



WRATHFUL KING

HIS KINGDOM MEANS NOTHING WITHOUT HIS QUEEN...

EVA WINNERS

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WRATHFUL KING PLAYLIST

<https://bit.ly/46hBRKS>

AUTHOR NOTE

Hello Readers,

Please note that this book has some dark elements and disturbing scenes to it. Proceed with caution. It is not for the faint of heart.

It is important to know that this book **CANNOT** be read on its own. It is part of the trilogy and you have to read all three books to understand the plot. Please be aware of dark themes.

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BLURB

It killed me to leave her behind.

Every night I closed my eyes to the images of her lifeless body in the hospital. Her second chance came, but it wasn't with me. It was with my brother.

I wanted to kill him and take his place. Except it wouldn't change anything. She hated me.

But then secrets unraveled. The truth twisted into something bitter before it set me free.

Masks dropped. Gloves were off.

I'd fight for her. I'd bring her back. I'd protect her even if it was the last thing I did.

We made a promise. She was mine, and I was hers.

To win, I'd risk it all. My heart, family, and life included.

Love makes you go all in.
Love makes you voluntarily stupid.
Love robs you of the humor you use to
protect yourself and leaves you speechless.
Love makes your soul crawl out
from its hiding place.
And then it strips you down,
and leaves you fully nude for all to see.

Zora Neale Hurston

PROLOGUE

REINA

Pain.

It ripped through me with relentless cruelty, letting me know I was still alive.

I reached up and jabbed my fingers into both eye sockets of the devil hunched over me. In response, he flailed his arms wildly and backhanded me. My cheekbone exploded, and I desperately blinked the black dots from my vision.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out.

This man would prefer it that way. It was Perez Cortes who enjoyed a fight.

Hot tears streamed down my face. I didn't stand a chance, but that didn't stop me.

I thrashed and scratched, snapped my teeth and threw fists. His hand cupped me between my legs, and I bucked away from him as best I could.

He froze.

Before I could process what was happening, blood spurted from his neck, covering me where I lay, and he let out a noise that was so inhuman I knew I'd never unhear it. Behind him, bottomless black eyes met mine.

“Sorry about that. Some men have no manners.”

I scrambled back into the corner, bringing my knees to my chest. My teeth chattered. My hands shook. Would he finally

rape me? The waiting and fighting, day in and day out, was wreaking havoc on my sanity.

He grinned as if he could read my mind while his eyes roamed over the flimsy, tattered nightgown I'd been forced to sit in for God knew how long.

“You’re going to bleed for me so prettily,” he purred in his shrill voice. “It’ll hurt as much as it’ll feel *oh-so-good*.” He threw his head back and laughed maniacally. “Well, for me anyway. I can’t guarantee *your* pleasure, but I would prefer it if you remained conscious.”

The panic attack ripped through me, crippling me in an instant. My chest tightened, stealing the air from my lungs. I began to hyperventilate, and before long, the world around me went hazy.

Numbness spread through my limbs as the taste of bile filled my mouth, and I knew I was about to sink into the abyss.

Footsteps echoed through the stone cell. Then... Quiet. Stillness. Nothing but painful breaths.

Like clockwork, the screaming in my head drowned out the silence. As did the agony in my chest, the ache in my bones.

Week one, I waited. Week two, I hoped. By the third, I despaired. Now, in what I believed to be my fourth week in isolation, parts of me were beginning to disappear, while others were transforming into something ugly and twisted.

I wanted to scream out and beg for help, but I knew it wasn’t coming. And my strength kept failing me. I felt sluggish. Disoriented. There were gaps in my memory. Sometimes I’d open my mouth and it was like I’d forgotten how to speak. I couldn’t remember what I sounded like. Other times I said nothing, but the whispers crowding my head spoke of things I had difficulty grasping.

It was futile to fight it, pointless to cling to the light when all I’d taste was darkness. So I got lost in that pain.

The voices in my head protested.

No one's coming for you. Get up and fight. Make them pay.

And I knew with certainty that I'd rather burn alive than live one more moment like this.

1

AMON

A Month Earlier

Destiny was a cruel bitch.

It had given me my cinnamon girl back only to throw a wrench into it all. Well, fuck destiny. Fuck everyone. She was mine, and I refused to let this be the end.

My wife's face was smeared with tears, dust, and blood as her hands roamed my chest. The bullets were still flying, and unless Hiroshi had called my men, I didn't know how we'd get out of this alive.

I lifted my head, searching for my right-hand man. He and my mother had been right behind us, but I could no longer see any sign of them.

"Heads down, fuckers!" Dante's voice echoed through the air and bone-deep relief shot through me. The sound of my brother's voice was like music to my ears.

The earth tilted on its axis for a moment and, ignoring my wounds and aches, I pushed my wife down and covered her body with mine. My hands cradled her face, her blue eyes locked on mine in sheer terror.

A grenade hit the ground. *Bang.*

Pain exploded in my back and I was shoved forward, my skull smashing into hers.

The world turned silent. There was no more shouting or gunfire. It was just me and her, in the middle of nowhere,

suspended in time. I promised that I'd protect her, but I was failing miserably.

I thought I heard her whisper, "Hold on. For me."

My back was on fire—at least that was how it felt. Reina's face blurred in front of me as pain flared, rendering me speechless. I attempted to shift but fell onto her instead, my limbs not cooperating.

Then I felt my body being pushed to the side. I willed myself to stand, but I could barely breathe, let alone move. I blinked the dirt out of my eyes and saw Reina stand up. Fuck, I had to get up. Help her.

A fresh round of gunshots scattered through the air, followed by a raw, agonizing scream. Where the *fuck* was Dante? I had no idea how he managed to get here, and I still hadn't caught sight of my mother and Hiroshi, but none of that mattered right now. I was so fucking grateful for my brother.

"No!" Reina's cry echoed out, piercing through my skull. I shifted and pushed my weight onto my knees, trying to get up. My vision turned crimson, and I realized it was blood. I hoped it was mine, not hers. Never hers. I couldn't bear the thought of her in pain. "Get the fuck away from him!" Her snarl was vicious as bullets started flying again.

Through the red fog, I saw my wife with a gun in hand, shooting at a black shadow that approached like a vengeful angel. I fought to move, determined to protect her. My light.

But just as my body finally began to cooperate, another bullet zipped through the air and hit me in the chest.

Reina's horrified scream was the last thing I heard as my vision turned black.

REINA

The silence was ominous, whispering of more bloodshed to come, as the chaos settled around us.

The car that Amon and I crawled out of was covered in bullet holes, one door blown off and lying on the gravelly ground two feet away. There wasn't another car in sight, not that I could see much in the dusty fog that surrounded us.

For a flicker of a moment, I thought I'd heard Dante's voice, but now, he was nowhere to be found. No rescue. No help. No sign of anyone but the men aiming their guns at me while I gripped my own.

The cold metal felt oddly familiar in my hand. I pointed it at the men who surrounded us, their intent to harm us clear from their refusal to lower their own weapons.

Instead of surrendering, I held firm and started shooting. Then all hell broke loose again.

I jumped in front of Amon's lifeless body, shooting at the men over and over again, and prayed for a miracle.

It felt like a nightmare. Yes, that had to be it, because the scene around me was too devastating to comprehend.

Amon—my world—lay dying at my feet, bleeding out. The man closest to me raised his rifle, but before he could pull the trigger, I crouched down, shielding Amon completely.

“Move out of the way or you'll be dead too,” the man ordered, his accent heavy. It wasn't Italian, more like... Spanish? No, not quite.

My upper lip lifted into a snarl. “Not if I kill you first.”

I aimed at his forehead and pulled the trigger, hitting him right between his eyes. As I watched his body slump to the ground, I turned to the others and, without a second thought, fired my gun nonstop until the bullets ran out.

My limbs trembled while my mind whispered the words I didn't want to hear: *He's dead.*

A man with bottomless black eyes and a crooked smile appeared through the smoke. He raised a hand, motioning for everyone to stop shooting. I could hear shouting in the distance. Whimpers. Cursing.

Good. Let them suffer. I had no regrets.

Suddenly, desperation washed through me. I was out of bullets and the men closing in looked too strong to fight.

I didn't stand a chance.

“Finally we meet,” the man drawled. “It's been a long time coming, Reina.”

Terror buckled my knees as I placed myself between him and Amon. I prayed there was help coming. Bullets were still flying around, but the fight seemed to have shifted away from us. Where were Hiroshi and Hana?

“And who the fuck are you?” I spat, sounding braver than I felt.

“Your future. Perez Cortes, at your service.” The voice slithered down my spine. “I'm so happy to finally have the golden child. You'll be my biggest prize yet.” The man was crazy if he thought I'd be going *anywhere* with him. His eyes fell to Amon's body and his lips curled into a menacing smile, revealing unnaturally white teeth. Shivers broke across my skin as he flicked a glance over his shoulder. “Check his pulse.”

“Don't you *touch* him,” I snarled, the emptiness in my chest matching that of the man's eyes.

He took another step closer, the stench of his cologne invading my senses. “And who's going to stop me?”

I launched myself forward and shoved him with all my strength, making him stumble. “I am.”

He stared at me, shocked, as he straightened his suit jacket. The nearby sounds of shouting and guns being fired faded into the background, leaving me with something more terrifying: the malice of this man. These guys had some serious backup.

Fear wrapped its invisible hand around my throat and my heart roared in my chest. The message ringing in my head was loud and clear.

This is the end.

My eyes drifted back to my husband’s body and the blood, chaos, and death surrounding us fell away. I’d rather die looking at him than at the evil that stood before me.

Then in one quick move, Perez Cortes pulled out a gun. Eyes never straying from Amon’s bloodied face, I braced myself for the bullet that never came. Instead, I watched in slow motion as it hit my husband, the bullet jerking his body.

I screamed and screamed and screamed until my voice became hoarse and a hard object connected with the back of my head, turning the world black.



I’d fallen into a deep pit of darkness.

My eyelids felt like lead. I tried to open them but they refused to move. Constant rocking shifted me back and forth, making me feel sick. Waves of nausea rushed through me and my temples throbbed like nothing else.

Slowly cracking open my crusted eyes, I was greeted by utter darkness. A flicker of panic ripped through me, tightening my throat with desperation. My heart was beating so hard it slammed against my ribs.

I squeezed my eyelids shut once more, my body pulsating with pain as I focused on the muffled sounds around me. Agonized cries. Soft whimpers. A constant buzzing.

Then the smell registered. Metal and salt.

I tried to muster the energy to move, but my brain felt too big for my skull, pulsing until the pressure became unbearable and threatened to explode. The ache drilled into me, kept me frozen in place. *Where am I, and why am I so weak?*

The only logical explanation was that I'd been injected with something. My mouth was drier than the Sahara and my tongue was heavy. The sounds around me, however dulled, pierced through my skull.

As my blurry eyes roamed the dark, I tried to shift again.

No luck. I forced myself to remember how I got here. Snapshots from the yacht, arriving in the Philippines, Amon's mother and Hiroshi—

“Amon?” I cried out, my voice hoarse. No answer. Just a terrifying silence. A sob crawled up my throat but I fought the urge to break down or let the panic take over as images of Amon sprawled on the ground rushed in. A tear slipped through my lashes. “No,” I whispered softly, more tears rolling down my cheeks as my shoulders curled in and began to shake.

A choking fear gripped me—for him, for myself. Where was he?

I finally regained enough strength to let my fingers roam, finding my hands and feet bound together with rope. My eyes traveled around me, furiously blinking the haze away. I was in a damp, steel-enforced box. *The buzzing. The constant humming. The rocking...*

I had to be on a boat. But how?

It was then that the whimpers and soft cries truly registered. I scanned the room blindly, looking for a glimpse of the others until I finally spotted them. Whites of eyeballs through the shadows. Barely visible bodies. Women slumped in the opposite corner of the box, caged up like me and looking like they were on death's doorstep. Some cried. Some prayed.

But we all faced the darkness together.

3

AMON

I shifted, the motion sending a soaring pain through my chest.

“You die, fucker, and I’ll kill you all over again!”

Dante sounded like he was underwater. Or maybe it was me who was drowning in the pit of hopelessness.

I peeled my eyelids open to find my brother’s face hovering over me. Where in the fuck did he come from?

“Reina.” It took all my strength to push the word out, and it sent me into a coughing fit. My ears rang, but I did my best to focus, desperate to hear my wife’s voice.

I resisted the temptation to slip out of consciousness, fighting my body’s reaction to the pain. I needed my strength so I could see her. Hear her.

“Don’t talk.” Another voice, one I couldn’t place. I turned my head to the side, but the glint of metal on gravel caught my attention.

The platinum chain with two Japanese kanji pendants.

Ignoring the ache, I reached for it with a shaking hand. My motor skills were shot, so it took several tries until I finally had it in my grasp along with a fistful of rubble.

Burning pain seized me and I closed my eyes and leaned back, the hard ground calling for me to rest my head.

Then darkness pulled me under.



I was in a soft bed when I woke up next, the ocean's familiar sound jostling my senses.

Somehow I managed to open my eyes as my surroundings slowly came into focus. The white walls. Blue ocean. I was in my compound in Jolo, Philippines. Then the smell of antiseptic and the sound of a machine registered.

“Get the fucking doctor.” Dante's voice again. Fuck! Was he always so loud? “He's waking up.” Footsteps next to my bed, a weight on the mattress beneath me. “Can you hear me?”

“I wish I didn't,” I grunted, my voice barely audible. “Where's Reina?”

He didn't get the chance to answer before the doctor rushed in to check on me. Poking. Probing. Speech, memory, and motor skills tests.

“Where's my wife?” I asked again, locking eyes with Dante once the doctor cleared me of permanent damage. “And what are you doing here?”

Silence fell and foreboding slithered through me.

My eyes narrowed. “Where. Is. My. Wife?”

The doctor glanced between us, shifting uncomfortably as he muttered something about excusing himself. The door clicked behind him and the stillness that followed was heavy. So fucking wrong.

“Did you fucking hear my question?” I felt like I'd aged a decade. “I swear to God, if you hurt her—” *I'll kill you.*

Brother or not, I'd end him.

He glared down at me. “First, you kidnap my bride,” he stated, although there was no heat to his voice. “And now you threaten me. Never mind the fact that you almost died on me.”

Shit, I felt like I'd died and come back to life as a bruised corpse.

“She’s not yours.” Fuck, why did I feel so fucking exhausted? Two bullets in me—one in the shoulder and one in the chest, inches from my heart—might have had something to do with it, but I didn’t like it. “She’s always been mine.”

“Took you long enough,” I heard him say under his breath. Then, “I was too late.”

Too late.

Fear rendered me speechless, and for a moment, I forgot to breathe. Every muscle in my body twisted up into knots. An avalanche of emotions boiled inside me.

I lost her.

For the second time in this cursed life.

No, no, no. God, please no. Anything but her. *Anyone* but her. I’d tasted life without her once before; I refused to endure it again. It was a slow, painful death.

“What happened?” I demanded with a low growl, which only increased the throbbing pain in my body. I ignored it. My fear for Reina was a thousand times worse.

My brother’s dark blue eyes locked with mine. “Darius got to me after you snatched Reina at the rehearsal dinner.” The blond fucker. “He mentioned an attack at his gym while he was there with Reina the day before the rehearsal dinner. When she disappeared after the party, he thought they’d gotten to her. He tried to call you but couldn’t reach you. We all did. I even tried calling Reina’s phone.”

My brows pinched. That couldn’t be. Neither one of us received any calls and—

“Fuck. Our communication system must have been hacked,” I muttered. “Reina kept trying to message her family and friends.” I was so stupid. I should have recognized that something was going on. Instead, I let myself get tied up with enjoying my wife. Goddammit, I should have been thinking with my brain, not my dick.

My chest tightened. “Who was it that attacked them? Where?”

“Brazilians. At his training center.” Why wouldn’t the motherfucker have told me that at the rehearsal dinner? “Luckily, his buddy was there, and they fought them off. Darius questioned one of the attackers Reina shot. It took him a bit to drag the truth out of him. Initially, they thought the Brazilians were after something else. I guess some shit they have going on.”

It would seem we all had some shit going on.

“How did you know where to find me?”

Dante rolled his eyes. “To tell you the truth, I wasn’t sure at first whether you and Reina had been taken by different people. I thought maybe your idiot cousin might have tried something, but then realized the fucker could never get to you. Although, I have to tell you, I think he sold you out.”

I didn’t think my cousin was the one who’d sold me out. Not on his own, anyway. He wasn’t bright enough for it.

“So how did *you* end up here?”

“I followed Mother’s digital footprint,” he stated matter-of-factly. “I knew she and Hiroshi would track you down once we found out you left with Reina. Good thing I brought Darius and Ghost, too. It was a full-on battle when we got there. Except... we didn’t get to you in time.”

Regret passed his expression. “You did for me, but Reina ___”

God, what were they doing to her at this very minute? She had to still be alive, although knowing the horror that trafficked women went through, I wasn’t sure if I should hope she’d hang on to life. Selfishly, I prayed she did.

“Ghost disappeared right after we rescued you,” Dante added, probably following the dark train of my thoughts.

“They were right behind me,” I muttered. When Dante gave me a puzzled look, I explained, “Right before the attack, Hiroshi and Mother were following behind me.”

He shook his head. “Are you sure? We combed the area and didn’t find any trace of them.”

“I’m sure.”

Pain throbbed in my chest and I grunted as I attempted to shift into a more comfortable position.

The moment turned stagnant, worst-case scenarios filling my mind. Tension, heavy and dark, lurked in what should’ve been paradise. We were supposed to be swimming in the turquoise waters beyond this room by now, and I was alone. I was *supposed* to keep her safe, and I’d lost her.

“The Omertà’s helping with the search.” His words barely registered.

I. Fucking. Lost. Her. That familiar bitter taste of failure filled my mouth, clogging my throat. Nothing in the world mattered but her. Not to me.

“How many days ago?” Dante’s brows creased with confusion. “How many days was I out?”

“Five.”

Fucking five days!

“Do we know for sure that the Brazilian cartel has her?”

Dante cleared his throat. “Surveillance at the docks show her being loaded onto a boat. I traced ownership to Perez Cortes through a shell company.”

When I was done with Cortes, he would wish he was never born.

4

REINA

Low voices became louder. Terrified whimpers grew more frequent. I strained to hear the words over the wild beating of my own heart, praying to stay awake. Over the last week, I'd been in and out, unsure of my surroundings and my reality. I vaguely remembered trying to attack a man for running his hands down my inner thighs, screaming and clawing, then someone locking me up.

“To shield the men from temptation,” he'd said. Was it the man with bottomless eyes and the accent? Or was it someone else? I couldn't remember, and frankly, I was starting to question what my mind conjured versus what was reality.

I tested my limbs and, to my delight, I could move them. I was no longer bound. I peered from under my lashes, not ready to reveal that I was awake and scared of what I might see. It looked like I was still separated from the other women. Except—*heck yeah*—the door to my cage was wide open.

Before I could celebrate, a voice halted my breathing and my movements.

“Romero and Amon will be looking for her,” one man said quietly.

Someone let out a throaty cackle. “Amon's dead, so he won't be looking for *anyone*.”

A sharp pain lanced across my chest. *No*. I refused to believe it. I hoped... for what? I hoped that, despite the odds, he'd survive two bullets to the chest.

“We have to get these women to Rio de Janeiro.” I’d been fucking kidnapped, and if those instructions were any indication, it was by the Brazilians. “From there, the women will go to Porto Alegre, and we can wash our hands of them.”

“You actually think we’ll be able to hide her from Romero and the Omertà?” another man responded with a heavy Hispanic accent. “Any of us?”

“We will, but they won’t be looking for us. They’ll go after the head guy. That’s Cortes’s problem, not ours. We did our part. Once we get to the port, Perez goes his way and we’ll go ours.”

“I can’t wait until we hit the fucking coast,” one of them muttered.

“Why didn’t we take a cargo plane instead of this fucking ship? We could have been in Brazil in a day. It’ll take three weeks *minimum* on a fucking boat.”

“Easier to smuggle flesh this way.”

“Fuck, it’s been a week and I still haven’t gotten my sea legs,” he complained. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to take it any longer.”

Oh my God! Hearing that I was part of flesh smuggling sent a fresh jolt of fear and adrenaline into my system. And these idiots were discussing seasickness like it was the most important thing in the world.

The sound of a hand coming down to slap a shoulder reached me. “This girl is worth *millions*, and she’s the ticket to Romero’s seat in the Omertà. She’s the jackpot.”

The other guy chuckled darkly. “It makes sense that we’re keeping her separate from the rest of the herd.”

I gritted my teeth at their demeaning reference.

“So he won’t be putting her up for the Marabella auction at Porto Alegre?” I had no idea what that was, but I suspected if I wanted to stay alive, I’d need to stay far away.

“He will, but nobody’s getting her but Perez Cortes. He wants to make this girl his little toy.” He let out a menacing,

hyena-like laugh while a shot of anger pumped into me at the man's callous words. "It's better this way since we'll get top dollar for her. I can buy my own goddamn private island after I get paid."

"We're going to need it to survive while Romero and the Omertà are still around," the other muttered.

"Don't worry, Romero's on his last leg. And the rest—"

A derisive snort completed the statement. It didn't sound good—for anyone in the Omertà. Jesus Christ, I was in really deep trouble. My nose tingled as I fought the urge to weep. I barely managed to swallow down the sob clawing its way up the inside of my throat.

Deep breaths, Reina.

Darius had trained me to fight. I just had to apply what I'd learned. It took me several moments to collect my thoughts but eventually Darius's voice filtered in.

Keep calm. Take stock of the situation. Leave a trail of your DNA wherever you can.

Their footsteps retreated and I risked cracking my eyes open fully. All I could see was their backs. Wide and stocky. I took in the scene around me, squinting to see through the low lighting.

Instinctually, I started counting. One, two, three... There were twenty captive women, all with various shades of blonde hair. *Twenty* women shoved into a cage like animals.

The men stopped in front of a cage near the container's exit, removing the padlocked chain and reaching inside. Two girls were yanked out forcefully.

The rattle of metal felt like a whip against my skull as the screams and cries started. For a moment, the world stopped spinning and horror filled the space. A shadow started to form inside me, wrapping around my soul in barbed wire and tearing at everything in its path.

A shredding sound—likely clothes—reached the confines of my cage, mixing with my labored breathing.

They were about to rape them.

I was on my feet in an instant. My footsteps were soundless against the metal floor, and I thanked all the saints that whatever they'd injected me with had worn off. Screams continued. I glanced around, finding a crowbar sitting on top of the box that was marked with symbols. *Japanese kanji*, I realized.

My fingers wrapped around the cold metal and I clenched my teeth to stop them from rattling.

One step. Two steps. Three steps.

I finally made it... just as one of the brutes was pushing the woman's legs open. The other woman thrashed at her side, kicking and screaming. Knowing I had to attack with efficiency, I swung the bar through the air.

Both women seemed to register my presence at the same time. Their eyes widened and they stilled.

Smash.

The horrible sound of a skull cracking vibrated through the air and rattled my bones. I didn't pause to evaluate. Moving to the other man, I repeated the same motion, only he was quick to defend himself.

I snatched the knife tucked in his waistband and swung it through the air, slicing him. A howl traveled through the metal-enclosed space. Blood splattered everywhere. He fell to the ground and I straddled him, the bar clanking against the floor with a loud noise.

"Now let's see how you like the torture," I gritted. His fingers wrapped around my wrist in an attempt to snatch the knife. I grabbed his hand, then banged it against the ground until it was limp. Then I started slicing his fingers. I should have been horrified at the pleasure I found in it. One by one, I tossed them through the air. "You'll never get them back."

The women started screaming and I raised my head, meeting their horrified looks. *Probably better if I finish him off quickly.* An echo in the far corner of my mind urged that I torture him, but he was still fighting like hell, so I reached for

the bar and swung it, not stopping until both men's faces were unrecognizable.

They were long dead, but that didn't stop me. My agony, my pain... I let it all pour into butchering their bodies. I was so engrossed in the massacre that I didn't hear the warning murmurs or notice the wide eyes from the women around me.

A rough shove between my shoulder blades came from behind just before a prick in my neck, followed by a burning sensation spreading throughout my veins.

I sucked in a sharp breath as I whirled around, the knife suddenly too heavy in my grip. A clunk against the ground. Bottomless eyes, one last heavy breath.

And then darkness descended, pulling me under once again.



“We need to get her an IV.” The unfamiliar voice stirred me from the haze. It sounded distorted, the ringing in my skull excruciating. An ache thrummed in my bloodstream and I felt like I was suffocating. “Her vitals are unstable.”

“We only gave her a small dose,” a man's voice explained. “It was like an adrenaline shot for the girl before it mellowed her out. She went crazy on the guards when they tried to have some fun with the other girls. The girl was possessed, I tell ya.” Fucking idiot. I wasn't possessed. I was furious, even in my drugged state of mind. “There are sliced-off fingers around here somewhere because the *loca* decided to throw fingers around so the demon could catch them.”

Huh? He was making that shit up. I cut up a few fingers, but it wasn't for any demon.

“If she's damaged, it's your life on the line, not to mention every single fucking member of your family.”

Someone wasn't happy, but I struggled to make sense of it. It was as if I was sinking to the deepest depths of the ocean

one second, and the next, I was on a soft cloud high in the sky.

I fought to reach the surface by kicking my legs, but they refused to move, heavy as lead. Pain shot through me as flames licked at my nerve endings, pulling me to consciousness.

A prick in my arm had a small whimper slipping through my lips.

“Dislocated shoulder, lacerations throughout her body.” The man’s voice faded before it came back with a vengeance, shooting up my spine. “Have you touched her?”

“No, boss. No, no, no.”

“She’s fine,” another man answered without a hint of concern in his tone. “When do we get our commission?” When he was met with silence, a muttered “never mind” followed.

Darkness licked at me, threatening to drag me back under. My temples throbbed, and I worried my skull was going to crack in half.

