. His hold is strong and forceful in a way that it wouldn’t surprise me if there’s a brise there tomorrow. The thought excites to the point that I can feel a surge of wetness spill against his shaft which is almost violently thrusting in and out of me.

“You belong to me,” he growls, his voice accentuating his thrust as he bottoms out inside of me, going so deep that it’s almost painful. His hand holding me still as his teeth bite at my lips.

“I belong to you,” I repeat my words coming in large huffs of breath and she fucks me harder and harder.

“You’re never leaving.”

“Never. I need you, Marco. I need you.”

“What am I to you, Princess?” he asks and this time when he slams back into me, it takes my breath and I swallow, feeling my throat work against his hand.

“Everything,” I wheeze, feeling my climax begin as I start to milk his cock.

His face registers surprise and he kisses me, while moving in and out of me, his grip still firm on my throat.

“Who am I to you?” he finally asks against my lips. I smile. I know he wants Daddy here—which he is—but I give him the answer in my heart.

“My husband. My world.”

He gives in then. “I love you, Princess. Come for me.”

This time as he surges back in, he grinds down against me. His tongue thrusts into my mouth as he kisses me at the same time. Sensation is everywhere and when his fingers move

down to where we're joined and he works my clit, it's over. I splinter into a million pieces, and I know that Marco is the only one who can put me back together again.

I cry out and he, keeps riding me. "That's it, Princess. That's it. Give it to me. Give it all to me."

"Yes, I whimper every muscle I have stretched tight as I quake.

"Milk my cock, take all my cum," he groans in my ear.

My nails bite into him as I hold onto him, scoring his skin as he keeps fucking me. "Yes, Daddy," I gasp and that's when I feel his cum heating my body as it jets out and I take it over and over until we're both spent.

He rolls from me, but I hold on tight. Not ready to lose him.

"Don't want to hurt you, baby," he murmurs, kissing my neck where he was holding me.

"You're not. You wouldn't. I don't want you to leave me yet."

"Okay, sweetheart. If that's what you want. I'll stay right here for as long as you need me."

"Forever, Marco. I'm going to need you forever," I respond, kissing his chest and closing my eyes as I savor the sweetness in this moment.

I feel his lips brush against my forehead and spread into a smile as he responds. "And I will need you just as long, my love."

I keep holding him as our hearts slowly begin to beat normally and we come down from our orgasms.

"I love you, husband," I tell him, realizing we just started our married life together and knowing that for the first time in my life, I've given everything I am to someone and it's enough.

"I love you, wife," he returns, looking down at me and kissing my cheek, his fingers in my hair. I can see his love,

too. I see it right there on his soft face. I see it the those sparkling blue flakes in his eyes. *He loves me completely.*

I was right. I am enough, and I will be for the rest of our lives together, even into the next one.

Forever.

Epilogue

Marco

One Week Later

I lean back in my sea, EZ's face on the monitor as we're talking. I've been married a fucking week and I already feel like a new man. I knew life with Helena was good, but I didn't realize just how good it could be when there was nothing between us. I also didn't know what life would be like knowing the love that we have would just grow every single day.

"So, you had to send old Ivan the fucking heart with a middle finger in the center of it?" he laughs.

I shrug. "The finger was Helena's idea," I laugh.

"Damn, I knew I liked that woman," he practically cackles.

"Just remember, she's mine," I respond grumpily.

"Don't worry, *ese*. I have my hands full with Libby. I'm starting to think I should have taken time to get to know the woman before I married her."

"You do know that's usually how it's done," I point out.

EZ shrugs. "Maybe, but it's probably more fun my way.

I smirk. Hell, he's probably right. "What was Levkin's response to the package?"

"Not much. Although, he did take the ring. Mikhail said the score was settled, but I told him if Ivan overstepped again, it would mean war. I think he understands that I have enough

firepower between my men, DeLuca, you, Killian and my cousins club, the Steel Vipers, to back that promise up. He said he and Viktor would make sure Ivan was contained.”

“Do you believe him?” I ask, not having much trust in the Levkin brothers.

“We’ll see what will see what happens,” he answers noncommittally.

I nod because there’s not much to say to that.

“How does married life feel, brother?”

“Getting better every fucking day,” I admit, and I see EZ’s answering smile. “That reminds me, Helena will probably be calling Liberty soon. I bought her a gallery here in Greece as a wedding present. She wants Liberty’s work in it.”

“That will probably require us visiting Greece from time to time. My woman does look great in a damn bikini.”

“I just finished the guest wing in his house.”

“Is it far enough way that I can make love to my woman without you hearing me?”

“It’s far enough away I can do the same,” I reply.

“Good enough,” he mutters.

“Before we hang up, I want to thank you for all your help. You had my back and saved my woman. I’m not going to forget that, EZ.”

“You can owe me one. With the Levkin trio in my backyard, I may need to cash it in.”

“Anytime, you know that.”

“Yeah, man. I do. Tell Helena I said hi.”

“Will do.”