Cold fingers pried my eyes open and I let out a moan as soon as I was met with the bright light.

“There she is.”

The blurry image of a man appeared, and I stared into his menacing eyes. Horror shot through me. I tried to form words, but my tongue was dry, sticking to the roof of my mouth.

Good God, what was happening to me?

“What...” I croaked.

“Don’t worry.” The man with the black eyes leered at me. “Heroin tends to be rough on a person.”

Someone chuckled.

Oh my God. They injected me with *heroin*.

Vicious, primal rage shot through me. Suddenly I wanted to tear these men to pieces like I had Angelo Leone. My chest seized. I was living out some kind of sick nightmare.

With every ounce of strength I had left, I reached for one of them, and by some miracle, I grabbed a cock and squeezed with a vise-like grip, twisting it this way and that.

An angry screech exploded from the man's mouth. I swung my arm through the air, then began to hit and claw. And the whole time, I choked on agony and hate.

I'd make them all suffer. I'd make them beg for mercy.

Until someone shot ice into my veins, and it was dark once more.

5

AMON

Despite my best efforts to hold on to the sliver of light, I kept slipping.

My body clearly wanted to give up, but my mind refused. It reminded me I had my wife to think about.

I cycled through the promises I'd made her like a mantra, tethering me to reality. Safety. Protection. Happiness.

It was the only thing keeping me from letting go and falling further into this pit of despair.

I opened my eyes and found my brother asleep in the seat next to my bed, his arms folded over his chest and his legs outstretched. He hadn't shaved and he was donning some Einstein-esque hair.

"You look like shit," I managed to say. I coughed, and the motion triggered a blinding pain in the top half of my body.

My brother's eyelids flew open and he jumped to his feet. "Jesus, I thought you'd never wake up."

His hand came to my forehead and I tried to pull away but there was nowhere to go. "If you start stroking my hair, I swear I'm going to kill you," I said, my voice weary.

"First you'll have to get strong enough to kill me," he spat dryly. "And right now, you're lucky not to be in a wheelchair."

"Have you found her?" I hissed as the pain shot through my shoulder and down my arm. "Have you found my wife?"

I didn't like Dante's somber expression.

“Perez Cortes got her.” My heart twisted so fucking bad I was sure it was being pulled out of my chest. Perez Cortes was a sadistic motherfucker. “I learned something over the last week.”

“What’s that?” I asked while my mind already worked on a plan, starting with getting out of this fucking bed.

“Father had an agreement with Perez Cortes once upon a time.”

My attention snapped to him. “What? Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“How do you know?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. Angelo had never hid his business from us, exactly, and I didn’t remember seeing any mention of his business dealings with the Cortes cartel. “And what was the agreement?”

“Kian told me,” he explained. “It’s how Father obtained *stock* for his whorehouses.” It still disgusted me that he’d participated in that shit. “Apparently our old man liked to bid at Marabella’s auction too, for his more prestigious clients. And it gave him a taste of girls from all different ethnic backgrounds.” If Angelo Leone were alive, I’d murder him myself. Right. The. Fuck. Now.

“Anyhow, Father ended it the same summer Romero moved his family back to Italy. Kian said our father made a rash and out-of-the-blue decision and turned against the trafficking of illegitimate mafia princesses.” The Cortes cartel had been running the Marabella auctions for the past two hundred years. It was a lucrative business and drew men with large pockets and no scruples. They’d built a hefty fortune from it. “Apparently Cortes has had it out for Angelo since then.”

My brows furrowed as puzzle pieces slowly fell into place. If Angelo suspected one of the Romero daughters was his illegitimate daughter, he might have ended the deal so as not to risk putting her in danger. If this turned out to be true, it would be the one decent thing he’d done in his life.

“Maybe the marriage arrangement was what ultimately put the Romero girls on Perez’s radar,” he added pensively. “Although it was you who sealed the deal.”

My eyes narrowed. “I wondered when you’d bring it up. After all, we have to discuss it.”

Dante gave me a blank look. “Discuss what?” he asked innocently. Christ, I didn’t have patience for any of this shit right now.

“Reina,” I gritted.

He let out a wry laugh. “What? Eager to discuss kidnapping my bride?”

I tilted my head, studying him. What did he mean? Not even he would have followed through with those wedding plans after what I told him, no matter how pissed off he might’ve been that I’d taken her.

“She was never your bride,” I snapped. “And you know it.”

He casually lifted his shoulder. “She could have been.”

“No, she couldn’t and wouldn’t have been. Not unless you wanted to be a dead man the moment you said ‘I do,’ assuming I’d allow the ceremony to get that far.”

“You could have called or texted me, you know,” he grumbled.

“I did text you. I told you she was your sister and I was saving your ass.” Literally.

He eyed me suspiciously. “What?”

“Stop playing games,” I said, suddenly exhausted. “I’m sure the doctor would tell you it’s bad for my health.”

He glared down at me. “This isn’t the time for games. After everything we’ve been through, you should know that I wouldn’t fuck around. *What text?*”

Dante watched me, his expression solemn.

“Fuck,” I muttered, pushing my hand through my hair and meeting his gaze. It was unpredictable how he’d take the news, but there was no sense in delaying it any more. “Reina’s your half sister.”

Silence fell and my brother’s eyes widened slightly as the reality of the situation sunk in.

“Half sister,” he repeated slowly, standing up and pacing the room. One minute stretched into two, then three. “I almost married my half *sister*?”

Dante had always been my ally, the only one I could trust. And even when we went through periods of distance, I always had his back. I could only hope that the secrets about to come out wouldn’t destroy that.

I waited for the wheels in his brain to click the rest of the information into place, and I saw the exact moment he started to question my connection to Reina.

“You and her—”

“She’s not my half-sibling.” Today was the day I came clean to my brother. “Because Angelo isn’t my father.”

“What?” His voice was eerily calm.

“Angelo isn’t my father,” I repeated.

I could almost hear the drumming of his heart as we stared at each other, the silence hanging thick between us. I’d intended to take the secret to my grave, but learning Reina wasn’t Romero’s daughter changed it all. I’d destroy every bridge, every mountain, and every continent for her.

“How long have you known?” His question held a note of accusation, not that I could blame him.

“Three years.”

Like the quiet ticking of a bomb ready to detonate, I pushed the feelings of guilt down, though the tension in my body didn’t release. It reflected the frustration and betrayal staring back at me in my brother’s dark blue eyes.

“Three years,” he repeated slowly. “And you couldn’t find a moment to share that with me?”

I ran my tongue across my teeth. It wasn’t an unreasonable demand, but I hated being questioned.

“And you never thought to share with me that you falsified Angelo’s signature to marry Reina,” I stated calmly, though fury flared and simmered my blood. For reasons I couldn’t explain, it bothered me that he would want her. Fuck, it bothered me that he’d even taken her on a date, though it was clear neither one of them had enjoyed it.

All Reina’s dates and all her time belonged to me. Nobody else.

“How about the fact that Reina is my half sister? You couldn’t tell me that? Jesus, what if she hadn’t resisted my charms and we’d done the deed?” A grimace twisted his face.

I snickered. “In your dreams, maybe.” Dante was determined to pin this shit on me. “Besides, I only recently learned she’s not my sister.”

Dante’s eyes widened. “So who’s your father?”

Tick, tick, tick. “Romero.”

“Holy fucking shit,” he drawled, laughing. “You were screwing your sister.” I shot him a glare. If I wasn’t feeling half dead, I’d wring his neck. “Well, you didn’t know she was your sister, so it’s okay,” he pacified. “But still. Holy fuck. You were screwing your sister.”

“She isn’t my sister,” I gritted. “And if you don’t stop, I’m going to give you a brand-new concussion. One you won’t recover from.” *Empty threat.*

“Okay, don’t get all bent out of shape.”

I let out a heavy sigh. I needed him to stop jerking my chain. “Besides, I sent you a message after Reina and I got married, right along with her true birth certificate that lists Angelo as her father.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, hoping to release some of the pressure behind my eyelids. “But

apparently all my communication was blocked, both ways, with everyone except Mother and Hiroshi.”

“I didn’t get any messages or calls.” He pulled out his phone and waved it in front of my face. “See?”

God, please grant me patience so I don’t murder him. I loved him like a brother, but he drove me insane.

“I just told you my communication lines were interrupted, Dante. Please listen. We don’t have time to keep going around in circles. Catch up.”

He rolled his eyes. Rolled his fucking eyes. “Then stop repeating yourself.”

How much damage could I do by banging my skull against the wall?

“Stop fucking with me, Dante. Thank me for saving you the agony I went through for *three years* thinking I was in love with my sister, and then help me find her.” I shot him a serious look. “Why her, anyhow? Knowing what she meant to me.”

“I just want to see you happy, brother.” This was the man I knew and loved. Dante leaned against the wall, his eyes flickering with his own secrets. “I didn’t really want her...” He paused to take a deep breath. “I wanted to know why she killed Father—”

“How do you know she did it?” I interjected.

“I had my ways.” I narrowed my eyes. “Regardless, I was going to either destroy her or demand she marry you.”

He would’ve never gotten the chance to destroy her, though the current situation could be classified as slightly ironic. Maybe it was my claim on her that destroyed her in the end.

No, don’t fucking think that way. I would find her and bring her back. The silence grew so deafening it was about to erupt like a volcano.

“Obviously, my plan for her changed. But not for Romero.”

“Well, you really thought it through, huh?” My bitterness was hard to tamp down. “It never occurred to you to ask why, exactly, she killed Angelo? And don’t tell me you’re cut up about his death. We hated his guts.”

His eyes shot to mine. “You know?”

Dry amusement filled me. Of all the fucking words I said, this was what he clung to. The fact that I knew. “She recently admitted to killing him.”

“Alone?”

I watched him, wondering just how much he knew. Reina told me she did it alone, but I didn’t believe her. I’d stake my life on her sister and friends knowing. “She claimed so.”

He let out a sardonic breath. “And you believe her?”

“I do.” Not really, but there was no point in beating a dead horse. Angelo being the horse in question.

“Why? She could be lying.”

I shook my head. “She’s not. Angelo attacked her. It was self-defense. We both saw the traces of the beating she got.” When he gave me a blank stare, I added, “It was the day we saw her in Oba’s restaurant. He attacked her in her apartment a few days before.” I let the words sink in, then continued, “We both know how he liked to choke his women.”

There was no use denying the facts. We saw firsthand the beatings he enjoyed handing out. Dante rubbed his jaw, pondering my words.

“Why switch names, then?” he demanded. “Especially if he knew Reina was his?”

It was my turn to be confused. “Explain.”

“Romero and Father drew up a contract that arranged a marriage between their eldests. He did it shortly after the fiasco he got himself into with the Yakuza, so roughly six, seven years ago.” He let out a bitter laugh. “Phoenix and you.” There wasn’t a single scenario in this universe that would have me agreeing to marry Phoenix. “He really never told you?” Dante’s tone was suspicious.

“Why would he tell me and not you?”

“It would seem you’re not the only one to keep secrets to yourself,” he deadpanned.

“I swear, you’re giving me a headache with your logic.” I threw my head back onto my pillow. This conversation was going nowhere.

“So why end it with Reina if you wanted her and you knew you weren’t a Leone?” said Dante.

I locked eyes with my brother, hoping we’d even *be* brothers after my next admission. “Because I learned that I was Romero’s son, but I didn’t know Reina wasn’t his biological daughter back then.”

Understanding flickered in his eyes while memories of the shit we’d been through flashed through my mind. The truth was, blood or not, I’d always think of him as my brother.

“I know it’s a lot,” I stated slowly, the fatigue crowding my senses. There were too many things weighing on my mind. First and foremost, Reina.

“It is, but you’re my brother. I don’t give a fuck who your father is.” Dante cleared his throat, but not before I heard his voice break. “How many times did you save me from him? How many times did you save Mother from him? For Christ’s sake, you put a gun to his head to protect us.”

A memory I had long since forgotten rushed to my mind. It was the summer I met the Romero family. The same summer that Grace Romero had killed herself. And there it was, clear as day.

“What did you fucking do?” Father bellowed, his gun pressed against Mamma’s temple.

Dante and I stood frozen in the foyer, having just returned from the beach. It had been a great day... I should’ve known it was too good to be true.

“I didn’t do anything,” she screamed. “I just ran into her at the store.”

“In fucking Venice?” he yelled. “No, you went looking for her.”

Dante and I shared a horrified look, but it was the clicking of the gun that snapped me into action. I took a step forward as Mamma’s alarmed eyes found us.

“What’s going on?” I demanded in a steady voice, despite the fact that my twelve-year-old self was shaking like a leaf. “Lower that gun before you hurt someone, Father.”

He pressed the tip harder against her temple, and blood drummed in my ears. I couldn’t understand why my mother wasn’t scared. She stood there, unapologetic, her back straight and fire burning in her eyes.

“Nothing, musuko.” I knew she was lying. My heart beat a fast rhythm.

“Nothing?” Father screamed. “She’s dead. Fucking dead, and it’s your fault.”

“Who’s dead?” Dante asked, his face pale.

Father ignored him, intent on hurting our mamma. “You never could stand being the second choice, could you, Hana?” He dug the metal into her head, like he wanted to rip right through her skull. His face was red with rage, but there was something else there too. Something I had never seen before. Terror. “You’re a fucking snake.”

Father’s finger curled around the trigger and I was certain this was it. He’d kill her this time. Mamma hadn’t moved a muscle, nor had she attempted to fight him, and I wondered how they’d gotten to this point.

“You can’t just kill her,” Dante tried to reason, looking back and forth between them, eyes wild. “Maybe you should just marry her, so Mamma won’t feel like the second choice.”

Despite our fucked-up upbringing, Dante was a romantic at heart. Father must have thought it too because he threw his head back and laughed. The unhinged, crazed laugh traveled through the cursed castle like the ghosts and memories that haunted it.

“Marry her,” he scoffed. “I don’t turn leftovers into my main course.” A wry laugh tumbled from his chest. “I don’t fucking worship a woman who cost my woman her life. Put her kids and mine in danger,” he shouted.

“She deserved to know the truth,” Mamma retorted coldly.

Maybe Mamma had had enough of Father’s mistresses? But that didn’t explain his comment about her seeking this one out in Venice.

Father smiled, pushing the muzzle of his gun into her mouth now. “Say another word, Hana, and I’ll pull the trigger.”

My eyes fell to the cabinet on the right, the one I knew he kept another weapon in. It was only three steps away. Dante’s eyes found mine, and I could see he had the same thought.

“What did she do?” Dante asked, moving into his line of sight. “Do we need to help some kids?”

That had Father’s attention. “We can’t. He knows now, and he won’t stop until he has her. Possibly both.”

“Who?” Dante asked. Something about the desperation in Father’s eyes didn’t sit well with me, but I shook it off. He was a bad man. He was the bad guy in every scenario. “Who?” he repeated.

Father pushed Mamma toward my brother, then waved the gun in their direction as if he intended to shoot them both.

“Which one is mine?” he screamed, his eyes locked on her.

Another step and I ripped open the drawer, pulling out the gun. I didn’t wait for his answer before I pointed it at him, hoping it was loaded.

“Put the gun down,” I said, my arm steady. “If you hurt them, I will pierce your fucking skull and watch you bleed out with a smile on my face.”

The pressure around my neck tightened and I lifted up so that I could knead it out. I now suspected I knew who Mother and Angelo were talking about. Slowly, every puzzle piece was shifting into place.

“Are you okay?” Dante asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Being shot twice might have something to do with that. I fucking feel like a ghost,” I said instead of answering his question. “How did it come to be that Reina was promised to you? And why is your signature on the agreement between Romero and Angelo?”

“Right before his death, Father switched the name to Reina, but he never made it official.” The news rocked me to my core. It was the last thing I expected. Reina and me. In an arranged marriage. “Father called Phoenix inadequate and crippled.”

“Don’t repeat those fucking words again,” I gritted. Angelo Leone was a piece of shit, but it could very well be that the old snake had used it as an excuse if he suspected Phoenix was his. After all, it was what he’d told Reina. “What happened to that agreement?”

Dante gave me that venomous smile that never amounted to anything good. “After Father died, Romero called me up. He wanted to formalize the agreement. Prior to his death, Father insisted that Phoenix’s name be switched with Reina’s.”

Angelo truly believed Phoenix was his, which led me to another conclusion. Reina’s mother must have had an affair with Angelo for a while if he was unsure which girl was his.

“Why did Romero change the names though?”

That unhinged look gleamed in Dante’s eyes. “Fuck if I know, but it worked for me. It was just about the time the videos started.”

“When did all this happen?”

“About a year ago.” He grinned. “My only caveat was that I sign as Father.”

“Why?”

His brow creased as if he hadn’t heard me right. “I didn’t want to piss you off.” Then, as if he thought he sounded too sensitive, added, “Or hurt you.”

If I wasn't in so much pain, I'd have rolled my eyes.

"This switcheroo doesn't make any sense," I growled.

He shrugged. "It doesn't, especially now that I know Reina's my half sister."

"Did Romero offer an explanation for why he wanted to switch my name with yours?"

Dante shrugged, a dark expression casting shadows across his face. "He didn't, and knowing your feelings for Reina, I insisted that I just falsify Father's signature." He gave me one of those smiles he reserved for when he stirred trouble. "That way I could just blame the bastard." Usually Father *was* the one to blame. "I knew you wouldn't have let me marry her. In fact, I counted on it."

"Jesus Christ, Dante. You're fucking crazy."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment." This talk was somewhat of a welcome reprieve, however temporary. "Did it ever occur to you that you'd be forced to go through with the marriage?"

He rubbed his jaw pensively. "No, that scenario didn't cross my mind. I was certain you'd grow a pair and step in." *Idiot*. "However, since Reina went off and married you, Romero still owes me a bride. So it'll be his oldest daughter after all."

He rubbed his hands together while I closed my eyes and leaned my head back again. I fucking hated that I couldn't jump up and move.

"I'll leave you to rest," Dante announced, and my eyes opened slowly. There would be no rest for me with this constant squeezing of my heart. Not while my wife was in harm's way.

"Call Kian. I need him to get me into Perez's compound."

He shook his head. "You're in no shape to go anywhere."

"Call Kian," I ordered, then closed my eyes to the images of Reina in pain. I could almost hear her voice calling out for

me. “Tell him I’ll give him anything to get here as soon as he can.”

“Okay, it’s your funeral.”

If I didn’t find her, it’d be my funeral anyhow.

I’m coming for you, wife. Just hang on.

6

AMON

I sat in my office at my compound in the Philippines, studying the options at hand.

There weren't many. Cortes was a paranoid bastard and had a habit of killing off his men without a second thought. It kept his location a well-guarded secret. Few people knew where the home base for the Cortes cartel was, and it just so happened Kian was one of them.

It had been two weeks since she was taken. The memories of the men opening fire on us plagued me. What if she was hurt? What if she'd been shot? I didn't dare think about her pain because it sent a burst of fresh fury through me.

Every night I dreamt of her. Every night her soft voice called for me, begging me to save her. My mind conjured the worst images that I didn't dare voice or think about during waking hours.

Dante broke the silence. "Hiroshi is wondering what the plan with your cousin is."

Since the attack, I'd kept my distance from Hiroshi and my mother. Until I was certain about the state of affairs, I wouldn't risk any more mistakes. Not when it could cost Reina her life.

The men who surrounded the compound and kept watch weren't the ones Hiroshi brought with him when he shifted his allegiance from my cousin to me. These were *my* most trusted men.

“No plan.”

“You still suspect he and Mother had something to do with it?”

“I do.” She could have been the master orchestrator for all I knew.

“What about the document she had us looking for?” Dante asked. After all, it was what connected us to Romero.

“I don’t know if there was anything in that document between Ojisan and Romero. Or maybe it doesn’t even exist. I don’t know.” I pushed my hand through my hair. “I feel like there’s something else, I just have no idea what.”

Dante shook his head. “I just don’t believe Mother would ever put your life in danger. She would have anyone’s balls for breakfast if they so much as thought about hurting you,” he reasoned. “She’d never allow you to be shot. You almost died, for fuck’s sake.”

“Maybe. Doesn’t explain where they disappeared to after the airport.”

When I woke up in the hospital, Mother and Hiroshi were nowhere to be found. I had to demand they be tracked down and brought to me. They were never found. I sent a message to both of them demanding a meeting. No response.

Hiding didn’t speak in her favor. On top of that, during our short encounter at the airport, she refused to acknowledge Reina as my wife.

It led to mistrust. My mother had spun some lies, but I’d never known her to be cruel. My chest rose and fell painfully. It was hard to think of my own mother—who I’d taken care of after every beating she’d endured at the hand of Angelo—being cruel to someone in my life.

“She can’t possibly despise her that much.”

My gaze met Dante’s. “Then why did she let me believe Reina was my half sister? She fucking knew that Angelo and Romero’s wife had had an affair.”

“You can’t be positive,” he reasoned, taking her side. “That shit between Father and her happened twenty years ago.”

“I don’t give a shit.” The red haze from the day we were attacked blurred my vision. “I don’t trust them. Keep them the fuck away from me.”

I needed to get moving before I lost my shit, but I was drawing a blank on the best way to penetrate the Brazilian cartel. I’d pulled in all my favors and ordered an army of men to comb the oceans and ensure we got to Reina before Perez Cortes’s cargo hit the Brazilian shores.

Rising to my feet, I made my way slowly toward the window. Getting shot was a bitch, but I should be grateful neither bullet was lodged in my heart. I might have not survived it.

The late afternoon setting sun spun gold rays over the ocean, signaling the end of another day and reminding me of how powerless I was.

Two weeks. Fourteen days. Three hundred and thirty-six hours. And every single minute had been agony. I was going fucking insane.

I waited for a ransom demand to come. It never did.

I even sent a request through the dark web to be part of the Marabella agreement and live auctions—which would put me on the opposite side of the Omertà—only to be answered with ominous silence. It was an agreement Perez Cortes controlled, which allowed only the most vicious and cruel mobsters to participate. He’d organized it, and the agreements he had in place had an entrance fee north of ten million dollars.

“I have to tell you something, Amon.” I sought out my brother’s eyes at his serious tone. “I was trying to find the right time for it.”

“Spit it out.” By the look on his face, it wasn’t good news.

“The Omertà knows Reina killed Angelo.” Tension shot through me. Killing a member of our own—no matter the circumstance—was never received well.

“How?”

His jaw clenched. “I told them.” Shadows flickered in his eyes, and it took me a moment to see them for what they were. Regret. “It was never my intention. I was furious with you for grabbing Reina before I could get the information I needed from her, and I blurted it out to Marchetti. It went to shit from there.”

A wave of disappointment so steep and hollow washed over me. My insides erupted in dangerous flames, the inferno threatening to consume everyone around me.

“You didn’t think to wait and ask me first?” I asked, my voice tight. “You didn’t *care* that might mean a death sentence for her?”

A potent fury spewed from my pores, but I kept it in check. I loved my brother, and protecting him was part of my DNA. However, Reina was my life. I couldn’t fight the Omertà and the fucking cartel at the same time.

“I couldn’t get in touch with you, Amon.”

“Goddammit, Dante,” I bellowed. “It’s Reina we’re talking about. You know what she means to me.” Another guilty expression flickered across his face and I took a deep breath. “You can’t keep reacting. The best attack is a logical offense that lets you hold all the cards. Now those cards are out of our hands.”

“Well, I was pretty fucking mad,” he spat. “How that fucker died was supposed to be *my* decision. It kept me going. And then—”

And then he lost his purpose. I understood that feeling too well, except I channeled it inward while Dante used it to destroy everything around him. I let out a heavy sigh, unsure where the shit with the Omertà would take me.

“You know full well that if you killed Angelo, the Omertà would put you on trial and end you. Then the Leone family would lose their seat at the table.”

He shrugged. “I was willing to take that chance.”

“It would’ve been suicide, and you know it.” But then again, Dante had been on that dark path for a while now. Ever since his own kidnapping. “Angelo was never worth throwing away your life.”

His jaw clenched and his blue eyes turned to dark blue pools, the flicker of resemblance to my wife’s lingering in them.

“You know the Omertà—especially Marchetti—won’t forgive Reina for the murder. They don’t want to have a war between patriarchies and their offspring on their hands.” Dante was right. Enrico was the biggest upholder of the fucking law in the Omertà. He was convinced those rules prevented brothers from killing brothers, sons killing fathers, the works.

“Fuck,” I muttered. If it was Aiden Callahan or even Giovanni Agosti, we’d be able to mitigate it, but Enrico Marchetti was a by-the-book kind of guy. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* “We’ll have to solve one problem at a time. First things first: Reina.”

“If she’s found—” My dark look had him altering his statement. “*When* she’s found, they expect her to answer for it. You know it won’t be good.”

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t give a shit what they expect. They won’t get her.”

“Brother—”

“They. Won’t. Get. Her.” And that was final. “We’ll tell them I did it. Or I’ll step away from the Omertà. None of it means anything to me anyhow, not unless it remains a way for me to protect her.”

Dante met my eyes and nodded. “I’ll stand by you. After all, she’s my half sister, and I caused this shit.” That he did, however unintentionally. “God, she was a Leone for all of one second, and then just like that, she’s back to being a Romero.” I shook my head at his comment, but pride filled my weakened heart. “We’ll save her, Amon. No matter what.”

“No matter what,” I repeated with conviction. “We’re bringing her home.”

I had never been the type to wait for shit to happen or for my enemies to make the first move. I preferred to obliterate everyone and everything in my path to keep those I loved safe. And yet here I was—failing. Going out of my mind with possible scenarios.

It was the reason I promised heaven and hell to Kian in the hopes of recruiting his help.

“Where in the fuck is Kian?” I needed to get our plan laid out and go after her. I had my best men searching for her, and it still wasn’t enough. Perez Cortes and my motherfucking cousin were nowhere to be found.

“He’s on his way,” Dante assured me, sitting on the couch with his feet propped up on the coffee table. He was dressed like a beach bum—flip-flops, white Armani shorts, and a black T-shirt. He was the picture of relaxation, except for his sharp expression and the gun tucked into his waistband. “Darius is coming too.”