We hang up and I waste no time walking to the elevator. When I walk out into the main corridor and then the courtyard, I breathe in the fresh air. I let myself into mine and Helena’s home feeling more relaxed than I ever have in my life. Things are coming together perfectly. The crew will start on Gio’s

house next, and I'm excited as fuck for each of my brothers to have a place of their own. The ghost of my father is completely gone now. I don't feel the darkness inside me anymore either. It's gone. Now there's just.... Helena.

And that's all I need.

Epilogue

Helena

Two Months Later.

I recline back against the soft cushions of the daybed swing that Marco had installed at the edge of our yard. It overlooks the ocean below and has become our favorite place to rest in the evening. In the little over two months since become Mrs. Stratakis, I've settled into my life, and I can barely remember what life was before having Marco's love.

"Hey, Princess, Marco says gently, coming up behind me. I close my eyes as I feel his lips glide against my neck. When he moves back, I tilt my head to look up at him. "You look as if you're in deep thought, baby."

"Not really. I was just reading the newspaper. There's an interesting article in there about how local billionaire Toban Cirillo has been embezzling money from his investors and no one can find him. They said he was spotted boarding his private plane a week ago and now they can't find him anywhere," I murmur, my voice mild.

"Really? That's horrible," Marco responds, his voice not even bothering to hide his humor. I roll my eyes.

"They think he and his son have gone to Russia where they were known to have business dealings. Incidentally, Russia doesn't seem to have extradition treaties."

"That's kind of smart if you think about it," Marco says absurdly. "They won't have to worry about being extradited

back to stand trial.”

I shake my head, laughing. “You’re horrible.”

He walks around and gets in the swing with me and I angle my body to curl into him, resting my head on his chest as his arm goes around me.

“How is your father handling the news?”

I sigh. If I have one black spot, this would be it. *My fucking father*. I think I hoped to find something human in him. I video conferenced him to show him my face and told him exactly what Zervas had did and was planning to do to me—including whoring me out to Ivan Levkin. My father just hung up on me. *He hung up on me*.

“He’s ignoring it, much like he’s ignoring me, but I think he got the message. He knows you’ve given him a gift by letting him live and do that on the outside and not in a jail.”

“Bullshit, I didn’t give him a gift. I gave it to my wife as a wedding present.”

“You gave me a gallery for my wedding present. You give me too much every day, actually,” I murmur.

“I don’t think I give my wife enough, sweetheart.”

“Well, there is one thing you haven’t given me that I’d really like,” I respond.

“Name it and it’s yours, baby.”

He says it so casually, but I know he means it. Marco spoils me and does it in a way that I let him because I know it makes him happy. Eventually, I’m hoping he’ll understand that he’s already given me the world.

“I want a little boy with dark eyes and blue flecks that make my insides melt,” I whisper softly.

I feel his body jerk in response. I look up at him to judge his reaction and he’s just staring down at me, his face giving nothing away.

“Are you sure?”

“Marco—”

“Honey, we’ve only been married a couple of weeks and you just started working in the gallery...”

“I’m my own boss. I have hired great help in the gallery. I want a baby so it will be close to the age of Melina and Antonio’s. That way they can grow up together. Don’t you want children, Marco?” I ask, suddenly worried.

Suddenly his lips stretch into a smile and those blue flecks in his eyes practically glow. “I want a girl with soft blonde hair and a laugh that makes the whole world feel like warm sunshine, Ena.”

My heart flipflops in my chest. I swallow down my emotion and look at the man that owns me heart and soul. “I guess we’ll just keep trying until we both get what we want.”

“That sounds like a plan, baby,” he groans, his lips coming down on mine.

Our kiss is gentle and full of love, it’s communicating emotions that neither of us can put into words. How can you describe something that is indescribable?

When we pull apart, I find myself telling him what I need him to know above anything else. “Thank you, Marco. Thank you for making every dream I’ve ever had come true.”

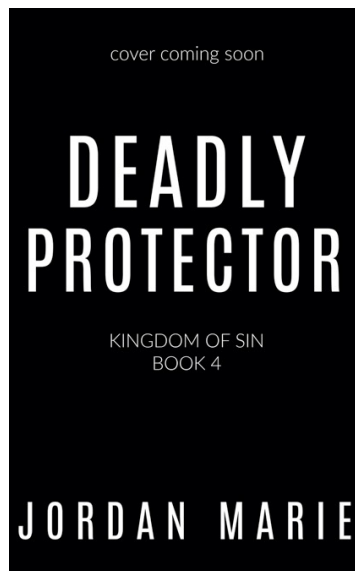
His hand comes down to gently cup against the side of my face. “Keep dreaming, Princess. Keep dreaming because I’m not about to stop now.”

He kisses me again and then we break apart to look out over the ocean. I do it with a certainty that with Marco by my side, I’ll always be living my dreams, because he’s my whole world and finally, I understand that is exactly what I am to him, too.

And that’s everything.

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So, even if it kills him, he'll protect her from himself, too.

The one thing he won't do?

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