Great. “Is Darius the only fucking guy working with Kian?”

He shrugged. “Blondie insisted. He says he cares about her and won’t rest until she’s safe.”

I liked Darius until I didn’t. His fondness of Reina still pissed me the fuck off, but I couldn’t deny he was highly skilled, and no matter how reckless he could be, I would need him on my team.

“And before you say anything, Kian anticipated your protests and stated that if you refuse Darius’s help, he’s out,” Dante chimed in. Darius was a nauseating pill I’d have to swallow.

I narrowed my eyes on my brother while reining in my temper. “The moment I have Reina, I’m sending him packing,” I muttered.

“Maybe Darius will sweep Reina off her feet,” Dante chirped. He really did have the worst sense of humor, not to mention an inability to read the room. My jaw tightened, my knuckles burning with the need to drive my fist into his face.

“And then maybe he’ll kidnap her from the bad guys and marry her.”

“Not unless he wants to die,” I muttered. Maybe I was being immature, unreasonable, considering he’d never touched or slept with Reina. But he’d had her attention and smiles for the past three years, and that alone pissed me the fuck off. I held grudges. Fucking sue me. “Besides, polygamy is illegal in most western countries.”

Dante lit up his cigarette. I noticed he was smoking more than usual lately, a clear sign of his stress levels. “Yeah, let’s not waste our breath on minor details,” he drawled. I reached for the document Illias had given me what seemed like months ago now. “Have you heard from Romero, your newfound father?”

I paused with the paper in my hand.

“No, why?”

“I told him I want Phoenix, since Reina ran off and married you.” Well, he didn’t waste any time.

“What makes you think Phoenix will agree to the arrangement?” I questioned. “After all, you called her lacking. I’m sure Romero shared your sentiment with his daughters.”

His eyes narrowed. “I found Phoenix lacking, but only in information.” I wasn’t the one who needed the mix-up explained, but I didn’t think Dante would be grateful for my input on the topic. “Phoenix won’t know what really happened.”

I didn’t follow his train of thought. “What happened?”

Dante pushed his hand through his hair, tugging on the strands. “You know I’d started to receive videos of Father’s body parts.” I nodded. “Remember when video clips were coming?” I nodded. “In one of the latter ones, I got wind that Reina was directly involved in it. I even got a snippet of Reina with Father’s dead body.”

I shook my head. “Father attacked Reina in her apartment. How would anyone get that on video?”

Dante let out a dry laugh. “How would anyone have shit on Konstantin? On Marchetti? We were all getting videos. Well, except for you.”

“I felt so fucking left out,” I remarked sarcastically. “You still have that video?”

“They’re designed to vanish after the receiver has played it.”

“Did you ever show it to anyone before it disappeared?” I questioned. I sure as hell hoped he didn’t show it to Marchetti.

His eyes narrowed. “That’s hardly the point.”

“Dante,” I hissed.

“No, never. And I’ll tell Marchetti that I was pissed off and made up the whole thing about her killing Father.”

“He won’t buy it.” Marchetti wasn’t dumb. Far from it. Tension rolled through me at his blindness. “The intent of those videos was to stir trouble among all the allies, including our own. I wonder what’s being held over Romero’s head.”

Dante shrugged. “What do we care? Romero’s hardly an ally.”

That might be, but he was Reina’s papà—fuck, my biological father—and we should know what sins he was hiding.

“Maybe, but he’s been helping dismantle flesh trading. It’s hurting Itsuki, my idiot cousin. The Brazilians. And let’s not forget Sofia Volkov.” I’d had enough of this spiraling conversation. I had to find a way to get to Reina. “Let’s table this for now. Besides, it’s not like he didn’t deserve it.”

“Fine, but this isn’t over. Reina, who never had to endure what we did, shouldn’t have had to get her hands bloody. She shouldn’t have been involved at all. It should have been *me*.”

Yes, the ghost of Angelo Leone still haunted us.

I heard muffled arguing outside my office.

Dante and I locked gazes, both of us drawing our guns just seconds before the door swung open. A stone-faced Tomaso

Romero spilled into the room with clenched fists, his arm around one of my men.

“Where are my daughters?” he bellowed, his gun pointed at Cesar’s temple.

It took a moment for the word to register.

Daughters. Plural. Shit!

7

AMON

“We tried to stop him, but he shot two of your men,” Cesar gritted through clenched teeth.

A grim smile tipped the corners of my mouth and I nodded.

“If he was able to penetrate these grounds, they deserve to be shot.” Glancing at Romero, I pinned him with a stare that could kill. “How did you find this place?”

Straightening his suit jacket, he offered Dante a passing glance before returning his attention back to me. “Where are my daughters?” he asked again, ignoring my question.

I looked behind him, not bothering to stand. “It’s okay, Cesar. You can go.”

Dante’s right-hand man scowled. “I’m not leaving you with this—”

“Shut the door behind you,” I stated calmly. He shot me a disapproving look before leaving without another word.

“Where are they?” Romero exploded, crossing the room in three long strides.

“Not here,” I gritted.

“When did Phoenix disappear?” Dante demanded, straightening on the leather cushion. “Amon took Reina, not her sister.”

Romero stood in front of the desk, legs shoulder width apart and temper steaming. Even in his declining state, he

strived to exude strength, but nothing could mask the dark shadows under his eyes or the paleness of his skin. He looked as bad as I still did, but that had everything to do with cancer and nothing to do with bullets.

“He forced my daughter to marry him,” he exploded. “Her sister probably went after her.”

“Phoenix is not here,” I deadpanned.

“Then where the fuck is she?” he roared. “She disappeared the same night that you kidnapped Reina.”

“I don’t fucking know.” My jaw clenched in annoyance. “But she’s not here and never has been.” It was obvious Romero never had a handle on his daughters’ whereabouts. “And I have no time for your theatrics. I’m waiting for Kian to get here, and then we’re heading for Brazil to get Reina.”

He paled. “Cortes has her?”

I nodded, my jaw clenching. My mind bubbled with horrific images of how my wife might be hurt, and judging by Romero’s expression, he was picturing the same.

“I plan on annulling this marriage, Amon. You have no fucking idea what you’ve done.”

The fire in my veins turned to ice and I shot to my feet, finding myself towering over Romero with a lethal smile. “Try taking her from me, old man, and it’ll be the last thing you do.”

It wasn’t a very effective threat, considering the man was dying.

“Since when do you care for the daughter of your enemy?” he asked, suddenly calm, but a hint of dread lurked in his dark eyes. “And don’t fucking bullshit me, I know your mother well enough to know she poisoned you against me and my children.”

“You’d know all about it, since you’re still legally married to her.” I heard Dante suck in a sharp breath. This was unfolding quicker than even he expected.

Romero stilled. “Choose your next words carefully, son.”

It was ironic that he used that word when he didn't even know the truth. Unless... realization struck through me.

"You knew," I hissed, crossing my office and slamming his body against the wall, a pile of books crashing to the ground from the movement. "You fucking *knew*. All along, you knew I was your son. It's why you orchestrated this entire goddamn arrangement with Dante in the first place." I heard Dante muttering my name in warning, but I was too far gone. Too furious to stop. "How long?"

"How long *what*?"

"How long have you known I'm your son?" I accused, bitterness lacing my voice. "You put Reina and me through hell."

"And you went after your own half sister."

Did he not know Reina wasn't his? Well, he'd learn. Right the fuck now. "She's not my half sister." A range of emotions skidded across his face—surprise, resignation, acceptance. Then I came to the only plausible conclusion. This man knew one of his daughters wasn't his, but it didn't matter to him. Or he was too weak and pathetic to find out. "You knew one of them wasn't yours," I said with conviction. "You just didn't know which one."

He flinched. "They're both mine."

"That's where you're wrong," I spat. "Reina is mine. My wife." Meeting his furious gaze, I challenged him to contradict me. As we glared at each other, I couldn't help wondering what had caused him to end his marriage to my mother and how in the fuck I'd found myself fighting both my mother and him. "Either stay and help me find my wife or get the fuck out of my way. But know one thing, you will never—fucking ever—take her from me."

I let go of him and took a step back.

"How did you find out?" The stillness in the air contrasted the turmoil lingering in Romero's eyes.

I reached inside my desk drawer and pulled out the birth certificate—the original one—and handed it to him. I watched

his Adam's apple work as his eyes scanned the paper.

"I always wondered which man she'd run to," he muttered bitterly.

"What do you mean?" I gritted. "You didn't know who she had an affair with?"

He raised his head. "No, Grace left me in the dark about it. She also refused to say whether it was Reina or Phoenix who was my child." He pushed his fingers through his thinning gray hair. "She ended the affair and the man, who I now know was Angelo, refused to accept it. He..." He gulped audibly, struggling to continue. "He wasn't pleased when she chose to end things."

"What are you saying?" Dante hissed, his jaw clenching.

Romero shook his head. "All I knew back then was that Grace ended it, and whoever her lover was didn't take it well and got rough with her."

Dante and I shared a glance. That sure sounded like Angelo. "That motherfucking—" Dante broke off, burying his face in his hands. "Thank fuck Reina wasn't raised by him. She'd be as fucked up as the rest of us."

Which meant big points for Romero considering he could have abandoned Grace when he learned, and he didn't. He could have demanded a paternity test, and he didn't. He'd forever have my gratitude, if nothing else.

"It's in the past," I finally said. "Angelo was an asshole, but their past fuckups are not our problem. Reina and I are carving our own lives, and I'll be damned if I let you stand in our way."

Dante's eyes gleamed with excitement. "Exactly, so stop cock—" I shot him a warning look. "Stop *marriage*-blocking and going on with blah, blah, and more fucking blah. Just thank all the saints that Reina didn't fall for my charms. Every other woman does."

Jesus fucking Christ. With that attitude, Dante would blow his chances of marrying Phoenix to smithereens.

“What’s got your panties in a twist, Dante?” Romero shot back. “Scared you’re no match for my Phoenix?” I snorted out a chuckle, the sound so foreign to my own ears I was reminded that we were in no position to be shooting the shit.

Dante narrowed his eyes. “I’m totally a match. Just watch me, old man.”

“Enough,” I growled, silencing both men. I stared at Romero. “The focus is on rescuing Reina and learning where Phoenix is. I find it hard to believe that Perez Cortes would bother with Phoenix.” When Romero’s expression darkened, I explained, “It has nothing to do with her hearing. Perez has an obsession with blondes, and she’s not one.”

“Thank fuck,” I thought I heard Dante mutter under his breath.

Romero stared at me, the expression in his eyes pensive.

“If you’re willing to take on Cortes, you must truly love her.” His words were spoken softly, but the look in his eyes was one of absolute conviction. “As long as she loves you and chooses this life with you, you will have my support.”

“On that note,” Dante drawled. “Don’t forget you owe me a bride now. Phoenix will suffice.”

Romero eyed him suspiciously. “I believe you found her ‘inadequate.’ You’re crazy if you think I’ll let my daughter enter into a marriage with an ignorant and unhinged man. A fucking deranged lunatic.”

Dante grinned his crazy smile. “You don’t have a choice. The agreement, remember?”

“I remember, but you seem to forget that it was Reina’s name on it,” he replied with an equally vicious smile. “And there isn’t a clause for *replacements*.”

Dante’s usual confidence remained firmly in place. “We shall see about that,” he said with a detached tone. “Phoenix will be on board with this marriage, just like Reina was.”

My jaw clenched. “She wasn’t on board with marrying you. Only me.”

Dante waved his hand casually. “A tiny, insignificant detail.”

“You two, shut the fuck up. I will tell you this, a Romero never betrays his own blood.” Romero’s cryptic statement left me guessing whether he was talking about me or his daughters. “I want my daughters back home, safe and sound.”

“When we find them”—when, not if—“my wife stays with me. She chose *me*.”

Romero looked back at me with pride, the kind I had never seen in Angelo’s eyes. Shaking my head, I turned away, only for his fingers to clamp around my bicep in a vise-like grip. Fuck, he was strong for a dying man. Gritting my teeth, I forced myself not to react as I slowly turned to meet his unrelenting stare.

Releasing his hold on me, he slammed his fist against his chest.

“If I’d known about you, I would have been there for you.” A moment of silence passed between us, and for the first time, I saw this man as more than an enemy. More than my mother’s ruin. More than Reina’s father. “Romero never betrays his own blood.”

“How did you learn I was your son?”

“The videos,” he muttered. “When everyone in the Omertà was getting videos, mine were about you,” he explained. “When Angelo randomly insisted we change the name from Phoenix to Reina, I insisted we changed the name from yours, like Angelo wanted it, to Dante’s.”

We stared at each other, only the sounds of the waves drifting in from the open window breaking the silence. Seconds felt like minutes before he finally let out a rough breath and raked a wrinkled hand down his stubbled face.

“Well, she’s mine now.”

“You love her.” His tone left no room for argument.

Shoving my hands in the pockets of my pants, I glanced toward Dante, who let out a condescending laugh. I couldn’t

wait to repay the fucking favor.

“I do. I’d burn the world for her.”

As the two of us observed each other, something shifted. I had always been taught that if you controlled the power, money, and fear, you’d control the world. I’d justified my every move and choice over the last twenty years with that conviction.

Until Reina. Power and wealth were no longer my priority. My wife was the center of my life, and the only reason I planned on maintaining the power now was to protect her.

“Tell me what happened, Amon. Then we’ll come up with a plan together.”

“I have a plan,” I gritted. “Kian’s on his way. We get into Cortes’s compound, and we get her out.”

“Then let me help.”

I caught Dante’s terse nod in my periphery. We could use Romero as an additional resource. At this fucking point, my ego wouldn’t be getting in the way. While Reina was out there, alone and vulnerable, our differences no longer mattered.

The tension coiled in Romero’s shoulders as I caught him up on everything that happened since our wedding: the helicopter from my yacht, landing in the Philippines, the attack, and ultimately waking up without his daughter, being nursed to health. He listened quietly, taking it all in.

Romero rubbed his chin pensively. “The Yakuza has wanted to get its hands on her for years. When I learned your cousin worked with Perez Cortes, I put the marriage agreement in place. To protect my daughters.” The anguish in his voice matched the one in my chest. “He... If she’s even still alive...” He swallowed. We all knew what Perez did to women. “He’ll destroy her.”

Fuck, I couldn’t mentally go there. I wouldn’t. My chest hurt so fucking much, and I knew it had nothing to do with the bullet wounds.

“I should have kept her on my yacht,” I rasped, my guard down and my bloody heart in my hands. I’d lost her twice already and it had all but fucking destroyed me. This plan had to succeed. “I should have recognized the signs of betrayal.”

By my mother and Hiroshi. It had to be them.

“Amon, you’re a Romero. I have full faith you’ll get my baby girl back.”

I would, even if it was the last thing I did. I wouldn’t allow fucking *anyone* to dim her light.

When I glanced up, I found a determined look on his face. “This family sticks together. Through thick and thin. And I refuse to let the underworld be the last thing my baby girl sees in this life.”

The world was about to burn.

8

REINA

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I blinked my eyes open and a gasp tore from my lips.

Blood. A lot of it.

I was lying limp on the cold tile in a pool of red liquid.

No, no. Please, no.

Mamma's eyes met mine, then her ghostly pale hand reached out to stroke my cheek.

"Mamma..." I choked on my tears. Or maybe it was blood, I wasn't sure. "Why are you crying?"

My palm covered her hand on my cheek, and despite the coolness of her touch, I leaned into it for comfort. She was so cold that goosebumps rose on my skin.

"I'm sorry for everything, baby."

A dark shadow fell over her face and my heart squeezed. I wanted to blurt out that I loved her, that I'd protect her, but I couldn't find a single word that was willing to slip past my lips.

She smiled and stroked my cheek gently, tears swimming in her eyes. "You and Phoenix will do better, won't you?"

I nodded, even though I didn't understand her words. The woman from the store upset her today. "Mamma, what's illeg—" I struggled to repeat the word that woman spat in Mamma's face. "Ille... gi... timate."

Blood dripped from her wrist in an oddly rhythmic tempo. Like some horror soundtrack.

“It means that one day, they’ll come for you. But you’ll be strong, won’t you, my little queen?”

My heart shuddered and I tapped my chest, hoping to extinguish the suffocating feeling inside my lungs. I swallowed the lump in my throat, but it only grew bigger and bigger.

“I will,” I breathed weakly.

“Keep yourself and your sister safe, my girl.”

Soon, her face turned crimson, sending terror through me.

“Mamma!” I screamed as blood filled the bathroom until I was drowning in it. I opened my mouth to screech for help when horror rushed in and I gasped as I was jerked down into a pool of blood.

My eyes shot open from the nightmare—no, not a nightmare, but a memory twisted into a nightmare, and instead of red, all I faced was darkness.

My heart raced in my chest, hammering against my ribs.

I couldn’t move, couldn’t even turn my head to the side. Each breath seemed to demand energy I didn’t have.

It had to be the drugs.

I was sprawled on the cold floor, the smell of urine permeating the air and overwhelming my senses. Slowly, my eyeballs shifted in my skull and I strained to study my prison. An old mattress. Metal door with thick bars. Metal floor. I even tasted metal.

The familiar rocking registered, along with the faint sound of waves slapping. I was still on the boat, then. Judging by the pain in my limbs, I must have been thrown into this cage. Or maybe whatever I’d been injected with caused this hollow ache.

A groan vibrated in my throat and I had to blink furiously through the pain. I felt it everywhere. My bones hurt. My

muscles even more so. Ice shot through me, immediately covering my skin in goosebumps.

I had never felt like this before.

“It’s the withdrawal.” I slowly turned my head, my skull feeling heavier than ever, and locked my gaze onto a girl lying in the cage right next to mine, alone just like me. A mane of blonde hair hid her face. I opened my mouth to say something, but my throat was too dry to form words.

“They’ve been tube-feeding you,” she explained. “And shooting you up with heroin. You’ve killed six of their best men since you got here.” I blinked. I didn’t remember it. Any of it. “They want to make sure you don’t kill them all by the time we hit the docks.”

“D-docks?” I rasped in a voice that didn’t sound like mine.

“Brazil,” she added. “Another few hours and we’ll be put on the auction block at Porto Alegre.” She made it sound like we were meat, cows about to be slaughtered. How long had I been out? “That’s when our hell will start, definitely nothing *alegre* about that fucking town.”

Fear obstructed my airways and the buzz in my brain harshened. Her lips moved, but I couldn’t hear a single word that left her mouth.

Something burned in my arm, and when I looked down and traced the canvas of needle marks, panic crashed into me, drowning out every other emotion. But that wasn’t the worst part. It was the flimsy material clinging to my body.

“Who put this nightgown on me?”

“I did,” she murmured. “I’m sorry. It was either me or one of the guards.”

Relief washed over me, my eyes burning with tears while my whole body started to convulse. “Th-thank y-you.”

She shifted and crawled closer, reaching her hand between the bars to clasp mine. I winced when she squeezed it, but her soft golden eyes stayed focused on me.

“When we get there,” she whispered softly, “don’t look at any of them. Don’t catch their attention, whatever they say or do. Stick by me.”

It sounded like good advice, and I couldn’t help wondering how she knew these things. She knew where we were going... Had she been here before? “Okay.”

“What’s your name?”

I met her golden eyes. How could she be so strong when I was falling apart? My skin itched, screams bubbled in my throat, but I jerked a terse nod anyway. “Reina.”

She nodded. “I’m Liana.”

Unable to contain it anymore, I yanked my hand from her grip and rubbed my skin, dragging my nails over it. “It’s the heroin,” she explained. “The last dose they gave you was two days ago.”

“I just... I don’t understand what’s happening to me. Am I addicted?” I rasped. The look in her eyes was my answer. Finally, a sob broke from my lips. Why couldn’t I have died with Amon? That would have been more merciful than this.

A pair of hands reached through the bars and grabbed both of mine. “Don’t worry about that.” Her voice wavered slightly, but I held on to it. “We’ll get the fuck out of this. One way or another.”

The unspoken words were clear. *Death*. I could only hope for it to come swiftly.

9

REINA

I held Liana's hand as we were pushed across the dock, up a flight of stone steps, then out into a filthy courtyard. There were so many young women dressed in similar white dresses, being herded together like cattle. There were guards surrounding us, armed to the teeth.

"Don't make eye contact," Liana reminded me in a soft whisper, shifting us deeper amongst the women.

"Won't there be police around?" I croaked. "Coast guards or something?"

"This town is overrun by crime lords. Courtesy of the Cortes cartel. There'll be no help coming from the police. Most don't even speak English."

Ache and dread seeped into my bones, taking center stage in this living nightmare. My fingers trembled, and despite the scorching sun, I was *freezing*.

I was terrified. I was furious. I was heartbroken.

My Amon was dead. Our fairy tale had become a tragedy. There was no second chance, no coming back from this. I didn't even know if I wanted to anymore.

A scream fizzed up my throat. I wanted to rip these monsters apart.

Liana squeezed my hand, almost like she could sense the storm I was brewing beneath the surface. "Breathe, Reina."

The words were barely a whisper, but I let them guide me. I focused on the one positive: we were no longer caged up in

the hull of a boat. I closed my eyes and forced fresh air into my lungs, desperate for the familiar lightness, but all I could taste was the darkness swallowing me. I needed a sliver of hope to hang on to. My sister's smile. Amon's laugh. Grandma's determination.

Be strong. Mamma's voice was a whisper sailing in the wind.

She was right. They came for me, just like she said they would.

Hang in there, cinnamon girl. The soft breeze carried Amon's whispers and the throbbing ache in my chest grew. I gave my head a subtle shake. I had to be strong. I had to stay focused. *Breathe. Focus. Survive.*

We stood near the marina, under the blazing sun. I was so dehydrated I didn't even think I'd be able to cry, my mental and physical state worsening by the minute.

I caught movement in the corner of my eye. A car with tinted windows came to a stop. Whimpers and cries increased before an uneasy hush descended over the prisoners. A dark shadow emerged from the car.

Tall with broad shoulders. Slicked-back hair. Sleek, black suit molded to his body.

But it was his cruel expression and dark, bottomless eyes that had me crushing the bones in Liana's hand. He was the one who'd put the final bullet into my husband.

Another man exited the car behind him and—

No. It can't be...

Short. Stocky. A suit that stretched at the seams. My breath was cut short when our eyes met and he pinned me with a look of contempt. The incident from my boarding school days rushed to the forefront of my mind. *Amon's cousin.* I'd never forget that face.

As I watched in muted shock, he turned to say something to his companion, whose dark gaze had already found mine.

A shudder crept up my spine at his menacing smile. I'd seen bad men. I'd killed bad men. But this one was pure evil.

"*Las putas,*" he called out, the disdain on his face clear. "Welcome to my territory."

"Fucking bastard," I muttered, my teeth clattering while shivers racked my body. "I'm going to murder them both."

"Shhh," Liana warned.

Amon's cousin leaned over and whispered something in his business associate's ear. The fucker laughed, found my gaze again, then gestured at his men.

"The auction may begin," the devil announced.

Auction. The word was like a poison in my body.

I felt a rough shove between my shoulder blades and I stumbled.

"Move, *puta.*" I wanted to snap. What was the point of shoving me around if they already knew I belonged to Perez Cortes? Maybe someone else would swoop in and save me. Although I doubted I'd find a Good Samaritan in this crowd of barbarians. They were all villains—ugly, vicious, and disgusting.

And still, I hoped for anyone—fucking *anyone*—but Perez Cortes.

Liana tugged us toward the podium.

"Stay close to me." My eyes traveled over the girls. There were so many of us. Younger than me. Older than me. Some, like Liana, looked to be the same age as me.

I rubbed my arms, my nails scratching at my skin. "Who are all these girls?"

"They're the illegitimate daughters of Camorra, Cosa Nostra, Bratva. Among other underworld families."

Illegitimate daughters.

Those words. I'd heard them before. And then the memory dropped into place.

The first summer we spent in Italy. The summer we tried to make Venice our home.

“Attacked in our home! And you know how much I hate dark, enclosed spaces.” Mamma was on the phone, her whispers cutting through the silence of the store while I stood still, trying to figure out who she was talking to from behind the dressing room curtain. She was still mad at Papà for putting us in the room behind the fireplace.

It was wrong to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help it. My curiosity got the better of me.

That was until Phoenix ran up to me and pinched my shoulder, signing, “You're it!” then bolted. My squeal echoed as I took off after her.

I sprinted through the store, oblivious to the sales ladies' glares, when my breath caught at the sight of a beautiful silver gown. My sister forgotten, I came to a stop, unable to tear my eyes from it.

Picturing myself in it, I lost myself in the princess stories I loved so much. Until a body slammed into me, making me stumble into it. My hands flew, flailing through the air to steady myself.

One minute I was on my feet, the next I was on the floor, suffocating under the sea of pink, green, lavender, black.

“Reina!” I winced at Mamma's voice, unable to swim through the material of dresses and find my way out. *“Where are you?”*

“Here.” My voice was small as I finally pushed my head through a ruffled pink skirt.

Mamma stood in front of the messy pile with one hand on her hip and her phone in the other.

“For the love of God,” she scolded.

A sales lady screeched in Italian, calling out names. “Gucci! Chanel! Valentino!” She must have heard our names wrong when Papà dropped us off and introduced us.

I shook my head. “No, I’m Reina,” I grumbled miserably, speaking in English. I didn’t know Italian.

“Why can’t you behave, Reina?” Mamma’s tone was cross. “You’re just like—” She cut herself off, horror passing her expression.

“I’m sorry, Mamma,” I said, lowering my head, ready to take the scolding. I was about to get an earful and I had no good excuses to use.

A loud sound shattered the air and my hands came up instinctively, covering my face. Screams rippled around me as harsh footsteps echoed through the room. Men spilled inside, dressed in all black and wearing heavy boots.

Mamma shrieked. One of Papà’s guards appeared out of nowhere, shoving my head back into the sea of clothes while I fought him, desperate to find Phoenix.

“Stay down!” Those were the last words I heard before a weight fell on me. I jerked violently, my screams muffled by the silky material that had suddenly lost its appeal.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

It was dark. I couldn’t see anything. I couldn’t breathe.

Something heavy suffocated me, and it took me a moment to realize it was a body on top of me, and it wasn’t moving. The screams and raw shrieks had my ears ringing. More gunshots filled the air, bodies falling down with loud thuds.

First the bodyguards, then the sales ladies. The smell of rust filled my nostrils, like the coins Mamma sometimes gave us to throw in the fountain.

I shook with fear, my face buried in the material. All I could do was tremble and cry silently and pray for the shrieking to die down.

Until the terrifying silence came.

And the words I’d spend the rest of my life forcing myself to forget.

“Your girls are illegitimate,” the crazy lady screamed while I shook underneath the pile of expensive fabric. I suddenly didn’t want to be here in this store or in this country. I wanted to go back home where things were peaceful and Mamma didn’t cry all the time. “They will come for her. The Cortes cartel. Or who knows, maybe Angelo will decide he wants to raise her.”

“He’ll never have her,” Mamma cried. I shifted under the material, risking moving the silk around so I could see what was going on. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The woman cackled. “Really?” Her dark eyes and pink dress didn’t suit her bitter smile. “Did he tell you the annulment came through? Because it didn’t; he lied. His marriage to you is a sham. He never divorced me.”

A hand grabbed the back of my head and I yelped. Kicking and screaming, I tried to fight her off, but it was pointless. The angry lady yanked me up to my feet by my hair.

“Mamma,” I whimpered, wide-eyed. My heart pounded against my chest and I brought my hand to it. It hurt so bad. I couldn’t see Phoenix anywhere. Did they take my sister?

“This little brat disgusts me,” the woman spat, tugging on my hair and making my scalp burn. “She’s a carbon copy of you.” What did she mean by that? The shop was spinning now, and I felt like I was going to be sick.

Mamma shoved the woman away, then pushed me protectively behind her back.

“Don’t ever touch my daughter, Hana,” Mamma hissed. She was freaked out, her entire body shaking and her face pale, but she was still protecting me. “Or I swear to God—”

“Teach her a lesson, won’t you?” the woman interrupted, flicking a look behind her to one of her men.

Mamma buried my face in her rich silk skirt, but not before I saw the man approach. He smiled, but it wasn’t a nice smile. It was evil and dark.

He raised his hand and Mamma’s grip on me tightened. I squeezed my eyes shut, when—

Smack.

Mamma staggered back from the impact. I cried out, feeling her pain like it was my own.

The man who hit her turned his attention on me and I instinctively stepped back, further into my mamma's skirt. He brushed his fingers over my cheek and I flinched.

"Don't touch her," Mamma growled like a lioness. "Tomaso will destroy you when he hears of this."

The woman—Hana—smiled another scary smile. "I hope he tries," she purred in a low voice. "He'll never win against Angelo. You and I both know that. And his death will leave your girls up for grabs." She stepped closer, wrinkling her nose as if she smelled something rotten. "You know they use them as young as eight."

I didn't know what she meant, but judging by Mamma's face, it wasn't good.

When the lady and her men left, Phoenix and I cried all the way back home to Papà's villa. It wasn't until I ran into his open arms that I felt safe again. He kissed the top of my head as I nuzzled my nose in his chest, his love and strength my anchor.

The clawing pressure around my neck tightened as I was yanked back to the present. Amon's mother. *She* was the one who threatened my mamma. She hurt our family. How could I have forgotten?

Someone pushed me from behind and I scrambled onto my knees, my memories evaporating with the sting. But they weren't forgotten—no. Amon's mother was the one to attack Mamma at the store.

"Let me help you," Liana offered, pulling me up and drawing us tighter into the group again. "Be brave," she whispered. "Don't show them your fear, keep it locked tight."

"What do you mean...?" I trailed off as we climbed the narrow steps leading onto the stage.

Rows of men waited, eager to witness our degradation and humiliation. Eager to procure something that was never meant to be theirs.

The next few minutes were the worst of my life. All the captive women were paraded like animals. Some sported whip marks, others bruises. But each of us had had our spirits destroyed, our souls crushed, in one way or another. We were about to be trapped in a cycle of hell where the only merciful way out was death.

I watched in horror as women were auctioned off, one by one, until there were only two of us left. The guard took Liana by the arm, dragging her to the front of the stage, but I held on to her so tightly, I almost yanked her shoulder out of socket.

She winced.

Releasing her hand, I muttered, "Sorry," then watched as she stumbled forward.

Her face was white as a ghost and her shoulders were stiff, but still she put on her brave face, glaring at our "audience." Men leered at her. Women shouted vile words in Portuguese I didn't understand. Someone threw an egg, but she was quick to duck, so it landed on a guard behind her instead. Despite this fucked-up situation, the corner of my lips tugged up slightly.

The bidding started. I watched wide-eyed as the numbers were called out. One hundred thousand. Two. *Three*. The bids grew higher and higher.

"Two million to the man in the back!"

Gasps traveled through the yard and everyone's eyes searched for the buyer. A man towered over most of the crowd. Dark hair. Aviator glasses that hid most of his face. Tattoos. Jesus, he had a lot of tattoos.

Before I could blink, Liana was being ushered off the stage. She looked over her shoulder, her panicked eyes meeting mine.

"It's going to be okay," I mouthed, even though I didn't believe it. I was beginning to think this was our end.

Before I could dwell on that fact, I caught an object flying through the air in my periphery. I ducked on instinct, avoiding what looked like a liquor bottle coming straight for me. I jumped and cried out in pain as it shattered and shards of thick glass tore into my ankle and the soles of my feet.

Then the tip of a gun pressed against my back and butted me forward.

My turn.

My breaths turned shallow. I looked over in time to see Liana's buyer lift her effortlessly and throw her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. *No...*

"And our last prize..."

My eyes darted to the audience. I wrapped my hands around my waist to keep from doubling over just as I locked on menacing eyes. His chilly smile turned my insides to ice.

I knew—without a shred of doubt—he would be the highest bidder.

"Our king, Perez Cortes, has offered ten million dollars. The illegitimate daughter of famed Hollywood actress Grace Bergman... Reina Romero." Growls. Gasps. Total silence. Then a booming, sadistic laugh. The kind that raised every hair on my body in alert. "It's been a long time coming. Perez has had his sights on her for the better part of the past few years, so the price was set by vote and he was given the first buy option in the auction."

Those words crushed any hope of escape. Instinctively, I knew escaping Perez Cortes would be an impossible mission. Not unless I channeled my inner Houdini and escaped the coffin I was destined for.

This was all just a show. The man with eyes that promised horrors already owned me. After all, he was the orchestrator of this auction and this was his game.

A guard gave me another rough shove that had me staggering on weak legs. When I glanced up, I was met with those same eyes, and they promised nothing but retribution. For what, I didn't know.

One thing I knew for sure though. The aches in my body, the withdrawal from that disgusting poison, it was all nothing compared to what this man was about to put me through.

But he had another thing coming if he thought I'd go down without a fight.

AMON

The platinum chain with the kanji pendants crumpled in the palm of my hand. The memory of her scent—cinnamon and sunshine—was the only thing keeping me going. My strength had been slowly returning, but I still wasn't back to my old self.

My recovery was proving to be extremely slow, but I knew if I wasn't careful, I'd be set back even more, and that wasn't something I could afford.

The colors over the horizon were changing rapidly. The reds shifted to golden and pink hues. The bifold doors were wide open, the terrace and living room filled with allies—Kian and Darius; Illias Konstantin and his right-hand man, Boris; Enrico Marchetti and his right-hand man, Manuel; the Callahan twins—Tyran and Kyran; Romero and Cesar; and of course, my brother.

“Where's Ghost?” Marchetti asked, his gaze sharp. “He's usually up for this kind of stuff.”

The long mahogany table was set in the center, and all the men sitting behind it exuded power. For the first time in a long time, I was hopeful.

“I couldn't get in touch with him,” Dante said, making his way to the bar and grabbing a beer.

“That's odd. Usually where there's trouble, the three of you follow,” Marchetti deadpanned. “And he likes blood as much as you two.”

“We’re saints compared to all you old men. But don’t worry, we’re not far behind.”

“Another few months and you’ll be all caught up. Sinners just like us,” Manuel chimed in. “Who knows, it might even be this week.”

Dante flashed his middle finger at him. “You’re just jealous you can’t keep up with us anymore.”

Manuel just grinned. “At least I don’t have to stalk them like a creep.”

My brother’s growl vibrated through the room.

“I swear to God, Dante. Your moods are giving me whiplash,” Enrico gritted.

“I thought you’d be used to it with your young wife,” Dante taunted, grinning savagely and ignoring all our warning glares. “Trust me, when those girls are together... Yeah, nothing tranquil about them. One second they’re angels, the next they’re in jail for disturbing the peace.”

“What?” Illias narrowed his eyes on Dante and his big mouth. Fucking idiot.

Dante just rolled his eyes. “What? Your sister didn’t share that with you? Of course, if we knew she was your sister, we would have called, but hey... not my fault you all keep secrets.” Then, as if he wanted to emphasize the words, he said in Italian, “*Tutti voi.*” All of you.

“Best we don’t comment on that,” Romero chimed in, trying to prevent everyone from drawing their guns.

“Or we can let the fucker hang himself,” Kyran added, clearly up for some fun and trouble.

“*Basta!*” I snapped, ending all the bickering.

“Is Hiroshi coming, or should we get started?” Konstantin asked, his shoulders rigid.

I shook my head. “Let’s get started.”

The tense beat of silence followed. I hadn’t told everyone about Hiroshi. I’d thrown all my resources into uncovering

details of the attack, but I still hadn't found out how my location had been compromised. I couldn't risk anything going wrong with this mission.

All I could think about was my wife. I had a reach that stretched across continents, but when it came to the Cortes cartel, it wasn't enough.

"What about Phoenix?" Dante asked randomly.

Romero's jaw tightened and his expression darkened. "Your interest in Phoenix and her whereabouts is disturbing, Dante."

"Just looking out for you, old man." Dante's tone clearly stated he didn't give two shits about him. This attitude toward Romero wouldn't serve him well at all. "Actually, let me be honest with you for a change." He stared at Romero, challenging him silently. "Your lack of interest or worry for your eldest is more disturbing."

At this rate, these fuckers would kill each other before the rescue.

"What about her?" Marchetti demanded, clearly unaware that she'd gone missing. "Did Cortes get her too?"

"No, he didn't," Kian answered firmly. "Only Reina is mentioned on the dark web. Trust me, if he had both girls, he'd be bragging."

"And we have no clue where Phoenix is?" Darius questioned.

"No, we don't. Now, back to Reina. Her life is in danger; Phoenix's is not."

A line of heavily armed men stood guard along the perimeter of the room, each with their eyes on their respective bosses. The energy in here was steeped in apprehension, each man waiting with bated breath to hear the details of my plan.

"Did Perez reach out with demands?" Kian questioned. I shook my head.

"We have to infiltrate that fucker," Darius gritted. "Level him to the ground. It's been a month. Perez is one sick bastard."

Do we know if she's even alive?"

My cool façade slipped a notch as I fought the images in my head—of Reina begging for help, pleading for mercy.

"She made it to the dock," Kian stated calmly. "They held an auction. My contact indicated Perez was the highest buyer, therefore there were no other bidders on her."

"That fucking—" Darius quickly tempered his expression.

"What auction?" Dante questioned.

Kian's gaze never wavered. "Perez set up a once-in-a-lifetime auction selling the illegitimate daughters of criminals from around the globe. He has kept it under the radar, planning and conniving, setting up his web and traps. The dark web is brimming with it. It seems my brother has been planning this for years."

Kian hated recognizing his blood relation to Perez. It killed him to even utter those words—my brother—out loud.

The temperature in the room dropped sharply.

"Why in the fuck are we only hearing about this now?" Enrico demanded.

"Because we didn't know about it," Kian gritted.

"Usually, Cortes ran the Marabella Mobster arrangements, not auctions," Illias stated pensively. "He was very much like Benito King with the Belles and Mobsters agreements in that regard. Why did Cortes change it to an auction now?"

Kian shook his head. "I don't know. It's hard to follow his logic. My assumption is that he's been trying to blindside us with this shit. He's been gathering a list of illegitimate daughters born to the crime lords for years. His little hobby. Also, he's been after Sofia Volkov for that information too."

"What do we know about this auction?" Tyran, the less manic Callahan twin, asked.

"Not much. The main attraction of those auctions was the illegitimate daughters." Kian looked as sick about it as I felt. "He might have done something like this before, but this is the

first time he's made it public. I've kept my eye on Perez and have never known him to orchestrate such a blatant and large-scale attack. Word is he even has Sofia Volkov's illegitimate daughter. Obviously, he's gotten brave, especially with how much he's advertising it."

Silence filled the space, stretching like a rubber band, ready to snap.

"I didn't know Sofia Volkov had an illegitimate daughter." It was Darius who spoke.

"Stop with that fucking word," Romero snapped, determination creasing his face. "I just want my daughters back."

Suddenly I understood why Reina was so protective of her papà.

"Can someone explain what the fuck is going on?" Marchetti stood up and pushed his hands into his pockets, restless energy brimming from him. His gaze zeroed in on Romero and me. "We need to go into this with our eyes wide open."

"This is bigger than just the Omertà," I started. "I agree with Kian, this has had to be in the works for years."

"It's like Perez wants to start a mafia princess trafficking ring, Enrico." Kian's expression was thunderous. If Perez was cruel when handling his own blood, I didn't want to imagine how badly he treated other women.

"How would he even know about Reina?" Romero questioned. "I didn't even fucking know until recently. How can we be sure that Phoenix isn't within their clutches? He went after Sofia Volkov's daughter. Phoenix will be blindsided."

The gnawing sensation chewed its way up my chest, sinking its teeth into the dark place I kept caged. Barely.

"Perez doesn't have Phoenix," Kian repeated his earlier statement with conviction.

“Maybe it’s safer this way,” I muttered. “If we can’t find her, neither can anyone else.”

Romero pushed his hand through his hair again. “I still don’t understand how she was taken.” His eyes found me. “Who knew about your movements?”

“My mother and Hiroshi.” Our arrival in Jolo was unplanned, so it would mean they had up-to-date intel. The question I was trying to find answers to was *how*. Assuming they slipped this to Cortes, it would have given him a twenty-four-hour heads-up. At best.

“And you think your mother’s behind it?” Tyran Callahan stated.

“I suspect she’s still not forgiven Romero.”

The twins had had issues with their own conniving mother, so this kind of thing shouldn’t come as a surprise to them. “Talk about a woman scorned,” Kyran muttered. “She sure can hold a grudge for a long fucking time. What? She can’t find another man?”

“We don’t need you pointing out the goddamned obvious,” Dante drawled, pulling his gun out and pointing at Kyran’s head. He was on edge; we all were.

“Dante, put the gun down,” I told him calmly.

“Are you sure Hana would betray you?” Romero questioned, mirroring my own doubts. Something didn’t feel right. Something I was missing. “She might betray the Omertà, but you and Dante...” He shook his head. “I don’t know why she would risk you after hiding your identity for years. You’re her golden egg.” Romero’s eyes fell to the pendant I twisted between my fingers. “Where—?” He swallowed. “Reina never takes that damn necklace off.” He was right; she didn’t. I’d always wondered why he let her continue to wear it.

Romero said flatly, “It was Hana’s.” His eyes were glued to the necklace. “I don’t know how my wife got her hands on it, but Reina convinced herself it was Grace’s and refused to part with it.”

My mother's betrayal. The secrets she'd kept from me for the past two decades weren't doing her any favors.

The timing of everything that transpired didn't line up. Or maybe I should say, it all lined up too well.

I returned my attention to the group. "We'll get confirmation whether she's involved or not. Right now, we need a plan on how to get Reina out of Perez's clutches. Then we look for Phoenix. While we're in Brazil, Romero can touch base with her grandma again."

Romero nodded and I met Kian's eyes, knowing he was our best bet of getting into Brazil.

"Be prepared to find a different woman," he stated, his expression darkening. It spoke of the ghosts he'd seen. "Reina's my brother's prize. That never bodes well for any woman."

"How bad?" Romero asked, his voice cracking.

"My brother is a sick son of a bitch. He enjoys breaking his women," Kian declared. Romero's façade slipped. "There's a reason he refuses to give up human trafficking. It gives him control and access to women he likes to toy with. And they all have one thing in common."

My heart pounded against my rib cage. The bars of my cage rattled and threatened to drag me under.

"Which is?" I said, but I knew the answer. I knew it in the pit of my stomach. It was the reason they never backed off from Reina.

"Blonde hair, blue eyes," Romero answered in Kian's stead. "The fact she's an illegitimate mafia princess of an enemy is an added bonus."

Kian nodded his head. "Angelo Leone used to be knee-deep in the auctions until he himself had an illegitimate daughter."

"I feel like I'm in a soap opera and there is a major love triangle going on," Darius remarked dryly. "So, to summarize it, Amon is Tomaso Romero's. Phoenix is illegitimate because

the annulment of his marriage to Amon's mother never came through. Who's Reina's father, or did I miss that part?"

Everyone's eyes landed on me. Fuck, we didn't have time for this.

"None of your business," Romero answered before I could. Everyone's eyes whipped to Romero's. It felt like watching a tennis match, tracking the ball left and right between each new speaker, each with a more shocking tale to tell. To everyone's credit, they kept their reactions masked. "All that matters is that Amon is my son and I want all three of my children, Reina included, safe and sound."

"That makes him your heir," Illias pointed out. "In the eyes of the Omertà, Amon is your heir. Line it up before your dying breath."

"That he is, but I want his assurances that he'll protect *both* my daughters. I don't give a shit about their illegitimate status. I don't care whose blood runs through Reina's veins. She's mine."

And just like that, Romero earned my respect.

"You have my word, but right now, the only thing I care about is getting my wife out of that psychopath's hands. Now, let's get on to it."

We all shifted our attention to Kian.

"The moment my brother gets an alert of our presence, he'll end her," Kian warned. "He'd rather kill her than let anyone have her. He's always been like that, and the years have only made him crazier."

"What's his deal with blonde hair and blue eyes?" Dante questioned. "We found a warehouse full of trafficked women—all dead—who might as well have been replicas of Reina."

A muscle worked in Kian's jaw. "My brother is Hitler reincarnated, or at least believes himself to be. He believes the Aryan race is superior, the way of the future. He got pulled into some fanatic, cult-like group and never came out of it." With every passing second, the impatience was suffocating me. I hadn't seen her in a whole month. I needed her back in

my arms. “Perez is a depraved lunatic, and he found plenty more lunatics to join his cause.” Kian’s eyes locked on me, then on Romero. “Death is a kindness when Perez gets his hands on you. He thrives on degradation and exploitation.”

“The sick son of a bitch,” Dante said through clenched teeth.

“Don’t I know it.” Kian shook his head, as if chasing his ghosts. “The Leone family became a target the day Angelo broke his business arrangement with Perez. Reina being his daughter was the easiest retribution.”

“How would Perez Cortes know?” Romero questioned. “I didn’t even know she was his daughter.”

“Someone did,” Dante said, flipping his knife back and forth. “It couldn’t have been Father, since he thought Phoenix was his, not Reina.”

Dante’s words sunk into me, spreading like poison.

There *was* someone who knew it before everyone.

REINA

After the auction, I was shuffled into a helicopter. My body screamed and protested for what felt like hours before we landed in what looked to be the middle of a rainforest. After equipment and boxes were loaded into the waiting vehicles, I was shoved into a Jeep with the man who bought me.

The itch beneath my skin and the shakes had gotten worse, the suffocating humidity doing nothing to help. Within minutes, I felt the sweat start to gather on my forehead and trickle down my back.

A rough, calloused hand wrapped around my arm and tugged me over. It felt like a death grip, escorting me to the other side.

“Don’t touch me,” I hissed, the sound of my voice ricocheting in my head.

He laughed, his fingernails digging into my flesh. He was danger personified, but my instincts screamed at me to fight.

In my weakened state, all I could do was close my eyes and try to keep my breathing steady. My body craved the release from the needle. I let out a scoff. The thought, pathetic as it was, consumed me. My body was burning up, and all I could think about was the poison that promised oblivion.

His chuckle filled the air. “You need medicine,” he mocked in a heavily accented English. The rest of the men stuck to speaking Portuguese or Spanish.

Forcing my shoulders to ease, I turned my head and met his eyes.

“Fuck you and fuck your medicine.”

Glancing around, I noted that we were out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by dense forest. The humid air was heavy with noise of the forest around us—insects buzzing, birds shrieking, bats clicking... It might've been a peaceful soundtrack if not for the position I was currently in. Even the trees seemed to pulsate with life, reminding me of my own dark fate.

We traveled off-road, every damn bone in my body jarring. The headlights kept throwing strange reflections in the undergrowth, bouncing off the glowing eyes of indistinguishable creatures.

The remainder of the car ride was silent. Ominous. Stretching so thin that I worried I'd snap in half.

Dusk was falling over the jungle and twining itself around me.

I was terrified. My teeth clattered as the night enveloped us, and eventually, someone turned up the heat and threw a blanket over me.



My eyes whipped open as we came to a stop and I was ushered out of the Jeep, dread settling deep in my gut with every step I took.

In front of us, a house that looked like it had come straight out of *Gone with the Wind* stood amongst the jungle's dense foliage.

“Welcome to the Cortes manor. You now belong to me.”

I whirled around, glaring at him. “I have no fucking idea who you are.”

“Perez Cortes, your new master.”

He'd barely taken his next breath when my palm connected with his face. *Smack*. It didn't stop there. My clenched fists flew into him over and over again. Fuming and panting, I dragged my fingernails down his neck.

The world was distorted. The rush in my ears drowned out the aches and itches. The jungle stood still while I turned *savage*.

Until a punch had my cheek exploding and I staggered backward, gasping frantically. My chest rose and fell, watching in horror as he brought his hand to my mouth, wiped my chin, then licked the blood off his fingers.

"You have a temper on you," he drawled. "It will be my pleasure to break it." His beady gaze traveled over my body as he reached out to smooth a strand of hair off my face. His touch lingered, shooting sparks of disgust down my spine. "Take her inside."

The guards dragged me away from my new owner and into a spacious lobby with a circular marble stairway. The white walls were stained red from the sunset streaming in through the open windows.

I stood in a massive living room that was bare apart from a flat-screen TV in a corner and a few scattered sofas.

"Welcome to your new home," Perez declared, watching me take in the house. "I've been waiting a long time for you."

"H-how long?" I stammered.

"Years." He laughed and strode to the wet bar, pouring himself a drink while I looked for something sharp I could use as a weapon. With each step I took though, I felt myself becoming even more sluggish. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten, let alone allowed myself to sleep for more than a few scattered minutes.

My eyes blurred and I shook my head to clear my vision. A second later, my gaze caught on the ice pick on the bar counter. It was the perfect weapon. I could stab him in the eye. Fuck the eye, he could come back from that. No—I'd stab him in the throat.

God, is this what my life had become?

“Are you going to offer me a drink?” My voice grew distant, the fog in my brain thicker. I closed my eyes, giving my head another shake.

Seconds passed and turned into minutes. My eyes twitched as I fought the urge to glance at the ice pick. Instead, I stared at him, hoping he wouldn't see right through me.

“Your poison?” *Holy fuck.* He fell for it. He *actually* fell for it.

I'd stab him and scream for the guards, then I'd slip away while they were busy and make a run for it. I had no idea where the fuck I would go, but anywhere was better than here.

“Whiskey.” I squared my shoulders, my body trembling.

He shot me a surprised look, but I schooled my features and channeled my grandmother's acting talent, already seeing my plan clicking into place. My strides measured and slow, I made my way to the minibar. One step, two steps, three, and I was next to my target.

“You're lucky. This here is a three-hundred-year-old whiskey.”

When I could be sure that his focus was on the bottle's prized label, I snatched the ice pick from the table. He heard the clank, likely from how my hands trembled, and turned just as I managed to plunge the pick into his shoulder, piercing his skin and sending blood spurting.

He let out a howl and backhanded me, sending me crashing onto the hard marble. My head hit the unforgiving ground and stars exploded behind my eyelids. Pain shot down my spine, ripping my breath from my lungs.

Before I could do anything, the guards were on me.

“*Putá!*” Perez shouted, kicking my ribs. Agony shot through me and the buzzing in my ears increased until it was a constant vibration in my skull.

His hands encircled my neck and he pounded my head into the marble, his knuckles turning white from the exertion. It felt

like my skull was being cracked open, and before long, my vision turned black.

Panic reared its ugly head, and my earlier instincts dimmed.

Fight, cinnamon girl. Somewhere in the scuffle, I heard Amon's voice. *Fight, damn it.*

My will to escape kicked in anew and had me clawing at his hands, leaving bloody marks over his skin. Another hit against the marble.

The taste of copper invaded my mouth.

“Clean her up and take her to the basement.”

This was it. My end.

My life flashed before my eyes, and I could do nothing but cling to the good memories. The happy ones.

Until I was out like a light.



Once upon a time, I sat on the floor of the shower in my Paris apartment and inflicted pain on myself with a blade. I craved the release of pressure in my chest, the feel of the metal on my skin... all so I could survive another day.

Yet, at this very moment, I couldn't understand why. That pain felt insulting after the shit I'd been through lately.

I was forced to stand under a rusty hose while one of the guards leered at me. I stood there just long enough to wash the dirt off my body and brush my teeth, hurrying to wrap a towel around myself. I couldn't linger in the comfort of the warm water on my skin, even after weeks without the luxury, because I had to stay angry. Determined.

The guard threw a white nightgown my way and I dressed, focused on shielding myself from his predatory gawking. Once I slid it on, I curled my brittle fingers around the stained yellow sink and found my reflection in the filthy mirror.

It wasn't good. I barely recognized myself. My face was a palette of bruises. My curls were tangled and matted with blood, making me rethink my short shower. And my eyes... They couldn't be mine. They looked hollow, dead. Black circles rimmed them, and the skin beneath was almost translucent.

"That's enough. You're not here to stare at yourself all day," the guard spat out, pushing the butt of his rifle into my lower back.

The walk through the dark hallway and then down into the basement was too long. Yet not long enough. I coveted fresh air, a night sky. Stars.

The only thing I got was a dark cell without a single window, no way to glimpse the outside world. I didn't count how many flights of stairs we'd walked down earlier, but I knew we had to be deep underground. It was freezing and smelled of mold, like no part had ever seen the light of day.

He pushed me inside and then shut the door with a loud thud, the click of the lock sounding like ominous thunder in my ears.

A shudder zipped up my spine.

The fragments of my sanity chipped away with every day I'd been in captivity. This cell was no different, reeking of despair. It was ingrained in the floors and buried in every little crack of the wall.

A noise behind me had me turning on my heel. *Oh my God.* The guard locked us in here together.

"Ready to play, princess?" He took a step closer, and I took one back. He started to undo his belt, and my stomach dropped. I stepped back another inch, a cold sweat breaking over my skin.

He trained his eyes on me and swept them slowly over my curves.

"Relax," he purred while my heart pounded against my ribs. Or maybe that was just the drugs. He thwacked the belt against his palm, the sound promising pain.

Another step and the stench of his cheap cologne and cigarettes seeped into my lungs, staining them forever. My limbs stiffened and my fingers twitched with the urge to hit him.

Not too soon, my hazy mind whispered. My frayed nerves mingled with the drugs in my system and had my brain working a mile a minute.

When the cell door swung open and loud screams reached my ears, I was certain I would die. Nothing felt real. More screeching pierced my brain as I doubled over, cupping my palms over my ears.

“Need your help,” a guard grunted, dragging a young girl by her hair. Naked. Her right arm was mangled and her left hand was completely missing. Fear swallowed me whole as I glimpsed the mutilation in front of me. I stared at it all, eyes wide like saucers, unable—*unwilling*—to comprehend.

Vomit climbed up my throat and I braced my hands on my knees, dry heaving and gagging.

“Don’t you fucking dare vomit,” my guard hissed, then turned to the other one. “And fuck off, Pedro. Find someone else to help you. I’m having fun with this one.”

Am I next? I thought, petrified.

“Fucking psycho,” the guard muttered. All the men in this place were vile and disturbed. He grabbed the poor girl’s arm and started dragging her, letting her battered body slide over the rough stone floor. My stomach revolted and I gagged again.

Tension lined every muscle in my body, making my hands quiver. I was so distracted with the horrid sight that I missed it. The belt audibly whizzed through the air with a soft *pfff* sound until it hit my hip. And again.

His hand wrapped around my throat, his other discarding the belt and procuring a knife. The blade slashed my skin and I fought to stifle my cry—I wouldn’t give him that power. Blood trickled down my collar and an evil smirk curled his

lips, but still I refused to give him the satisfaction. *Don't show them your fear*, whispered Liana's voice.

“Cooperate and you won't end up like that girl.”

Pain.

It ripped through me with relentless cruelty, letting me know I was still alive.

I reached up and jabbed my fingers into both eye sockets of the devil hunched over me. In response, he flailed his arms wildly and backhanded me. My cheekbone exploded, and I desperately blinked the black dots from my vision.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out.

This man would prefer it that way. It was Perez Cortes who preferred the fight.

Hot tears streamed down my face. I didn't stand a chance, but that didn't stop me.

I thrashed and scratched, snapped my teeth and threw fists. His hand cupped me between my legs, and I bucked away from him as best I could.

He froze.

Before I could process what was happening, blood spurted from his neck, covering me where I lay, and he let out a noise that was so inhuman I knew I'd never unhear it. Behind him, bottomless black eyes met mine.

“Sorry about that. Some men have no manners.”

I scrambled back into the corner, bringing my knees to my chest. My teeth chattered. My hands shook. Would he finally rape me? The waiting and fighting, day in and day out, was wreaking havoc on my sanity.

He grinned as if he could read my mind while his eyes roamed over the flimsy, tattered nightgown I'd been forced to sit in for God knew how long.

“You're going to bleed for me so prettily,” he purred in his shrill voice. “It'll hurt as much as it'll feel *oh-so-good*.” He threw his head back and laughed maniacally. “Well, for me

anyway. I can't guarantee *your* pleasure, but I would prefer it if you remained conscious."

The panic attack ripped through me, crippling me in an instant. My chest tightened, stealing the air from my lungs. I began to hyperventilate, and before long, the world around me went hazy.

Numbness spread through my limbs as the taste of bile filled my mouth, and I knew I was about to sink into the abyss.

Footsteps echoed through the stone cell. Then... Quiet. Stillness. Nothing but painful breaths.

Like clockwork, the screaming in my head drowned out the silence. As did the agony in my chest, the ache in my bones.

Week one, I waited. Week two, I hoped. By the third, I despaired. Now, in what I believed to be my fourth week in isolation, parts of me were beginning to disappear, while others were transforming into something ugly and twisted.

I wanted to scream out and beg for help, but I knew it wasn't coming. And my strength kept failing me. I felt sluggish. Disoriented. There were gaps in my memory. Sometimes I'd open my mouth and it was like I'd forgotten how to speak. I couldn't remember what I sounded like. Other times I said nothing, but the whispers crowding my head spoke of things I had difficulty grasping.

It was futile to fight it, pointless to cling to the light when all I'd taste was darkness. So I got lost in that pain.

The voices in my head protested.

No one's coming for you. Get up and fight. Make them pay.

And I knew with certainty that I'd rather burn alive than live one more moment like this.

REINA

The darkened cellar became my home. The whispers and ghosts became my company. But the pain... It taunted me. Dared me to fight, to survive this horror.

Hours, days, weeks, possibly months... They all blurred together. I couldn't distinguish dreams and nightmares from reality. I wasn't sure how long I'd been here.

Shivers and the clattering of my teeth pierced through the nightmare, and I focused on that noise. It was better than the screams tearing through the hallway, splitting my skull and heart in two.

I brought my palms up, covering my ears. I knew what was coming next.

Thrust. Another rape happening outside these walls. One day it'd be my turn.

The thick walls separated me from everyone, but it didn't stop the misery and abuse from finding its way into my prison. Each cry and scream multiplied as it traveled through the hallways, twisting into something darker than my own hallucinations.

This place was filled with shadows and monsters. The hallways echoed and groaned, feeding my despair as I sat in the corner alone, crying.

In the deepest recess of my mind, I remembered I fought for them. *The women who paid for my sins.* The women *he*

made scream for my disobedience. My lack of resistance. Or was it too much resistance? I wasn't sure.

Another thrust that seemed to shake the stone wall, sputtering dust through the air. Was I imagining that too?

But no... there it was. A whimper. Another cry. A heart-wrenching scream.

The heroin provided some semblance of escape, but still my stomach churned. It was like a constant itch underneath my skin that I couldn't scratch. A bloodied cut I didn't remember getting, opening back up right as the crusty scab had started to heal again.

I pinned my attention on the flecks of dust dancing through the air, mocking me with their freedom while I sat here immobile.

I raised my hand, reaching for them.

Except I couldn't catch them. They were fleeting, just like my sanity. Just like the rush from the heroin. It was meant to subdue me, but *he*—Perez, the man with the cold dark eyes—said it made me savage before it made me mellow. He didn't like either extreme.

And I... I lost myself further with each passing day, and each denied dose drove me to madness.

I'd killed again. At least I thought I did. It was hard to distinguish reality from the nightmares. Everything was blurred in my mind because of the drugs they kept pumping into me. I was an addict now, I supposed. Not that it would matter in the long run.

I lost track of it all and, honestly, I wasn't sure I cared.

But I could still remember the first night a man tried to rape me when I was brought here. I fought him, gouged his eyeballs. Just as he was about to overpower me, Cortes came behind him and killed him. Shot him in the head, his brain splattering all over me.

Bile had risen up my throat, my skin crawling with revulsion. I screamed and screamed until my throat turned raw

and I couldn't scream anymore.

The only thing I knew with certainty was that he'd shot me up with more poison. The effects of it kept scraping inside me like fingernails against a chalkboard. Somehow, my brain had sent a message through the fog of pain to breathe. To live. To survive.

After that, Cortes assigned a doctor and one trusted guard to watch over me. They understood I was "his" and so far hadn't attempted anything. Not that anyone wanted to touch me—for the most part—but once in a while, a brave or foolish man tried. The last one I sliced with his own knife, gutting him from neck to groin.

I no longer screamed when I saw death or when the blood flowed like a river.

Horror's shadow—the doctor or my guard—appeared at the cell door.

"Is she on birth control?" It was the guard's voice. My eyes locked on the door, praying Cortes wasn't there too.

The doctor answered, "Her medical records show she has a birth control implant. Why?"

Their conversation made me want to vomit. Rage. Kill. Except there was nobody else in the room with me. Not a soul within my reach. Maybe the conversation was happening in my head. God knew there was enough other crap going on in there.

"He wants her knocked up."

There was no fucking way. I'd sooner slice my own throat. *No, no, no.*

"He can't knock her up if he keeps drugging her." Knock me up? Why would he want that? He was nuts. God, I was so fucking helpless and I hated it.

"She keeps attacking Jefe." Jefe. Didn't that mean boss? They must have been talking about Cortes. A string of curses followed, and a thought struck me. They were speaking English, not Portuguese. Since I'd been kidnapped, most

conversations occurred in Portuguese. Why didn't this one?
"Heroin is not working."

A heartbeat passed.

"It looks to me like it's working. If Jefe wants to get her pregnant, he needs to get her off the heroin and just put her on sedatives. That will make her an easy lay."

Someone chortled from the darkness, sending a terrifying echo through the cold, damp air. How much longer could I resist? Deep in my drugged heart and hallucinating mind, I knew the man would rape me. It was just a matter of when.

"I heard she bit his dick. He'll be out of commission for a while. Maybe we should play with her and break her in for him." I didn't know where this rumor started, but I was grateful for it.

"You two stupid *idiotas* do that at your own risk, and when I'm not around. Need I remind you what happened to the last guy who tried to sample her?" one of the men said. I remembered. His blood still stained the floors of my prison cell. "We just have to find a drug that keeps her lucid."

A snicker echoed. "Does it really matter whether she's awake or not?"

"No one wants a drug-addicted whore who can't even suck a cock properly. He doesn't want to fuck a limp corpse. Once Cortes breaks her, it won't matter if she's lucid or not."

My heart shriveled as I listened to them. I shouldn't be surprised by anything at this point, but even with the addiction, a fresh dose of panic twisted my gut painfully.

"You, get lost. And you, stay with me."

Footsteps faded.

"So are you going in, Doctor, or are you scared she'll end your miserable life?"

I shot to my feet. My teeth rattled, sounding like ice clinking in a glass. God, just the thought reminded me of my thirst. They slid one glass of tepid water and one plate of slop through the door once daily, and never at the same time.

The door creaked open and footsteps tapped on the filthy stone floor. Holding my breath, I eyed him as he approached me. He stopped a foot away from me, then slowly unzipped his bag.

I remained still as I watched him pull something out of it. A surgical knife.

Eyeing him warily, I wondered—for the hundredth time—if this was real. Nobody could possibly live through this kind of torture. I'd had enough fighting to last me ten lifetimes. Fuck, a hundred lifetimes. I fought to survive. Fought not to be touched. Fought to cling to the memory of my husband.

This place was every woman's worst nightmare, but every time I contemplated giving up, I'd hear Amon's voice.

Keep fighting, cinnamon girl. But why? Why should I fight if he was dead? Come back to me.

My husband's voice in my skull was heaven and hell, paradise and abyss. So close yet so far away.

"We have to remove your implant," the doctor announced, holding up the knife. He was bald and missing an ear. A scar snaked down his scalp to his right temple and cheek, ending on his neck.

He grabbed a needle from his bag and then signaled to someone on his right. I could hear the heavy thud of boots against the filthy floor.

I waited, bracing myself. Three, two, one.

Another man pounced on me, grabbing me by my left arm. I thrashed and kicked, but my body was weak. They laughed, speaking in Portuguese. Why were they speaking in English before? Maybe it was their sick way to taunt me.

I jerked against his hold, kicking him in his shin. Until... *whack!* Pain exploded in my temple. Another punch followed. One of them grabbed my arm and shoved me to my knees, hitting a nerve that had a yelp escaping my lips.

"Not so tough anymore, huh?"

“Stop fucking agitating her,” the doctor ordered. “Keep her on her knees and her arm free.”

I went crazy in my attempt to fight them, but I was too weak.

“Fuck that,” he growled. “She’ll suck my cock while she’s down there.”

He pried my mouth open, and in no time, he had his fly unzipped and was yanking out his dick and stuffing it inside my mouth. I glared up at him, my insides raging like a tornado. The thread snapped, just like it had the last time and the time before that when someone tried to touch me.

I bit down and clenched my jaw as the guard let out a wailing howl and blood exploded on my face. He punched me so hard, stars exploded as I grabbed the knife in the doctor’s hand. *Jackpot.*

The demon inside me unleashed. Adrenaline burst through me, and in one move, I shot to my feet and sliced his dick clean off. I yanked him onto his knees and went for his ear, cutting it off and then stabbing him over and over again.

Another howl. “You’ll never touch me or anyone else again,” I hissed, wiping the blood on my face with the back of my hand, then getting to my feet.

I looked down at the dickless wonder with vindicated satisfaction.

Cortes appeared at the entrance of my cell, blocking my clear path to freedom. I stood still, and just as I thought I might be seeing things, he moved. I didn’t react fast enough. A needle pricked my neck.

I knew what was coming. I couldn’t cry, so I laughed and laughed and laughed, sounding like a lunatic until the drugs took over and I laughed into nothingness as everything turned blessedly black.



A creaking sound woke me up and I gasped, sweat slicking my skin.

Blinking hard and feeling disoriented, I looked around but saw nothing—nothing but darkness. Dim light from outside my prison made shadows move across the walls. The hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention, and I knew someone was watching me. My eyes darted around the cell, searching for danger.

The whispers of my breath were all I could make out. The pounding in my chest increased, pumping adrenaline through my veins.

“Who’s there?” I rasped, my throat dry. I must have been drugged again. It left a taste in my mouth I’d grown accustomed to.

My trembling hands cut a path down the length of my body, searching for evidence of assault. There was blood and filth, bruised and broken flesh, and my nightgown had been changed sometime in the night, but that was it.

I shifted slowly from the cold, hard floor and pulled my knees to my chest, my eyes adjusting. It resembled the shadows in my mind and in my soul.

Another soft noise came from my left. My eyes snapped in its direction, and I saw it. Two bodies in the far corner of my cell. The whites of their eyeballs stared at me with a void that I felt in my heart.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice so raw it was unrecognizable. I held my breath, waiting for a response. There was none. Several stilted seconds passed, and then a wheeze. “I can see you moving,” I called out, shifting forward on my hands and knees. “What do you want?”

The sound of a body slumping to the ground. No, not one body, but two. I could barely process what I was seeing. One set of eyes with a blank stare, and another whose eyes were welling with desperation, his mouth moving soundlessly.

Did I do that?

The doctor: I thought he was here earlier. Was he?

His hand reached my way and I scrambled backward. I jolted violently, falling and landing painfully on my tailbone. A horrible sound rumbled from his chest, and suddenly, I no longer saw him. Instead, I saw visions of my soon-to-be death.

I'd die alone and forgotten in this nightmare that nobody could penetrate.

Panic wrapped its cold and cruel fingers around my throat, slowly taking over me and stealing my breath.

I plastered myself to the wall, my chest heaving and heart racing. My nails dug into my skin, forcing me to remain alert. The dying man kept moving his mouth, but no words came out. The glistening of his blood reminded me of the horror movies I never wanted to watch.

Sucking in a deep breath, I held it, waiting for him to die.

Then, out of nowhere, a dark shadow came forward and a scream tore from my throat.

Perez Cortes, with his evil grin and calculating eyes.

My whole body trembled. He reached out and pricked my neck, sending warmth surging through my veins. I hated and loved how good it felt.

Goosebumps broke over my skin and I gritted my teeth, shifting uncomfortably as my tremors intensified.

If I ever got out of this hell, this man would haunt my nightmares. I knew it as well as I knew my own name. He'd left an ugly mark on my soul and no amount of bleach or holy water would ever erase it.

He took another step and I leaned back, desperate for as much space between us as I could manage.

"You killed my doctor," he purred, and my eyes found the body sprawled in the corner just as his last breath left him.

"He d-deserved it." My voice shook as violently as my body. "And i-if you get c-close to me, I'll k-kill you too."

Fuck, he liked challenges. By now, I should know better than to engage with him. I bit my lip, my eyes dropping along

with my heart.

Why didn't I just ignore him? Then he'd be gone already.

"You're just like your father." He watched me with such a disgusting thrill in his eyes, sending all kinds of images into my mind of the ways he could defile me. "He should have stuck with me. But no matter, his betrayal will be yours to repay."

I had no fucking idea what he was saying, but that wasn't much of a surprise. Nothing made sense anymore.

"You'll d-die, just like h-him." I hadn't taken pleasure in killing Angelo Leone, but I suspected I'd enjoy it tremendously with this man. His screams would make the most satisfying sounds that not even Phoenix's gentle fingers playing Beethoven could match.

"Oh, *princesa*. We both know I won't. It'll be you and me until—"

Until I was dead. Thousands of scenarios raced through my mind, but one screamed the loudest.

Death.

For reasons unknown, it refused to claim me. Blood stained my hands, my clothes, and my hair. Probably my face too. Yet death was too good for me.

"Fuck. You."

"What did you say?" Perez drawled, his voice dripping with venom.

My mouth filled with sand while nausea tilted my stomach. My skin itched so fucking bad it felt like I was being overrun by insects, their little legs scurrying across my limbs.

"Fuck you," I repeated, trying to sound brave, but my voice was too small. This attitude would undoubtedly result in my death. With that in mind, I added, "Get close to me again and I'll end your miserable life."

"End my life and you'll be at my men's mercy."

Out of nowhere, he produced a switchblade and closed the distance between us. His cologne assaulted my nostrils and my empty stomach, making my nausea unbearable. He opened and closed the switchblade before he pressed the sharp tip of it to my neck.

“I’ll kill them too,” I said, reckless now.

To my surprise, he laughed. “A killer like your father, it would seem.”

The tip of his blade pressed deeper until I felt hot liquid trickle down my neck.

The malicious gleam in his cold eyes almost lit up the basement cell. Or maybe it was another hallucination.

“You think anyone will want you?” He kept his voice low, but he watched me carefully. “After me, there’s nobody for you. Not ever again. It’s only a matter of time before I have your body and soul.”

“Never,” I screamed. He caught my wrist and bent it until a yelp tore from my mouth.

He snickered. “Like father, like daughter. He was a stubborn motherfucker too.”

I was nothing like Angelo Leone. *Nothing.*

Yanking my wrist out of his grip, I cradled it against my chest, then pressed myself flat against the stone wall, watching and waiting until I could strike him with a deadly blow.

Hate swirled within me. So powerful I thought it’d eat me alive.

It killed the cinnamon girl. It killed the sunshine inside me. Leaving me with only hunger for my next kill.

Perez Cortes’s body strung up in the air, screeching like the pig that he was. I shook my head. No, not like a pig. Like a snake. I didn’t care if I died... One way or another, I’d make him pay.

“I offered for your husband to buy you back from me, but he didn’t agree on the price.” *Lies, lies, lies.* A thought nudged

at my mind, but I was too distracted with the throbbing ache in my chest. It felt like a gaping and raw wound, strangling me.

I reached for my necklace once again, but of course it wasn't there.

So, I focused my gaze on the ring on my finger. It wasn't shiny anymore. The diamonds were stained crimson and filth clung to the metal. I often wondered why he hadn't taken it from me. They took everything else—my clothes, my dignity, fucking everything—yet they left my wedding ring.

“You'll take it off one day.” I raised my head and found his gaze locked on my finger. “Very soon.”

“In your dreams,” I muttered under my breath, earning me a slap across the cheek. My ears rang, but I refused to show weakness.

“If it were me, I'd give up all my wealth.” I snorted, imagining that scenario. “He said you're not worth it now that you're used merchandise. He doesn't want anything this filthy.” He chuckled, looking me up and down. Another twist of my ring.

Wait... What he'd said before, about offering Amon a price to buy me back...

“He's alive?” I choked out, meeting his dead stare.

“He just needed one more bullet,” he gritted.

The ringing in my ears turned high-pitched. *Kill, kill, kill.* My hatred for this man ran almost as deep as my love for my husband. My fingers itched to feel that cold metal in my palm so I could fill this fucker with bullets. I was so lost in the fantasy of killing Perez that I missed his next move.

His big palm clutched me by my throat and lifted me in the air. I choked and clawed, kicked at his shins, but I couldn't fight him off. I was too *weak*, too *small*. I was *pathetic*.

“Don't you worry, baby girl.” I fucking hated his voice. “I'll finish him off.” Amon's body, sprawled on the crimson-stained gravel, danced behind my eyelids. “Make him regret ever having you.”

“The o-only thing I regret is you t-touching me,” I croaked, each syllable hurting my throat. Survival instincts kicked in, my body fighting to live despite my wish for death. “I’m going to kill you for taking him from me.” My throat burned as I attempted to break free of his hold. I was a rabid dog, hissing and biting. My strength was waning. The heroin was working too well, sending me into that mental space where nothing mattered.

Perez dragged his blade down my collarbone, over the side of my left breast, and across my torso before he paused.

“This can be quick and painless, *princesa*. Just relax.”

Fuck that.

Those words had me fighting harder. I swung my knee, hitting his groin. A guttural howl escaped him.

In the next second, he dropped his hold from my neck and ground my face into the stone floor. He ripped my filthy dress and I screamed until my throat turned raw and I tasted copper.

He punched the back of my head, making my world explode. Ignoring the pain, I twisted just in time to see him unfasten his jeans and tug them down. Sheer panic consumed my mind. Tears streamed down my cheeks. Then I headbutted him in the groin, his dick hitting my cheek.

I tried to crawl away from him, but he dragged me back. The stone tore at my flesh.

“I’m sick of your fire,” he growled, his palm crashing into the side of my face. He fisted my hair, then pulled my head and slammed it back onto the ground.

A soft whisper reminded me of what the doctor said. *He doesn’t want to fuck a limp corpse.*

I made my body go slack, closed my eyes, and waited. One breath. Two breaths. My heart pounded, not liking how vulnerable I was. My palms burned and a wave of goosebumps spread across my body as I silently begged for this to work.

He shook me like a rag doll. I let my head hit the stone, feigning unconsciousness. It wasn’t too hard with the drugs in

my system. Another shake.

Don't open your eyes.

He kicked me one more time. I bit the inside of my cheek, determined not to let out a sound. Perez let out a frustrated breath, then stomped away.

The door shut with a loud, metal clang.

I didn't move, listening to his footsteps fading with each second until I could no longer hear anything.

Deep breaths, Reina. Hold on. Amon's voice. Just breathe.

"Shut the fuck up," I whispered to the ghost as images flashed through my mind. Our wedding. The gondola ride. The fireworks for our new beginning. Only to get a bitter end.

He no longer wants you, my mind whispered. You're ugly. You're scarred. You're filthy.

"Shut the fuck up," I repeated. My heart had broken. It was shattering with each breath, and that little organ would never be the same. I would never be the same.

That's why he refused to pay the ransom.

The thought released fresh pain. And still, even knowing this, I was happy he was alive. Even though I'd never see him again, never feel his warm body, never breathe in his lemon and green apple scent. I rolled over, pawing my chest.

I curled into a ball, forcing the tears back, surprised to find there were still some left. I drifted, riding the thin line of sanity.

The ground shook beneath me. Or maybe it was my imagination playing tricks *again*.

A voice followed. No... not just one. Many voices. Guns. The sounds of bullets reverberated through me.

My eyes snapped open in anticipation, only to find an empty room. Blood. Bodies lying dead in the corner. But no Perez.

The stench of death circulated in the cell. Soon it would take me too.

Then I'd be free. Maybe I'd choose a happy memory and stay in it forever. Swimming with Amon in the sea. No, the lanterns. That had been the most perfect night, just the two of us.

A noise slipped free from my throat, something between a cry and a laugh. I was trapped in hell and dreaming of heaven.

I was losing my mind. Or maybe it was already gone.

AMON

Rage. Hope. Despair.

Those were the three emotions circling through my body. It was hope that kept pushing me forward while the urge to burn the world—reduce it to ashes—consumed me.

The constant hum of the airplane's engine somewhere over the Pacific as we made our way to Brazil should have calmed me. It didn't. Instead, my reflection stared back at me, washed in violence and seething with self-loathing.

My fucking fault. I failed her. I should have protected her. It. Was. My. Fault.

My fist flew into the mirror, shattering it completely. Tiny broken reflections stared back at me, giving me a preview of what was to become of me.

She'd been gone for a whole fucking month and I'd felt every second of it.

Everyone was getting some shut-eye as Illias's fleet of private jets brought us closer to our destination. Not me. Every time I closed my eyes, images of my wife fighting for her life threatened to put a match to my anger.

My hand flew into the wall, bending the titanium aluminum.

Someone tapped on the bathroom door, but I was too far gone to react. "Amon, it's me. Open up."

Like a drone, I drove through it a second time. And a third, a fourth, a fifth, before Dante's hands came around my arm,

yanking me backward.

I stumbled, and we almost fell from the force of it, but my brother's back hit the wall.

"Snap out of it, Amon," he barked. I shook my head, eyes wild. My knuckles were split, droplets of blood falling on the floor. "Are you trying to put a hole through this plane and kill us?"

"I deserve it," I clipped.

"Let's save her first, and then you can decide if you want to jump out of a plane. Come on, let's go sit down," he muttered.

My body was brimming with tension, but I relented.

His hand patted my back. "We're going to find her."

I offered only a terse nod, then turned to wash the blood off my hands and knuckles. My reflection in what was left of the shattered mirror promised an equally broken future if I didn't find her.

Dante's gaze met mine in the reflection. "Hungry?"

"No."

He turned to leave, then paused in the doorway. "Don't break any more mirrors. That's seven years of bad luck," he drawled, flashing me a quick grin. Except the shadows lingering in his expression told me the truth: he was putting on a brave face for me, but he was worried about Phoenix. It was as if she'd disappeared into thin air.

Shaking my head, I finished washing my hands, then made my way out of the bathroom to join Dante on the couch. He slid a cigarette out of the pack and popped it into his mouth.

"You should really stop smoking," I remarked tightly. "It's not good for your lungs. It could kill you."

He ignored me as he lit the cigarette up, folding his ankle over his knee. "Not before this stress does."

"Anything on Phoenix?"

His gaze flickered to me. “I’m starting to think she’s in hiding.”

My brows shot up. “Why do you say that?”

“I hacked into her bank account.” He paused to look at me, a dry look hit my face. “She withdrew two million dollars.”

“Cash?” He nodded. “Sounds like she might be on to your plan and decided to take matters into her own hands.”

“Well, she doesn’t know my determination,” he muttered, his cigarette flopping up and down.

“No, she doesn’t.” *And God help them both.*

“You think it was wise leaving Romero at your place?”

A crease formed between my brows. “What can he possibly do? Take my shit? The man’s days are numbered as it is.”

He rolled his eyes.

“No, but he could insist on taking Reina home if—when we get her back.” My fists clenched. Dante’s eyes lowered, noting the tension in my hands. “He won’t,” he added, quickly. “He seems accepting of you as a son. Plus, through you, Reina remains his daughter.”

“Then everyone is happy,” I deadpanned.

“Or he could be playing along just to appease us,” he cut in wryly.

Was this a fucking game of yoyo? I was two seconds away from losing my shit, and Dante’s pep talk wasn’t helping. I cracked my neck. *Keep it fucking together. For her.*

Warfare raged in my head. Setting my jaw, I stared out the plane window, seeing nothing but darkness—one that matched my soul. Unleashing it meant tearing into anyone around me, including Dante if he didn’t stop talking stupid.

I inhaled a deep breath when Kian’s voice cut through my thoughts. “Amon, you need to see this. It’s not pretty, but you have to.”

My stomach twisted. “Is it Reina?”

Kian nodded. Was I strong enough to see it? I didn’t know, but I couldn’t look away. Not when my wife was living through who knew what type of hell.

“Amon?” Dante pressed.

I reached for his pack of cigarettes, snatched one out of the packet, and lit up. So much for preaching to my brother.

He opened his mouth to speak. “Don’t,” I warned, my voice hoarse.

His mouth snapped shut and he nodded, looking back at Kian who clicked a button and turned the laptop our way. The video was time-stamped over three weeks ago. Fucking three weeks.

It didn’t have any audio, but it didn’t change the fact that two men were attacking her. My hands balled into fists as I watched Perez drug her, feeling helpless as fuck.

“Is that—” Dante started but then stopped.

“Perez Cortes,” I gritted. “I thought the fucker didn’t leave Brazil.”

“He left for her,” Kian muttered. Then I watched them shove her into a cage and tie her up like a goddamn animal. Bile swirled in my stomach alongside a whirlpool of anger as I waited for him to assault her.

I forced myself to watch, my teeth clenching harder and harder until every bone in my jaw threatened to break.

“He won’t rape her,” Kian cut in, flicking me a worried glance. “Not while unconscious.”

That didn’t make me feel any better.

AMON

We reached the outskirts of Manaus right before nightfall. We all changed into clothing appropriate for jungle and battle.

Kian had contacts among local authorities and at the airport that would keep our entrance into the country quiet. It was thanks to him that everything was coordinated efficiently.

Eight Jeeps waited for us as we disembarked the plane. Once outside, Kian gave a silent nod to our dress code. Black shirts and cargo pants. “Smart. The jungle gets cold at night.”

It was Kian, Darius, Dante, and me, along with ten of our best men, including the Callahan twins. For some crazy reason, those two loved explosives and were in charge of blowing up the place. We all agreed: get in and get out.

Romero stayed behind and so did Illias and Marchetti. We couldn't risk most of the Omertà being wiped out in one go if shit went south.

“How far to the target location?” *How far is she?* I glanced at Darius, who was dressed in military gear. Despite my dislike of him, I had to admit I was glad he was here and on our side.

“Three hours.” Kian pulled a map up on his satellite device. “It'll be jungle terrain from here. We'll stop about five miles out, then make the rest of the journey on foot.” He pointed to the spot on the map. “Once we have her, one of my men will head our way with the vehicles.”

“What is this? A fucking prison in the middle of the jungle?” Dante’s eyes were glued to the screen.

“Perez is a paranoid motherfucker, and so was my father. When he selected this spot, he ensured the setup would make it practically impossible to penetrate.”

“But lucky for us, you know some ways in and out,” Darius deadpanned. “I fucking hope.”

Kian jerked his head. “I do. Just one.”

If it meant I had to crawl on my hands and knees, I wasn’t leaving this fucking jungle without her.

The stars were hidden behind the clouds and trees, making the success of our trek promising. If it stayed like this, it would provide us with a cloak of invisibility.

When we got to the marked location, we exited from the Jeeps and began on foot. The miles of trees and night creatures were the only landscape for the remainder of the way.

“Are we climbing a mountain?” Dante muttered.

“Stop being a sissy,” Darius mocked. “It’s a fucking hill. Barely.”

For the next three miles, the two called each other all kinds of creative names, though they managed to keep quiet. God knew how. We all ignored them. It was their way of blowing off steam, and neither knew when to quit.

Kian signaled to turn off our flashlights when we approached a rough path. For the next mile, we traveled in total darkness, using night-vision equipment. As if understanding the need for our concealment, the moon hid further behind the clouds and the darkness was almost oppressive.

Moving swiftly, we approached the compound with its tall walls and looming pillars. Behind us, our men followed. Nobody spoke a word.

“The walls surrounding the perimeter are thick,” Kian explained. “This place is locked down and there are guards

everywhere. Once we're inside, we'll have to leverage the element of surprise."

"How much space is there between the walls and the house?" I asked.

"Five hundred feet from every angle," Kian answered.

"And according to this map, it's a wide-open space," Darius chimed in. "We'll have to be fast and efficient. No one gets away."

I nodded. "The moment we're in, our men need to start eliminating the guards. Tell them to use silencers."

"Snipers in position," Kian ordered.

"Thank fuck these guards are dressed in white," Dante muttered. "Otherwise, not sure how the snipers would tell us apart."

Kian offered him a cold smile. "It's not my first rodeo."

"I have no fucking idea what that means," Dante spat. "I'm Italian, not a cowboy."

He was agitated and it had nothing to do with lack of sleep and everything to do with the jungle.

My hand landed on my brother's shoulder. "You okay?" We locked eyes. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple. "You're a good shot. Maybe you can pick the guards off one by one from here."

He grinned. "And let you have all the fun? Fuck no. Let's go."

I watched him for another second, then with a terse nod, I pulled my gun out of the waistband of my pants and we made our way toward the fortress, slipping soundlessly through the gap Kian told us about.

By design, nobody spoke a word. Kian pointed to each location where guards were likely stationed. Immediately, the ones on the towers started falling over like stringless puppets, one by one.

We moved with each target, using the opening to get closer to the house. Then an explosion of gunfire shattered the silence. A spray of bullets followed. Our cover was blown.

We started running, using the darkness to shield us from enemy eyes. My finger on the trigger, I took out everyone in my path. The atmosphere thickened with tension and urgency. Soon more guards charged our way.

I reloaded my gun, slamming the magazine in place. There was no room for mistakes, only efficiency. Aim. Shoot. Aim. Shoot.

The bullets whizzed through the air. At one point, one grazed me, but I didn't slow down to inspect the damage. It would have to wait.

“Jesus Christ, these guards are multiplying like roaches,” Dante breathed, shooting left and right.

“I wish we had time to cut off their cocks. Better yet, find the women they've been hurting and let them do it.” Darius's voice came through the earpiece while grinning savagely, but his smile was wiped the moment an explosion went off, shaking the ground.

We found ourselves in front of a plantation home with yet another slew of guards surrounding it. Our snipers took them out easily while we aimed for the ones hiding in the shadows.

Kian stopped to reload. “The women are kept in the barracks and the basement,” he instructed. “We should split up.” Dante and I nodded. “Darius can go with you, Amon. My guess is we'll find Reina in the basement, since she's the prize. Your brother and I will head to the barracks. We're getting all the women out tonight.”

The four of us reloaded our magazines in silence, then split up.

Darius and I entered through the grand entrance. The quiet luxury inside was in stark contrast to the chaos happening outside. Darius tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to the living room.

Bloodstained marble.

Our feet silent against the hard stone, we moved past it, heading down the long hallway with doors to the left and right.

“I don’t like this,” I mouthed, conscious of the fact that we’d yet to confront any guards. Judging by Darius’s expression, he didn’t like it either.

Reaching the opposite end of the house, a long window overlooking a waterfall and acres of jungle came into view. A muscle clenched under my stubbled jaw. This fucking bastard created a paradise for himself that would serve as hell for everyone else.

I shifted to the left when a choking sound had me turning my head. Some fucker had an arm wrapped around Darius’s neck.

“You’re here for her.” I recognized Perez Cortes. The fucker had a fresh gash on his face that looked to be from a fingernail and his shoulder looked fucked up. “You can’t have her. She’s mine.”

Darius saw an opening and took it, flipping him over his shoulder. Perez, the slimy ass, jumped to his feet with surprising agility. He pulled out a knife from the back of his pants, bending his knees into a fighting stance.

“Better say your final prayers, boys,” Perez spat, a sick gleam in his eyes. Darius and I shared a glance, then wordlessly fell into attack mode. He went left, I went right. We took turns, our strikes measured, but Perez was strong, fighting us off with ease. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, and when his knife sliced my forearm, I barely felt it. “Angelo Leone’s bastard daughter will scream her prayer when I’m done with her.”

Fury shot through me and I raised my gun when Darius’s grunt stopped me from pulling the trigger. “You go on. Find her. I got this asshole.”

For a moment, my wish to make this fucker suffer battled with my need to find my wife.

“Bind him. We take him alive,” I hissed. “Death is too merciful for him.”

He nodded, and I left the men to battle it out, confident Darius would win. I followed along a stone hallway with more rooms.

Opening the first door, my stomach lurched. A dead woman was spread over the bed like a broken doll, her blonde hair matted and dirty. Scenes right out of my worst nightmare waited for me, door after door. Fear gripped my heart, but I pushed on.

There was no going back without her.

Reaching the end of the hallway, I found a wrought-iron staircase that led to the basement.

Just as I started my descent into hell, a voice came through my earpiece.

“Kian, I have your brother. What’s your position?” It didn’t surprise me. Kian had been nursing a grudge against Perez for longer than I’d even been alive, ever since he’d sold their baby sister to a whorehouse. It was clear by the crazed look in Perez Cortes’s eyes that he wasn’t all there.

“Don’t forget who the fucker belongs to,” I said, my breaths coming in shallow bursts as I descended into the depths of this hell-hole.

“Duly noted.”

“We found some girls in the barracks, they’re still alive.” Kian’s voice came through. “Not many.” My stomach churned. She couldn’t be dead. She just fucking *couldn’t*. I paused with my hand on the stone wall, not sure I was ready for any of this. “Did you find her?”

Her. Reina.

“No.” Silence. “I’m making my way into the basement now.”

“Our extraction ETA is ten minutes.”

“Got it.”

The scent of death was even stronger down here, I thought, as I descended the rest of the way.

The last door along the corridor called out to me.

My footsteps heavy, I made my way to it and placed my hand on the latch. For a moment, I stood frozen, terrified of what I might find.

My heart cracking my ribs with each beat, I pushed the metal door open and faced my worst nightmare.

Reina's blonde curls were stained with blood. Bruises—black, blue, and purple—covered every visible inch of her skin. Her blue sapphires, unseeing, connected with mine.

The world came to a stop and I almost fell to my knees.

I'd failed her so fucking bad.

REINA

A crack stretched across the center of the ceiling. Some days it looked longer and it took up the entire room. Other days it barely took up a quarter of it.

I'd started to associate it with the state of my mind.

Some days I was more lucid, hopeful even. And others, my body shook from craving that needle and the relief it brought. But above all else, what was rotting me from the inside was not being able to distinguish reality from tricks my head played.

The heat in the air had my skin glistening with sweat, yet the last prick of the poison had me shivering from the inside out. A drop of sweat trickled from my brow and I let it roll down my cheek like it was a tear.

It wasn't though. There were none left.

Purple bruises covered the length of my body, the worst being in the crooks of my arms where my veins had collapsed. I was in hell, but I had never felt safer—that was, until the haze cleared and the need for another hit became an agonizing itch I couldn't scratch.

Perez Cortes controlled it all. He could grant me relief, hell... or death. Still, I prayed for the latter. Nobody would be saving me. I started to believe I was beyond salvation.

The silence of my prison was interrupted by the sounds of bullets, machine guns, shouts, and explosions. I didn't so much as flinch, certain my mind was taunting me. And

anyway, I hoped this place would burst into flames, and I no longer cared if I went up with it.

“Pretend you’re dead,” I whispered to myself, although I couldn’t hear my voice over the voices in my head and screams in the air.

A door cracked open and a shape appeared, stealing my attention. My fingers reached for it, sweeping my hand through the air—left, then right—unable to touch it. I craved a human touch; I’d never been alone for so long. I missed my sister, my friends, Grandma... I even missed our cramped apartment. *No*—I couldn’t let myself go there. I had to tamp down those memories, they did nothing for me here.

Another creak.

The faint light poured into my corner of darkness. I drew my eyes open and toward the doorway where a man stood, clad in all black.

Slowly, my gaze trailed up the tall frame until I reached his face. Something flickered over his face, nudging at my drug-induced fog, but I couldn’t grasp it.

“Reina.”

The softness of his voice sent an alert through me. I scooted further into the corner, ready to fight. The man with obsidian eyes pushed the door aside and walked into the small room, past the dirty mattress.

It’s a trick. “Don’t fall for it,” I whispered.

I watched him approach me and lower to his haunches with an expression that had me wanting to lash out.

His hand reached for me, and before he could touch me, I snatched his palm and bit into it savagely.

A grunted “fuck” tore from his throat.

Panic and the need to fight awoke my senses, right alongside a citrusy scent. I ignored it and shoved at the towering figure, but his footing was too stable, his frame too strong.

“Reina, it’s me,” he hissed as I kept clawing at him.
“Amon.”

I let out a raw scream at the cruel trickery. It was Perez’s cruelty. I knew it. He’d found a new way to toy with me.

“What’s going on, and what the *fuck* is that smell?” Another voice filtered from behind him and I stilled. I blinked my eyes, my tongue sweeping over my dry, cracked lips. A flicker of light hair came behind the dark man, his eyes darting around. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

Every fiber in me froze. I blinked again. *They’re still here.* It took several deep breaths for hope to set in. Panting, I looked down, noting that my hands were covered in blood. As was my filthy nightgown.

If I was dreaming, surely I’d pick something better to wear.

My skin was irritated, and I could feel it flaking off me. Groggy, freezing, and uncomfortable, I looked around my cell. Filth, blood, dead bodies.

“Cinnamon girl, it’s me.” I recognized his voice. It was deep, dark, and... deceitful.

My throat tightened, and just as I was about to start hyperventilating, a loud *boom* sounded.

“We have to grab her and go,” Darius whispered. “We don’t have much time. Perez has been disarmed, but his men don’t know that yet.”

Perez has been... Did that mean he wouldn’t hurt me anymore? Couldn’t? I inhaled a sharp breath. I should jump to my feet and run to the men who’d come to save me, yet all I could do was think, with absolute terror, that it was all an illusion. A fever dream, no matter how real they looked and sounded.

I’d wake up and that sinking feeling would crush me again.

My tremors were back and my teeth rattled louder than ever.

“Are her pupils—” Amon didn’t finish.

“Yes. Look at what they’ve done to her arms too.” I pulled my mangled arms behind my back, right hand clasping over my left wrist, and felt my shoulders drop in shame. “Grab her and let’s go.”

Boots stomped my way on the stone floor, and the crunching of dirt and rubble sent my heart flying into my throat. I shook violently with each approaching step. The roaring of my heartbeat drowned out every other sound, and when another bomb went off, I barely heard it.

“Fuck, I think she’s scared of me.” His voice, those words, reverberated through me, but it was his shattered tone that reflected the pain in my chest. It was enough to finally give me pause.

Eyes wide, I stared up at my savior—my... husband, and I felt my nerves pinball through my broken body. A sob ratcheted up my throat, muffled by my hand. I was on the verge of fainting, being sick all over my prison floor, when his face came but an inch from mine.

It felt like staring up at a night sky full of glittering stars.

“I’m taking you home, cinnamon girl.” He spoke so softly, my heart shuddered with longing. “Do you know who I am?”

His eyes were locked on me as if he was convinced I’d vanish into thin air.

“Amon.” Utter relief whooshed from his mouth in a drawn-out sigh and he fell to his knees in front of me. I swallowed, raw emotions scratching at my throat. I didn’t want to feel them. I didn’t want to remember him.

“Fuck, baby.” His voice was gentle, vulnerable. “I’m so happy I found you.”

A whimper burst from me.

He stood and lifted me into his arms, holding me so tightly that I could hardly breathe. “Fuck, you’re so cold.”

Amon placed soft kisses all over my cheek, pulling me tight to his chest and rocking me. His hands roamed over my

clammy skin in an attempt to warm me up. How could he stand to touch me when I was disgusting, unworthy, ruined...?

“We need to go, Amon.” Darius’s voice shook slightly, drawing my eyes to him while my husband shed his jacket and wrapped it around me.

“Hold on, cinnamon girl.” He stood up, his grip tightening on me. He swallowed over and over again, fighting to keep it together. His dark eyes were flooded with tears, making them shimmer in the dark. “I’m taking you home.”

He couldn’t know that my demons would follow me anywhere, even home.

AMON

“How is she?” Dante asked from the passenger seat, concern marring his face. He eyed Reina’s unconscious body. Darius was behind the wheel, the Jeep rocking uncontrollably as we made our way back through the jungle.

Perez was bound with chains in the vehicle ahead of us, his mouth muffled and his eyes blindfolded.

And my wife... She was out cold in my arms. When we’d rushed up the stairs and out the front door, Reina had spotted the women—the ones we hadn’t been able to save—and lost her shit. She came at us all, biting and scratching, leaving us no choice but to sedate her.

My finger hadn’t lifted from her pulse once, petrified that destiny would be so cruel and fucked up as to take her away from me just when we finally reunited.

“She’ll be okay,” I muttered, more to myself than to my brother. “She’s strong.”

“Did you get the message to Romero?” Dante had been nothing but patient and understanding since he’d laid eyes on her broken, emaciated form in my arms. He’d gone through a similar hell once before, after all. “He must be going out of his goddamn mind. Maybe it’s good he’s her father for all intents and purposes. He’s better than our own.” *Our own*. Angelo Leone had been anything but a father. If his conduct when Dante was taken was anything to go by, there was no chance

he'd have gone out of his way to save Reina if he were still alive.

"I did. He's relieved. He wanted to meet us at the port, but I told him to sit tight. The sooner we're out of this country, the better."

"Does he know she'll need to go to rehab?"

Darius's lips tightened, and he shook his head. "Reina's addiction is the least of our worries."

He was right. She was in bad shape. Thankfully, most of the blood staining her skin and her nightgown wasn't hers, but the bruises and scarring definitely were, and they were no small thing.

We left the Cortes compound blown to kingdom come, courtesy of the Callahan twins. Kian pointed out the strategic locations to set up the explosives for maximum impact, and the twins were more than happy to oblige. A few of Cortes's men took off on foot, but Kian made it his personal mission to track them down.

I suspected those men knew all about the brother who'd done the impossible and fled the Cortes cartel—his reputation was god-like among organizations. So when they'd caught wind of him, they'd hightailed it out of there before they could meet their fate. The worms were slippery, but they wouldn't be able to evade capture for long. Just like my fucking cousin wouldn't be able to run from me when I eventually tracked him down.

Darius's eyes flickered to the rearview mirror every so often, checking on my wife. We both knew this would leave scars. I had already started arranging increased security for my compound back in Jolo. Clearly, a month in Perez's captivity, not to mention that crossing by sea, had left my wife feeling more vulnerable than I knew how to deal with on my own.

I pressed my forehead to hers, murmuring soft words, hoping they'd reach her somehow.

I cursed the evil that had ripped us apart. Perez dimmed her light, but I was determined to bring it back. "We'll get

through this, cinnamon girl. Together.”

At the sound of my voice, her eyelids fluttered open, but there was no recognition in them.

“Just hang on.”

Her eyelashes settled back on her cheeks, almost as if she couldn’t stand to look at me, and she didn’t open them again for the rest of the bumpy ride.



I paced back and forth outside Reina’s hospital room, my fingers curled into fists as I waited for the doctor to finish with her. The sight of blood never particularly bothered me, but seeing so much of it on my wife was an experience I’d spend the rest of my days trying to shake from my memory.

Twice now I’d almost lost her. And twice now I’d failed her.

Never again. Never fucking again.

When Reina’s condition worsened and our team of private doctors couldn’t manage, we had to take a detour to Colombia. Once there, a private hospital took her and a few of the other rescued women in for emergency procedures. Raphael Santos, the head of the Santos cartel, provided us all with security and a compound to stay in.

Thank fuck the Nikolaev family had a good relationship with the Colombians and was able to get through to him in time.

The door opened and I lifted my head, squaring my shoulders as the doctor stepped out. He was older, maybe in his late fifties, with gray hair and dark eyes.

“How is she, Doctor?” I rushed to him.

“We disinfected her wounds and stitched up several deeper ones,” he said. “She’s malnourished, dehydrated, and unfortunately, very much under the influence of drugs.” He

took a deep breath. “The next few days will prove difficult. I’ve inserted an IV, which she’ll be receiving fluids through.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded once. “She’s in very rough shape, Amon. Sedation is necessary at this stage, but please remember that it cannot be a lasting treatment. Opioid withdrawal comes with a barrage of symptoms, including anxiety, depression, and, in Reina’s case, forms of post-traumatic stress. It will take weeks, if not months, for her to regain some semblance of normalcy. She needs full support and empathy from those around her.”

“I understand,” I replied.

“I’ll be back tomorrow to monitor her and administer more medication. Her vitals stats are feeding directly into my phone, but if you need anything urgently, just grab one of the nurses.”

“Will do. Good night, Doc.”

“Good night, sir.” He strode away, leaving behind more questions than answers. It was a start though, and that was what mattered.

I leaned against the doorway, watching Reina sleep. Her skin was so pale, so translucent. She must have lost twenty pounds since I last saw her, which felt like years ago.

Her golden curls were splayed across the pillow, lacking the liveliness they once held. Even as she slept, the dark circles beneath her eyes and the hollowness of her cheeks taunted me. There was hardly a trace of the little girl I met all those years ago, never mind the young woman from a month ago.

My jaw clenched as that little voice in my head told me I caused this. I should have never touched her, tainted her with my darkness and put her in harm’s way.

“How is she?” Raphael’s voice came from behind me.

“Not the best news, but she’ll pull through. The doctor took me through the next steps and what to expect.”

He nodded his understanding. “No matter what I say, it won’t make you feel better.” It sounded like he was speaking

from experience. “The best advice I can offer is to give her time and space. Whatever she needs to heal.”

It wasn't the worst advice. Except, I couldn't breathe without her. I'd give her time, but I couldn't give her too much space. The only way I'd keep my own sanity and be able to support her through this was with her back in my home, under my care.

Everything I'd done from the moment I took my first breath had led to her. I wasn't the perfect man she deserved, but I was hers. Always had been; always would be.

“Thank you for letting us use your facilities,” I said, choosing not to comment. “I'll shoulder all the costs.”

“Don't worry about that. We're glad Perez is gone and that you saved those women.”

I shot him a look. “Not a fan of Cortes?”

“His reputation and penchant for cruelty knows no bounds. We've been waiting for our own opportunity to take him down for years.” Santos's eyes landed on my wife, studying her with intrigue. “So this is who the crazy fucker obsessed over.” It wasn't a question.

“Does the whole world know he was obsessed with her?”

Raphael's attention returned to me. “Well, everyone who has touched the flesh-trading world.” I stiffened, but before I could smash his face against the wall, he added, “You hear shit when your father has no scruples. May he rot in hell.”

“He partnered with Cortes?”

“And with Benito King,” he deadpanned. “He really knew how to make friends in his time.”

Benito King led the cells—once upon a time—in North America. His business dealings in trading flesh were referenced as the Belles & Mobsters agreement. While in South America, Perez ran the Marabella agreements. It made you wonder who inspired whom.

Benito King was a bastard, and none other than his own daughter had put an end to him. She and Reina had that in

common, if nothing else. I sighed. The women who survived the underworld were stronger than the men. A lot fucking stronger.

“I’m guessing you didn’t approve.”

“I didn’t,” he acknowledged. “You know it was the fact she was Leone’s daughter that made her a target. Not you.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You sound pretty confident in your assumptions.”

He shrugged. “Call it what you will. Been there, done that. I’m just pointing out the obvious.”

“And how do you know she’s Angelo’s daughter?” I questioned. After all, it was only mere months ago that I learned it.

“That idiot Perez never excluded my old man’s route in his distributions.” It was on the tip of my tongue to ask why he didn’t stop it when he clarified, “Since my father preferred Benito’s agreements, Perez didn’t include many details, and the messages on the dark web were encrypted.”

It didn’t fucking matter anyhow. His father was dead.

“How did Perez know Reina was Angelo’s daughter?”

The silence that followed didn’t bode well. Ever since the attack, I’d had a bad feeling that something big was brewing in the background.

“Someone within the Yakuza. I don’t have a name.” His hand landed on my shoulder. “Whatever else you need, just let me know.”

With that, he turned around and left, leaving me alone with my thoughts. The Yakuza. There was only one way they would know. *My mother.*

Did she hate Romero so much she’d sell out an innocent woman to a cruel bastard? Or was it to get back at Angelo? It was inconceivable that she’d take things that far.

“I know that look.” Dante’s voice came from behind me. “Shit’s about to go down.” His gaze flicked to Reina’s still

form. “I hope we get to rip out some intestines and wrap them around some poor fucker’s throat.”

I looked at my brother, *really* looked at him, noting the clammy skin. The haunted look in his eyes that I hadn’t seen in a while had returned and stared me back in the face. It resembled the look I saw in Reina’s when I found her.

“Are you okay?” I asked, watching him warily.

“Yes, of course.” He wasn’t, but I knew my brother well enough to know pushing for an answer would have the opposite effect. “What are you fuming about?”

“Who says I’m fuming?” I asked, tone cold.

Dante’s eyes flicked to Reina. “My little sister’s alive, so it can’t be related to her.”

It had everything to do with her. This world started and ended with her. It was built for the two of us, and whoever stood in our way would be eliminated.

Even my own mother.

AMON

Some of the women we rescued had asked to stay behind in Colombia under Raphael's protection, others wanted to go back home. Wherever home was.

We worked out the logistics to ensure no woman was left unaccounted or uncared for, thanks to the men Raphael supplied. These women had gone through hell, and the evidence was in their skittish movements, their trembling hands. Not one woman had yet to utter a single word directly to us, although they spoke to the doctors and nurses.

The Santos compound was home for three days. The doctors treated the wounds on Reina's body and pumped her with fluids. I stayed with her through it all, letting it feed my rage. Soon I'd shred the rest of the culprits with my bare fucking teeth.

The first twenty-four hours, I stayed with her every second, unable to let myself believe she was really here, that she was safe.

The door to the hospital room opened and Dante appeared. He looked harsher, and he seemed to be fighting to keep that smug grin fastened on his face—his trusty mask. But it was all wrong.

"You should get some rest, Dante," I told him, turning back to look at my wife.

He entered the room, and an eerie sense of déjà vu washed over me. Three years ago, we were in a similar situation:

Reina fighting for her life and the two of us fighting our own demons.

“You need rest more than me, Amon,” Dante reasoned.

“I’m fine,” I grumbled, resisting the need for sleep.

“No, you’re not.” Dante glanced over his shoulder. “Besides, if you want to make Perez pay, you’re going to need your strength, because Raphael and Kian are planning some majorly fucked-up shit.” His eyes lit up. “It’s going to be awesome.”

He worried me. His usually volatile persona had been cranked up a notch, magnified, and was simmering under the surface and waiting to explode.

“What exactly are they planning?”

“They’re setting up some kind of *Hunger Games* shit so they can torture him and extract answers, fast.”

I sighed, pulling out my phone. I couldn’t deal with batshit crazy right now, yet it seemed I was being forced to. As if he heard my thoughts, Kian and Raphael appeared at the doorway.

“Your brother’s such a tattletale,” Kian grumbled. “I know not to give him any of *my* secrets.”

I smiled wryly, not bothering to correct him. Dante had never betrayed a single secret in his life. If I wanted to keep a secret, I could always count on him.

“So, a *Hunger Games*-themed party?” I asked, changing subjects.

“He’s got to pay,” Kian gritted. “It’s the only way to regain the power his operation has taken from us. It’s a stain on the organization, and we will not be seen to stand for it. Let the fuckers find out what happens to those who dare to even consider trading flesh in our territories.”

Cold fury leached from his voice. It was the same one I felt burning through my veins.

“You won’t hear me arguing. When and where?”

“First thing in the morning,” Kian answered, and my eyes darted to the wall clock. That was in two hours. “Meet me in the courtyard.”

“I can’t leave Reina alone.”

“My wife, Sailor, can stay with her,” Raphael offered.

Reina would want Perez dead. I knew it without a shred of doubt. “Okay,” I confirmed.

Raphael grinned. “I’m going to enjoy this.”

This time Dante smiled his true crazy smile. “Ditto.”

Once they were out of the room, I slid in next to Reina on the hospital bed, careful not to hurt her. Sleep didn’t find me, but for the next two hours, my palm rested on her chest, and I pulled comfort from the steady thrum of her heartbeat.



Raphael was back in precisely two hours, announcing it was time to go. A petite woman with platinum-blonde hair stood next to him.

“This is Sailor,” he said. “She’ll stay with your wife.”

She extended her hand. “I’ll keep her safe. Raphael’s guards are everywhere too.”

Once we were outside, I found Kian and Dante already waiting in the courtyard. Right outside the gates, trees lined the acres and acres of property. He could escape, but he wouldn’t. Raphael had guards surrounding the hospital. If we failed—and we wouldn’t—they had a standing order. *Shoot to kill.*

Perez stood in front of his brother, holding tightly to his pride.

“What kind of shit is this?” he retorted like the pompous ass we all knew him to be.

I smiled grimly, taking a page out of Dante's book. "We're going to play tag, and guess what?" I drawled. "You're *it*."

Kian's lip curled in disgust. "Let's see how you like being on the other end of your torture methods."

Dante scoffed. "Maybe we should slice his dick off when we're done with him... While he's still alive, of course."

My eyes still on the fucker, I nodded. "We will. But before he dies, he'll tell me who betrayed me."

Perez must've found my words amusing because he started laughing. "You don't have to look far," he said. "Take a look at those closest to you."

"I want names," I said dryly.

"You'll never get them from me."

He must still feel brave. That would soon change. I flicked a glance at Kian, giving him a terse nod.

"Run," I commanded. He was about to taste his own medicine. "When we catch you, you'll get exactly what you gave Reina."

"What you gave to *our sister*," Kian spat.

"What you've done to all those women," Raphael finished.

He looked between us and, noting our seriousness, he turned and he *ran*.

I shared a look with Kian and Raphael. A final nod had us stalking forward. Frost still covered the grounds, but in another few hours, it'd be scorching. It was the way of the Colombian Amazon.

I headed further into the woods, my footsteps silent against the forest floor crumbling beneath my feet. The wind swept through the leaves, the first sounds of dawn chirping in the trees. Tuning out anything apart from what would serve me out here, I heard it.

Heavy breathing, branches snapping beneath clumsy footsteps.

Then I saw the footprints, and it quickly became child's play. I followed his tracks until I found him hiding behind a tree. Like a fucking coward.

To my disappointment, Kian was about twenty feet away, homing in on our quivering target.

“How does it feel?” I called out. “Knowing your fate.”

He didn't answer, but his breathing said enough.

“Are you tasting fear like our little sister did when she was sent to the whorehouse?” Kian asked as I took a silent step closer. I couldn't wait to start toying with him and hearing his screams.

“Is your heart pounding so hard, you're worried you'll have a heart attack?” I taunted. “Don't worry, you'll be begging for one by the time we're done with you.”

I could taste his fear on my tongue. Desperation permeated the air and a stillness settled over us. Both Kian and I anticipated his brother's movement. Perez jumped out from behind the tree, bolting in the opposite direction from me.

My knife was out of its holster in the next breath and flying through the air with a soft swish until it found its aim, slicing through his calf.

A screech pierced my ears, sending birds scattering through the canopy of trees. I watched with apathy as he fell flat on his face, then worked to drag himself up. His leg dragging, he attempted to limp away.

Big mistake, because Kian threw his knife, slicing his other calf.

A pitiful yelp, or more like a pussy screech, traveled across the forest.

“Jesus, he's going to wake up the whole country.” Raphael showed up out of nowhere. It only now registered that he was wearing a white suit. A white fucking suit and combat boots.

“You know that suit will be red by the time we're done with this guy,” I clipped, suddenly feeling better than I had in weeks.

Crouching beside Perez, I cocked my head and tsked at him. “See what happens when you fuck with me?”

“I should have shot you in that ugly head of yours,” he shouted from the top of his lungs, his voice breaking as I pulled my knife out of his calf. Blood gushed down his leg, soaking his filthy socks.

“It’s my favorite knife. You understand, don’t you?”

I didn’t give two shits whether or not he did.

“Good idea,” Kian chimed. “I want my knife back too.” The black fury I felt in my chest emanated from Kian in the same way. “It’ll be my lucky one, since it’s about to shred this motherfucker to pieces.”

Perez bared his teeth in agony, snarling like a kid who just lost a game.

“You’re all psycho bitches,” he screamed.

We shared amused looks. “Lead the way, Raphael,” I said, grabbing the fucker by the front of his shirt. “I hope it’s a long way to the torture chamber.”

“Don’t you worry,” he drawled. “We’ll take the scenic route.”

I dragged Perez, purposely hitting stumps and rocks to ensure he got the roughest ride. It took only ten minutes to find the spot where Raphael had stashed away his torture gadgets—a bunker that looked like it belonged in World War II, somewhere in Europe. You’d never believe that shit was in Colombia.

“That’s freaky,” Kian remarked dryly, pointing to the array of instruments.

I shoved Perez into the middle of the concrete circle, letting Kian and Raphael secure his wrists and ankles. He begged and stuttered, promising all kinds of riches, while sweat poured down his face. He was no longer proving to be the calm, fearless prisoner.

“I’m sor—”

I kicked him hard in the stomach, cutting his breath *and* his apology short.

“No apology will do here,” Kian remarked.

“I want to see you suffer,” I added. “How did you find out my location? How did you know we’d be in the Philippines?” He pressed his lips together in clear refusal, and I punched him hard, breaking his nose.

“Nob—” I took advantage of his open mouth and shoved my knife into it, slicing his tongue. Blood spurted out of him like a damn water hose.

“I always wondered if cutting a man’s tongue floods their mouth with blood,” Kian drawled. “We’ll save that for the last act.”

I grinned, bringing my knife to his groin area. “*This* will come first. We’ll make the tongue the grand finale. I want to hear his screams when his dick drops to the ground.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Kian’s smile was the picture of menace. “This won’t bring my sister back, but it sure as fuck will make her spirit rest easier. I know it’ll make *me* feel better.”

I took a step closer, the stench of piss invading my lungs. I ignored it, intent on making sure this fucker felt agony before he drew his last breath. Sweat poured down his face as I brought my blade to his throat.

“Who gave you the information on our location?” I demanded. I pushed it into his flesh, then twisted it clockwise.

“Your cousin,” he wailed.

How in the fucking hell would my cousin know? “Who was his contact?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Your cousin came for the auction to see Reina one last time, and to collect his finder’s fee.”

The anger was hot and red, filling my vision with crimson.

“You shall not see,” I said, and his eyes widened, just enough for me to pluck out his left eyeball. I let out a heavy

sigh, barely audible over his howls. “Okay, I’ll let you watch me through one eyeball.” While he was writhing around on the ground, clawing at his face, I grabbed two blades, then returned to his body.

“I really wish Ghost were here,” I purred, plunging a knife through his left palm. His scream was a fucking symphony worth recording and listening to over and over again. “He’d pull your teeth out. Unfortunately, I don’t have the stomach for it.”

“Yeah, he’s savage,” Kian agreed.

Perez started to laugh, the act throwing me off. “What’s so funny?” Raphael demanded. I was curious now too.

That seemed to only make him laugh harder.

“If he can laugh, he’s not in enough pain.” And by God, he’d be in so much pain by the time I was done with him. For Reina. For every woman he ever hurt. “Limbs are next,” I announced helpfully. Or not.

I grabbed a saw and waved it in front of him to ensure he understood what I meant. And boy, did he *scream*. All I could think about was the state of my wife and the dead and dismembered women we found at his torture compound.

Much to his dismay, I started with his left arm, leaving him hanging like a broken swing. He screamed and shit himself.

“God, my kids don’t even cry this much,” Raphael complained. Just as I predicted, Raphael’s white suit had red stains all over it, even though he had yet to have his turn with Perez.

“So glad he stopped laughing,” Kian grumbled. “That was annoying.”

“Shit, I cut the arm with the blade piercing his palm. I meant to do the other one.” I plunged the blade through his right palm this time.

I didn’t bother removing the fucker’s pants. Nobody needed to see his dick. I just raised my knife and stabbed it into his groin and pelvis area.

“Do you like the color of blood?” I hissed as I kept stabbing his groin area. The stench of blood and piss mixed in the air, but I ignored it. This was for my wife.

I turned to Kian. “The tongue is all yours.”

Perez had been in and out of consciousness, but his one eye widened at that, full of pure, delicious terror, and I watched Kian cut his brother’s tongue clean off in the span of a single heartbeat.

But it was my face he saw last. I made sure of it.



Another day and Reina was cleared to travel. It took a couple million dollars to persuade the doctor to fly back to the Philippines with us. None of us were on our deathbeds—a few bullet wounds, broken bones, and mostly superficial injuries. We were lucky. Reina not so much.

Her condition left her mostly unconscious. There was a time or two when she’d even stopped breathing. My heart stopped right along with her.

According to the doctor, it was how Reina’s central nervous system reacted to the absence of heroin. It slowed down her breathing to the point of stopping and irregularized her temperature and blood pressure. We had to flush her system out.

Dante was sitting in the seat beside me, playing with his switchblade, his mood darkening with each mile we put behind us.

“Have you heard anything about Phoenix?” I asked him, knowing he had Cesar on it.

“No, she’s good at hiding,” he muttered. “You think Romero is helping her?”

“Considering how much he’s freaking out, I doubt it,” I remarked. “Maybe her grandmother?”

“I have men watching her.” Clenching his jaw, he grabbed the glass from the table and poured the rest of his Guinness into it. Thank fuck it wasn’t bourbon or whiskey. That would prove to be very bad. “And I have all her lines tapped. Nothing there, either.” There was a stretch of silence, then my brother eventually broke it. “I’ll find her though. If it’s the last thing I do.”

Lifting my glass, I took a long, slow drink of my bourbon. “Are you sure you’re alright? You seem on edge.”

Dante shot me a sideways look. “I remembered something.”

My brows tightened. “About?”

He clenched his teeth, shadows crossing his expression. “Reina’s needle marks,” he started, rising to his feet. “They took me back... to when I was captured.”

“What?”

He shook his head, pushing his hands through his hair. “Let me sort through it first,” he said, exhaling a heavy breath.

He strode toward the front of the jet and disappeared into the cockpit, but it didn’t take long for Kian to take his spot. Darius would have been here, drinking whiskey with us, but he’d stayed in Colombia an extra day to take one of the women home to her family.

“Your brother doing okay?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“Back at the Cortes compound, he looked like he was seeing ghosts,” he remarked. The wheels in my head started turning. Could it be that the Cortes cartel was responsible for Dante’s abduction years ago?

“He’ll be okay,” I gritted. *I hope.*

“How is Reina doing?”

My gaze flickered to the back of the plane where Reina was sleeping, curled up on her side. She was bruised and

weak, but with the way the nurses had dressed her in pink shorts and a baggy white tank top, I let myself feel hopeful.

“Not great, but she’ll pull through.” She had to. For herself. For us.

Rising from my seat, I made my way toward the small bedroom in the back of the plane. The doctor sat there, monitoring her vitals, and the moment I stepped in, he looked up from the IV stand he was adjusting.

“Unchanged,” he stated calmly, anticipating my question, then nodded before making himself scarce.

I sat on the edge of the bed, then reached around my neck to unhook her necklace. I’d kept it on me all this time, holding on to the hope that she’d come back to me.

I fastened it around her neck while pressing my lips to her forehead.

“Cinnamon girl,” I murmured against her damp forehead. “I’ve waited for you since I was twelve years old. I fell in love with you before I knew what love was. Please don’t leave me alone. I’m nothing without you.”

But instead of finding comfort in my words, a terrified scream tore through my wife’s lips. I recoiled, unsure of what to do, all the while feeling my insides turn to liquid.

It was the kind of scream that nightmares were made of.

REINA

When I woke up next, I was in the Garden of Eden. It was just me and the sound of the waves. No cold, damp floor. No tortured screams. No blood or filth covering me from head to toe. No shadows and monsters. No Perez Cortes.

I scratched at my forearms, feeling restless as my eyes roamed over the spacious bedroom. Wide-open windows revealed blue skies. A breeze swept through the room, and there wasn't a single dark corner to be found. The soft hum of the ocean soothed me, at least while I was awake.

Come back to me. I remembered the whispers from sometime in the night. A pair of strong arms rocking me back and forth. My screams. His words. *Please come back to me. I need you.*

My eyes lowered to my bare forearms and hands. Ugly scars marked my skin, but I chose to focus on the good. I had no choice.

“Welcome home, baby.” My father’s voice pulled my attention, and I found him sitting with a book, looking like he’d aged a decade. He’d lost even more weight than when I’d last seen him. Purple shadows stained the skin underneath his eyes.

“Papà?” I whispered, caught between disbelief and hope. “A-are... are you real?”

He gave me a tired smile. “Of course, baby girl.” He stood up and approached the bed, and I just stared at him. The

mattress shifted under his weight and his frail palm cupped my cheek. “I didn’t think I’d see you again before—”

His voice cracked and his face crumbled like an avalanche. I leaned into his cool touch, my chest tightening with each heartbeat.

“I’m here,” I whispered.

“You are.” A tear rolled down my cheek and he wiped it off with his thumb. “I’m so sorry, my baby girl. I failed at protecting you.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “It’s not your fault.” We stared at each other, so many things unsaid, lingering between us. “I... I’m not—” How were you supposed to tell the man who raised you that you weren’t his? “I’m not your daughter,” I croaked, the emotion in my throat suffocating me.

A heartbeat passed.

“I don’t care who your biological father is. You are my daughter. Until my dying breath. It was my job to protect you, and I failed monumentally.”

Ghosts lingered who started this story without our permission—Angelo, Hana, even Mamma. She was mostly the victim but I couldn’t remain oblivious to the fact that she’d had an affair with Angelo. If Angelo couldn’t be sure which one of us was his, their relationship must have lasted a while.

A shuddering breath left my lungs, loosening the tightness. “Papà, it’s not your fault. You didn’t fail at all. It’s Angelo Leone’s fault. *He* made me a target.”

He released my cheek and a stretch of silence followed. His gaze rested on me, haunting questions in them unmistakable, but deep down, I knew he didn’t have the energy for the answers. He didn’t have much time left on this earth.

“I should have recognized the signs,” he muttered, moving back to the lounge near the window. “Grace begged me not to go to Leone’s home. She didn’t want to move to Italy, which I chalked up to her nervousness. But I couldn’t do business from

the States, and I needed to arrange a business deal with Angelo to access his ports.”

I was sick and tired of hearing justifications. Mamma had had enough money to support us for several lifetimes. He didn't need to worry about any business deals, didn't need to put them before his family.

“What happened to her, Papà?” I hesitated, looking at the wedding ring on my finger, at the sparkle that I didn't feel in my soul. “Did Mamma have an affair with him?”

A heavy sigh left him. Maybe I shouldn't have asked, but I didn't want to go through life wondering. I needed to know the truth.

“Grandma will kill me if she learns I told you,” he muttered, then a mischievous smile curved his lips. “It's a good thing I'm almost there already.” I rose from the bed and padded over to him, wrapping my arms around him and hugging him tightly. “I'll be meeting your mamma soon enough, so I'm sure she'll have her say in the matter too.”

“That's a morbid joke,” I muttered, sighing tiredly, my tremors increasing and the itch under my skin spreading. My body begged me to return to the bed, to the warm sheets, but I knew I had to be strong.

He waved his hand. “I earned that right.” He might have a point there. I lowered to sit next to him, my eyes catching the sight of my bare legs. My skin was no longer flawless. They carried maps of my pain, of what I'd endured. I closed my eyes and waited for him to start. “God, I'm not even sure where to begin,” he grumbled.

“The beginning,” I whispered, terrified of the truths I'd learn. I glanced out the window while he gathered his thoughts, letting it sink in for the first time that I was *finally* at Amon's house in the Philippines. I always imagined what it would be like, especially after finding out he'd spent much of the time we were apart here. I could see why now, just by looking out the window at the calm, turquoise waters lapping against the stilts my bedroom sat on. The scent of salt mingled

with the humidity and promised to keep me warm. I *needed* to feel warm.

“Okay, well, as you know by now, I was married before your mamma,” he started. I tensed, my fingernails digging into my palms. I now knew who he was married to and who was the result of that marriage. “But I didn’t tell her, and when she learned, she became quite upset, thinking she was the reason behind it.”

“Was she?”

He shook his head. “No, Hana—Amon’s mother, who you’ve met—and I didn’t see eye to eye, but I came to that revelation too late. We were already married by then. Like a fool, I convinced myself that the business deals that would come along with it would be worth it. Bottom line, it was deceitful, and I can see now that it was wrong to lie, even by omission. I made that mistake with your mother, with you and your sister.”

I nodded, unsure what I was feeling right now. Our parents kept way too many secrets from us and they weren’t the only ones paying for them. Amon, me, Phoenix... heck, even Dante, who’d almost married his half sister. It was all fucking wrong.

“I’m sorry you didn’t hear it all from me first,” he said, clearly at a loss for where to go from here.

“What did Hana want that you didn’t?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

“She wanted more power, more control to secure our future children’s positions. It’s best if you don’t know the details. What matters is she wanted power and control. I never did. Business dealings, yes, but not the kind of shit she was after. Ruling over the Yakuza was never on my radar.” My brows furrowed, but before I could question it, he continued. “She took our separation hard. Grace found out that I left Hana for her, that I was married before. It was a half-truth, but it was enough to send Grace searching for comfort outside our marriage. I never knew it was with Angelo Leone.” Fuck, it was so damn messy it made my head spin. “I learned only

recently that the marriage wasn't annulled at all. Jesus, I'm still married to that crazy woman."

"When did you learn about the annulment? Or, I guess, the lack of it?" I asked.

His lips thinned. "Not until you disappeared."

"How did you find out?"

"Your husband."

I couldn't breathe. I didn't know who was the most wrong in that quadrangle. Papà for lying. Mamma for cheating. Amon's mother for being a bitch. Or Angelo Leone for touching someone else's wife.

Then something occurred to me. "Did Angelo know I was his?"

He couldn't have. His last words to me were that Phoenix was his.

"That's the confusing part," he muttered, pushing his wrinkled hand through his thin hair. "When we arranged the marriage, it was between his eldest and mine."

"Amon and Phoenix?" I rasped, something about it not sitting well with me.

He nodded. "But then he approached me and insisted we change it. To you. Except, why would he do that, knowing you're his daughter? He was a sadistic bastard, but there's no way he'd support incest." My eyes bulged in shock. "Unless he knew Amon wasn't his, although I don't think that's it either, because why bother making a mutually beneficial marriage arrangement for a son that isn't yours."

"I agree." Angelo Leone didn't seem the kind who'd care for an adoptive son. In order for him to go to such lengths, he'd have to truly believe Amon was his.

"Reina, Amon's my son." So many secrets. So many lies. So many betrayals.

Was anything sacred in the underworld?

Then a realization sunk in and my eyes widened. “You knew the entire time Amon was yours?”

“No, I only learned shortly after Angelo died. I looked into the reason for his insistence on changing the name from Phoenix to you. I didn’t find his reason, but I learned Amon was mine.” All this entanglement was giving me a headache. “When Angelo died, Dante approached me to sign off on the agreement. So I insisted that we replace Amon’s name with his. Never in a million years did I think you were Angelo’s daughter.”

My temples throbbed. It’d become a constant feeling that rarely went away, and when it did, it was to be replaced with terror.

“We really fucked up, huh? But Amon loves you. He refused to give up, gathering a rescue party, organizing the mission day in and day out.” Papà smiled through his tears. “You children will do better than us.”

I wasn’t so sure, but I didn’t want to worry him further. I could call him out on handling everything poorly—being the indirect reason for Mamma’s affair, inadvertently causing her death, not being there when Phoenix and I needed him for emotional support, and for not letting us find love on our own terms. He should have never drawn up a marriage agreement in the first place. It was barbaric and fucking wrong.

But none of it would erase what happened, and there was no sense in playing the blame game now.

“Where’s Phoenix?” I questioned, not missing the way his face fell.

“I’m going to get your grandma or she’ll have my balls.”

“You’re right about that.” Both of us turned our heads to find her standing in the doorway in all her glory. Her eyes met mine and she gave me one of her beaming, Hollywood smiles. “You sure know how to worry us, Reina.”

“I’m sorry, Grandma,” I whispered, rising to my unsteady feet.

She shook her head and came over. “I want to live long enough to see my great-grandchildren, and I’m not sure my heart can endure anything like this happening again.”

I winced at her words and my eyes flickered to Papà, knowing he wouldn’t live to see his grandchildren. Not that I was remotely thinking about children at this point.

“Where’s Phoenix?” I asked again, but all it earned me was a sad silence. “They didn’t grab her,” I whispered, moving away from both of them. “Right?”

Grandma wouldn’t allow any space. “They did not,” she assured, rubbing my arms softly. “Don’t worry about Phoenix. She’s fine.”

The desperation and uncertainty in her voice was unmistakable. My stomach dropped. They didn’t have a fucking clue where she was. The tremors started in my toes, slithering up my body, and dug into the marrow of my bones.

Panic grew and grew until it suffocated me. It seized my body and paradise became hell once more.

“You’re lying,” I screamed, a raging storm gathering in my chest and my mind. “Where is she?”

Panic rose up, feeding me fear and hopelessness. Images of the torture I endured crashed over me, except my face was replaced with my sister’s.

The blood-curdling scream pierced my ears through the ringing. Was the sound coming from me? I watched the woman I’d become, as if from above, crouched near the floor, hands over ears, crying, *No, no, no*.

Then a prick. The room spun. I gasped.

Bu-bum... Bu-bum... Bu-bum.

My heartbeat slowed. Faces swirled before my eyes. Papà’s. Grandma’s. Dante’s. His. The little boy whose stars had swallowed me all those years ago.

Then the world went pitch black and the horror’s shadow disappeared. I knew it would be back.

AMON

“Okay, everyone out,” I gritted as I laid Reina back on her bed. I hated sedating her. It wasn’t the right way to help her heal. “The therapist said not to crowd her, so why am I finding you both in here? I’m guessing she knows about her sister now? Goddammit. None of this was in her treatment plan.”

She’d been crystal fucking clear with her instructions. Why couldn’t anyone follow them? Reina needed time and space, not to be overwhelmed by things she couldn’t control.

“I showed up and Tomaso was still here.” I swear to God, Reina’s grandmother was a pain in my fucking ass. If her concern for her granddaughter wasn’t so deep-seated, I’d send her away. “I think she’s getting better,” she stated calmly, causing me to do a double take. Was she fucking blind? “Well, aside from the stress of Phoenix being unreachable.”

And I fucking lost it.

“Her visible scars are healing,” I hissed, eyes flitting over the yellowing bruises on her body, the gashes on her skin. “But there are invisible ones too. I know them as if they’re my own. Mutilations she’s hiding from everyone. So don’t tell me she’s getting better.”

The hurt in Diana’s eyes had me regretting the harshness of my words, but not enough to apologize. The time for seeing things through rose-colored glasses had long since passed. Reina was so fucking far from being better. Her screams at

night kept everyone awake. The way she stared at a blank spot on the wall for hours without saying a word was even worse.

It would take years, if not a lifetime, of therapy to get my happy cinnamon girl back.

“You’re just mad because I had you kicked out of her hospital room three years ago.” Fury and ice shot through me at her words, rendering me speechless. She really thought that fucking little of me to think I’d stoop so low?

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t allow you to sit in my home and be around my wife.” The tone of my voice rippled with the undercurrent of anger that threatened to erupt. I already took accountability for that accident, harbored enough guilt. I didn’t need to get petty about it. “Watch what you say next, Diana, or you’ll find yourself back in England before the day is over.”

“I can say whatever I want. It’s a free country and I’m a grown-ass woman,” she hissed, glaring at me. “Besides, what do you want? An apology?”

“Those words never left my mouth. I understood your position back then, and I’ve moved on from that. Reina’s my wife though, and she needs to recover in peace. Without your drama. So either get on board or leave.”

Romero chimed in. “I agree with Amon. The last thing Reina needs is more stress. This is not helping her.”

“But—”

“Get out of this room and let her rest,” I hissed, my eyes locked on hers. She whirled around, smarting at my tone. With a terse nod at Romero, I left too so I could get my shit together.

So, for the next thirty minutes, I watched from the monitor as my sedated wife slept. This was the closest I could get to her without provoking her panic attacks. Fuck, I didn’t know how we’d get through this if the sight of me alone caused her condition to worsen.

It barely registered when Dante and Romero entered my office, and it was only when they were two feet away that I

quickly switched the screen to my hacker's report. They took a seat, eyeing me suspiciously.

I finally snapped. "What?"

Dante raised his hands as if in surrender. "I didn't say anything."

"But you thought it," I grumbled. It was another side effect of sleepless nights and the distance Reina carved between us. I was cranky as fuck. My brother had been more than happy to call it out on several occasions.

"I heard what happened," he stated. "I'm proud of you for telling the dragon off." Dante wasn't helping at all. "If you want me to talk to her, I volunteer to put her in her place."

I shot him a dry look. "I bet, but I got it."

Romero actually rolled his eyes. He and Dante weren't exactly amicable, per se.

"Reina will get better," Romero stated. "She's strong. She always has been."

"But you need to be better too," Dante added, watching me closely. "For her, if not for yourself." The fact that he was right only pissed me off more. He was the irrational one and I was supposed to be the reasonable one. "Besides, you'll need your energy once my half sister and I gang up on you."

Fuck, I wouldn't mind that at all. It would mean she was well enough, and I'd happily take whatever they had to give.

"Let's focus on filtering through this report," I finally said. "We have to locate Hiroshi and the others."

For the next few hours, we screened through my surveillance software using facial recognition. The half dozen screens in my office gave us access to hot spots for criminal activity around the world. Every airport. Every train station. Even the activity on the dark web.

We were hunting and we wouldn't rest until we found every fucking person who dared to be part of the attack on my wife. It didn't matter that they'd attacked me, that came with

the territory, but her... That was unforgivable. I needed closure, and I suspected my wife did too.

“Any news?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. “Leads?”

Dante’s lips tightened and he shook his head. “It’s like they disappeared into thin air.”

He was right; my mother and Hiroshi were nowhere to be found. I had my men and anyone who owed me a favor searching for them. Her properties all came up empty. No one claimed to have heard from them in weeks.

“I don’t know, Amon. Your mother might be a lot of things, but I just can’t see her taking a chance on you getting hurt,” Romero said. My jaw clenched and I curled my fingers into fists. It was a sore subject, although kind of ironic. She’d made his life hell, hindered the legality of his second marriage, and still he was defending her. As if he could read my thoughts, he continued, “I’m not saying she’s a saint, but attempted murder of her own son...? I wouldn’t think so.”

Dante lifted his head. “I hate to agree with the man, but I have no choice here. Why go years protecting you—us—only to do something like this?”

“But, then, *who*?” I questioned. “My cousin certainly doesn’t have the bandwidth to organize shit like that.”

“How about Hiroshi?” The question came from Romero.

“His right-hand man?” Dante asked, clearly as confused as me, to which Romero nodded his head. “He benefits more if Amon is alive than dead.”

I turned to face Romero.

“If there’s something you know, now is the time to share.” His eyes darted behind me and I followed his gaze to the painting. “It was Ojisan’s,” I clarified.

“I know. He’s rumored to have cherished it above almost anything.” He was right, it was my grandfather’s favorite. “The last time I saw him, he said something strange, and I’ve never been able to shake it.”

“Which was?”

Romero shook his head. “That it contains the secret to his legacy.”

“Maybe the old man was crazy,” Dante said in a dry tone.

I frowned, thinking back to what I knew about Ojīsan. He was one of the sharpest men I’d ever met. Everything he did came with a purpose.

“Romero, was there an agreement drawn between you and Ojīsan when you married my mother?”

Romero waved his hand tiredly. His fatigue was getting worse by the day. “Yes. We agreed that he’d supply me with drugs and I’d let him use my ports for his European distribution.”

My brows furrowed. “Nothing else?”

“Like what?”

“Concerning your daughters and their involvement in the Yakuza.”

Romero let out a dry laugh. “Are you nuts? Your ojīsan barely tolerated outsiders in his business. Marrying your mother was just another business deal, one he didn’t even support in the beginning. Why would he put anything in place for my children?”

Dante and I shared a look. “What about ensuring succession for the Yakuza?”

Romero shrugged. “He had a contingency plan drawn up in the event no Takahashi heirs were produced.”

“What did it say?”

Romero shrugged. “No fucking clue, it wasn’t written in English. Hana and I went our separate ways, and considering your cousin was born, the document was useless to me. I had it destroyed.”

“Did my mother know?” I questioned, realization dawning on me. This had to be the document she was after.

“I assume so. I told her I was going to get rid of it.”

“So why would she task us with finding it?” I muttered more to myself than anyone else.

“Maybe she was looking for their marriage certificate so she could prove your legitimacy and claim to the Omertà seat,” Dante suggested, his tone unsure. “She just didn’t want to outright say it because it’d reveal her secret.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, but my intuition warned there was something more. Returning my attention to the painting, my chest throbbed painfully. Those floating lanterns would forever remind me of Reina. My first dance. *Our* first dance.

“Any trace of the idiot?” Dante asked.

“No, none.”

I suspected Itsuki might be with my mother, which left the taste of bile in my mouth.

All evidence pointed to her.

She knew about the illegitimacy of Romero’s girls. She was the only one who could have slipped the connection to the Cortes cartel, making her a permanent target. The question was why. That was the part I couldn’t wrap my head around.

Of course, Romero wasn’t completely innocent in that clusterfuck either. His dodgy business dealings had been putting both his daughters at risk for over a decade.

Goddammit! None of it made sense. Perez had stated his information came from the Yakuza, and he truly had nothing to lose.

I needed to start taking the idea of my mother wanting the throne to the Yakuza seriously. We’d been suspecting it for years, and Romero confirmed she was hungry for power, even before I was born.

It didn’t fucking matter. I’d have given her whatever she wanted, if only she’d asked. But instead, she fucking dared to allow the kidnapping of my wife.

My. Wife.

My mother might as well have been the one to inflict every one of those scars on my wife. She hurt her. Hurt *us*. I couldn't forgive that. Her hate for the people who'd wronged her had taken her too far this time.

I read through the reports from my hacker again, worried I'd missed some clues. There was only one thing that jumped out at me. My mother had withdrawn five million dollars right before the attack happened.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was preparing to flee.

I shook my head. The bottom line was that Mother and Hiroshi betrayed me. I suspected the latter did it because he loved my mother, but his loyalty should have been to me first. We could have come to a different resolution.

"Romero, why don't you go lie down?" I suggested, noting how he swayed on his feet. He was getting weaker by the day, and none of this stress could be good for him. We had our differences, sure, but he was still my father-in-law. Well, technically my father.

"That's not a bad idea." He made his way out of the room, then lingered in the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder. "Thank you for getting her home, Amon."

A beep pierced the air and my eyes snapped to the monitor.

"Is it Phoenix?"

Phoenix's whereabouts were a top priority, even more than finding my mother and Hiroshi. Her last known location was the Paris airport. From there, we had nothing. No ticket, no trail. We'd scanned all individuals who flew that day to ensure she didn't use a fake name.

I didn't like the idea of Dante's distress. He was here for me, but I suspected he wanted to be out there searching for her.

I shook my head. "It's not Phoenix," I told him. Dante's eyes were bloodshot but alert. There was no way he was getting any sleep these days. "It's my dear cousin."

An unhinged smile curved his lips. “Bingo. Motherfucker’s about to die.”

He sure fucking was. I tasted the bloodthirst that I usually saw lingering in Dante’s eyes. I would enjoy killing Itsuki as much as I enjoyed killing Perez.

“Where is he?” Dante questioned.

“Japan. Hiding in Ojisan’s bunker.” It dated back to World War II, meaning zero surveillance. No wonder I hadn’t been able to find him. “But not for much longer.”

“Want me to go with you?”

I shook my head. “No, I want you to stay here with Reina. I don’t trust her grandmother.” After all, she’d kept me from her before. “And Romero’s feeling worse by the day.” Dante’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t say anything. “You still despise him,” I stated. “Why?”

His expression darkened. “He just rubs me the wrong way.”

“Hmmm.” I knew him well enough not to push. Instead, I took a seat next to him and switched to Italian, asking, “How are you, really?”

“Been better,” Dante answered.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I love you, brother, and I will forever be grateful for your help. But I think it’s time you went searching for her.” He was going out of his mind, and that never boded well for anyone, least of all him. When he opened his mouth to protest, I cut him off. “Romero’s health is deteriorating. You’ll be doing both him and Phoenix a favor if you reunite them before he keels over.”

He stared at me pensively and I could see him coming to terms with my recommendation. Hell, my brother needed all the points he could get. Considering all the glares Phoenix always shot him, I suspected she wouldn’t make it easy on him.

Besides, I planned on taking my wife away for a little bit. Just the two of us. Sort of a modified recovery plan by way of

honeymoon.

“What about you?” Dante questioned. “And Reina?”

“I think maybe a change of scenery will do her some good.” I was grasping for ideas to help her. “Just the two of us.”

Dante stared at me, his fingers tapping against his thigh.

“I don’t think her grandmother or Romero will be happy with that,” he quipped, pointing out the obvious.

“They’ll have to deal with it.” My attention flicked to one of the computer screens. “I can monitor all of this from anywhere in the world, and Reina’s not getting any better here.”

“How much longer does Romero have? Or should we call him by his first name now?” He rolled his eyes while I shook my head at his nonsense. “Tomaso,” he tested the name like it was a bitter pill.

I shrugged. “I don’t think it matters what we call him. He might only be around for another month or two.”

His tapping paused and he pursed his lips. “I might need him gone faster if he’s going to get in the way of me marrying Phoenix.”

I didn’t have any attachment to Romero, but I didn’t think Reina would cope. “You’d better not get any ideas, Dante.”

I could tell by his expression that he probably wanted to punch me in the face for not taking his side. Any other time, I would. But this was my wife we were talking about.

“Well, he’d better not get in my way,” he finally said. “That dragon of a grandmother either.”

I let out a dark chuckle. His determination reminded me of my own not too long ago.

“One way or another, Phoenix *will* marry me.”

It was no coincidence we went a bit over the top for the women we wanted. After all, we were brought up together.

But it was the fact that he was a replica of Angelo Leone that bothered me the most.

AMON

I didn't grow up around my ojīsan like my cousin did, but I knew every inch of his compound by heart.

Courtesy of my mother.

She pounded it into me, having me study every inch of the home that would one day belong to me. She insisted I understood the hierarchy in the Yakuza, the ins and outs, the language, all in preparation—it occurred to me somewhat grimly—for this very moment.

I made my way through the back of the compound and then down the staircase that led to the bunker, all without running into a single obstacle.

Careful to keep my steps light, I stopped in front of the bunker door, listening for any noise. It sounded like he was watching Honbashi, a Grand Sumo tournament.

I waited for the announcer to shout a score and for the spectators to cheer, then I cracked the door open. I took in the surroundings. A gun thrown carelessly on the table by the door. His boots and socks. A pair of pants discarded by the couch and a shirt thrown over the coffee table. It was a fucking hovel.

I guess I should've felt lucky the fucker was wearing boxers.

He was so engrossed in the match he never even noticed me approaching him.

Two steps and I was right behind him, wasting no time. I pulled out my knife, slicing his ear off in one go. He jolted up to his feet, screaming out in agony while clutching his head. Blood dripped through his fingers, drenching his hand. He watched me with terror in his eyes.

“What’s the matter, Itsuki?” I drawled. “Nobody to hide behind, huh?”

I didn’t usually revel in torture, but I’d enjoy every fucking second of making this asshole cry. Just like Perez did. There’d be no mercy before I killed him. Nobody threatened my woman and lived. I’d destroy everything and everyone to keep her safe.

“Please don’t,” he begged.

“Don’t what? Slice your other ear?” I held up the bloody knife and his face paled a few shades.

“Don’t kill me,” he cried.

I circled the couch casually.

“I warned you to keep away from her years ago.”

He didn’t comment as his eyes flitted around, searching for his gun. Unlucky for him, I knew it was on the table by the door. I bet he wished he kept his clothes on now.

“H-how did you find me?” he stuttered.

I ignored his question. “Did you tell Perez about Reina?” My answer was in his guilty expression. “How did you know?” When he remained quiet, I continued. “Give me the answers and I’ll expedite your death.”

His pupils dilated and his nostrils flared, but his instinct to survive prevailed. He lunged at me, but he was sloppy. My knife slammed into his shoulder, and his blood-curdling scream could have set off an earthquake.

He fell to his knees and wept. “P-please, Amon.”

“Begging won’t help you now,” I said coldly, the image of Reina the day I found her and the sounds of her screaming

through the nightmares that still plagued her flashing through my mind. There'd be no mercy for him.

I reached for the thin wire in my pocket and ripped it out. I took advantage of his position and wrapped it around his neck.

“If you're not going to talk, I might as well drag it out of you.”

I choked him, drinking in his pained whimpers. I freed one hand next and stabbed him in the gut.

“Who told you where Reina and I would be?”

He was too weak to fight back. He begged, cried, and screamed.

Death refused to come for him. It was by design; I wanted answers before I killed him off.

Twisting my knife in his gut, I repeated my question. “Who? Tell me and it'll be over.”

He let out another piercing scream and I rolled my eyes. He had always been weak, but it was never more apparent than now. He wouldn't last long, and his next words confirmed it.

“Your mother.” Blood dripped down his chin. “It was your mother.”

My pulse thundered in my ears while red drenched my vision. *Betrayal. Rage. Disappointment.*

I pulled the wire taut and sliced his throat. After all, a promise was a promise.

As he took his last breath, I got a text. The heads of the Yakuza's four syndicate groups called a closed-vote meeting. No guards. No right-hand men. Just the leaders.

It could only mean two things. They wanted a new leader for the Yakuza with fresh Takahashi blood, or someone was about to be executed.

News had never traveled so fast.



There were four syndicates within the Yakuza that called all the shots. The Yamaguchi-gumi was the largest Yakuza family. The Sumiyoshi-kai was the second largest. Inagawa-kai was a close third, with the fourth one being Kudō-kai. The head managing all four was always a male member of the Takahashi family. My great-great-grandfather made it so, but ironically, he also made it a democratic process.

All four members had to agree unanimously on the leader of the Takahashi crime organization.

The fucking vote couldn't have come at a worse time.

I kept checking my phone for any updates on Reina. I wished I could have brought her with me, but I knew the way of this world. Wives, daughters, and mistresses of the Yakuza were not considered vital to the organization; therefore, they held no standing.

I lingered by the senior guards outside the Yakuza headquarters in Tokyo and typed a message to Romero and Dante.

How is Reina? Any update?

Dante's reply came before Romero's.

It's been ten minutes. Stop being a paranoid freak.

The head of Yamaguchi-gumi nodded his greeting as he passed me.

The next message was from Romero.

No change. Ignore your idiot brother.

Romero had a sense of humor. Who knew?

I collected myself, wiping my expression clear, and walked into the office.

Each syndicate head was seated around the desk and, to my surprise, the head chair behind the desk was left empty. My eyes traveled over the four men.

“The main seat is saved for you,” Yamaguchi declared. As I moved to take the seat, placing my phone faceup next to my glass of water, he addressed everyone in the room. “It’s time we bring the true blood—a young, competent blood—as the head of the Yakuza. Itsuki Takahashi has proven time and again to be incompetent.”

My phone lit up, and I read the message that flashed across the screen.

Had to sedate her again. Nightmare.

The message was from Romero.

Be careful to only give her the minimum dose.

“Are we boring you?” Sumiyoshi sneered.

I put my phone away and met his eyes. “No, but my wife is sick, and she is my priority.”

A heartbeat passed before a soft murmur filled the room. “We heard what happened. Our deepest wishes for a swift recovery.”

I nodded my thanks. “You can appreciate my urgency to return home to her.”

The four of them nodded in unison. “Okay, then let’s get straight to business,” Yamaguchi continued. “We propose to eliminate Itsuki and have you take his place. You have brought in the most deals, money, and success to our organization. All your cousin succeeded in was losing them.” He paused for effect. “Those in favor of Amon Takahashi”—they never did acknowledge my Italian background—“becoming the next leader of the Yakuza, raise your hand.”

Kudō-kai was the first one who lifted his palm. Sumiyoshi followed. Inagawa kept watching me suspiciously. He’d always been wary of anyone outside his immediate circle. Murmurs started, but I didn’t bother listening, keeping my

gaze locked on Inagawa. The vote to switch from my cousin to me would have to be unanimous. His gaze darted to the first two *Yes* votes, then returned to me. Maybe it was the fact he saw that I didn't give a shit, or maybe it was something else entirely, but he raised his hand too.

"You have my vote," Yamaguchi announced, putting his hand up. It wasn't as if they could keep Itsuki at the helm. He was dead in the bunker without any chance of resurrection. "You will lead the Yakuza."

It didn't come as a surprise really, but it was unprecedented. The voting to replace the Yakuza leader had never been done in the history of the organization, but knowing my cousin's incompetence, a unanimous vote was the only way.

"Please join me in welcoming the new Yakuza leader," Yamaguchi announced. "Amon Takahashi."

The tattoo artist already waited out front. It was time to follow my ojīsan's tradition and sit for the inscription of the kanji symbol that represented our syndicate. The same symbol that my wife wore around her neck.

The other leaders trickled out when the meeting was over, and when my tattoo was finished, I hauled ass out of there. Reina needed me more than these men did.

My phone buzzed again.

Dante's message flashed across my screen.

Marchetti and his wife are on their way from Italy.
He's bringing the entourage.

Fuck.

Only one thought filled my head: I couldn't let him get to my wife before me.

AMON

I arrived back at my compound exactly an hour before Marchetti. Thank fuck.

My wife had been home for two weeks already. All the while, Cesar searched for Phoenix with Dante's diligent micromanaging, Romero lingered on my property, and Reina's grandmother continued to offer her two cents whenever possible.

None of it concerned me as much as Reina's progress. She kept slipping further into herself, refusing to talk to anyone.

For the first few days, she hardly spoke at all. I'd find her staring blankly out at the ocean. Mostly, she offered no reaction, which was a far greater indication of her mental health for me than any other test done by the doctor. Reina adored the sea, simply being near it should've been enough to at least draw out a small smile or softening of her eyes.

Seeing her like this hurt like fucking hell, and all I wanted was to hand her the pieces of my heart and give her something to hold on to. But she refused any help, even from her papà. Wouldn't even let me come near her. If I got within a foot of her, she flipped out.

I had a therapist, Dr. Anna Freud—no relation to Sigmund Freud—visit daily to work with her. I hoped the Harvard psychologist would somehow work a miracle, being closer in age to Reina.

In the beginning, it did nothing. Reina refused to say anything for the most part, but within the last few days, she'd

finally begun to acknowledge Dr. Freud. It was a small change, but I would take it.

Isla, Athena, and Raven were visiting today. It was impossible to keep them away any longer. And while I hated that Enrico Marchetti accompanied his wife, I was grateful he'd come so far. Reina needed her girlfriends.

"How is she handling everything?" Enrico asked, taking a seat next to me. We were in my office that had somehow morphed into a surveillance station. Some nights when Reina was under sedation, I'd sit in her room, in the darkness, and listen to her breathe.

And the days I couldn't sit in her room because she couldn't handle me being anywhere near her, I'd watch her from here. Was it healthy? Fuck no. But goddammit, I was already well on my way to madness.

"She's alive," I answered, though I wasn't entirely sure it was the truth. She was breathing, but there was no life in her eyes. She was barely existing, hiding in her own shell and refusing to let anyone in.

"It takes time." He sounded surprisingly understanding. "When Isla returned home after her... kidnapping, it took her a while to heal. Reina was held captive for over a month. Just give her time and space and she'll start talking and smiling, and then everything will fall into place." His dark eyes found mine. "She'll be up, down, and sideways for a long time."

I glanced over the horizon and the blue ocean, the images from last night still fresh in my mind. She thrashed and whimpered every night, her raw screams tearing her vocal cords. I hated sedating her. I'd tried waking her up carefully, but the invisible demons she fought sent her into full attack mode.

Last night was the first time my reassurance helped her more than it frightened her, and she'd fallen into a dreamless sleep until morning.

But then, like clockwork, the sun rose and it was back to the same routine. She wouldn't move. She wouldn't talk. She

wouldn't even meet my eyes, and I had no fucking idea how to help. I'd be damned if I gave up though. I would save her, even if it was the last thing I did in my life.

It made me feel helpless, and I fucking hated it. So, I put all my energy into finding Hiroshi and my mother. I needed an outlet while I waited for Reina to let me know she was ready for me.

My gaze caught on my grandfather's painting. Even before his death, my idiot cousin never learned that the painting in his compound was actually a copy that I'd commissioned after I stole this one right out from under his nose. I stood and made my way to the portrait our family commissioned three generations ago. Lanterns floated over Ojisan's Zen garden, the midnight-blue sky above it.

Fuck, I missed my wife. I missed the cinnamon girl who danced with me and lifted the weight off my chest. I wanted to lift the pain for her, but I felt like I was failing.

"She's going to get through it, Amon," Marchetti assured, picking up on the distress clouding my eyes.

"I know she will. She's the strongest woman I know," I agreed. "Which brings me to my next topic," I started coldly. "I won't bring her to the Omertà to be questioned about Angelo Leone."

Tense silence filled the office, and for once, I really wished Dante would appear and crack one of his tasteless jokes. I didn't want to risk smashing Marchetti's head and having both Reina and I marked as enemies of the Omertà.

"You're part of the Omertà, and the rules apply to you in that same order."

"And how am I part of the Omertà?" I asked coldly.

"You're Romero's legitimate son. Therefore, his seat goes to you."

I side-eyed him. "I haven't formally accepted any title."

Surprise flickered in his expression. "Are you contemplating rejecting the honor?"

I scoffed. “Not much of an honor if it puts my wife in front of you and the others to answer for a crime committed in self-defense.”

“Is that why she did it?” I nodded. “Then why not reveal what happened? Why chop up his body?”

Jesus, Dante had really let the whole thing spill. “I honestly wouldn’t give a shit if she went on a murderous rampage.” She could burn the entire fucking world and I’d be standing right behind her, holding the torch. “Angelo was a cruel bastard and the only regret I have is that I didn’t murder him before he tried to put his filthy paws on Reina.”

Okay, I could turn down the hate by a few degrees—or ten—but lack of sleep over the past month and my wife’s condition had been weighing down on me. Or maybe I never gave a shit in the first place. Hard to tell right now.

“What’s your plan with your cousin?” he questioned, moving on from the subject of Reina.

I shrugged, not yet ready to divulge the details of what I’d done. “He’s no more, but I’ll kill anyone who was helping him.”

“Taking over the Yakuza?” I narrowed my eyes. We only had the meeting yesterday and nobody knew about the newest elected leader except for Dante. “My sources tell me that men in the Yakuza follow your lead more than your cousin’s, so I’m guessing it shouldn’t be hard to take over.”

“Maybe.” More accurately, he hoped to keep leveraging the connection to the Yakuza. Well, he was fucking crazy if he thought he’d leverage anything while demanding to judge my wife. They could all go fuck themselves.

I was already the elected head of the Yakuza, but none of it fucking mattered. What good was it to be a king without a queen. What good was power if there was nobody to protect. What was the point of running the Yakuza and taking Romero’s seat in the Omertà if I failed at protecting her?

And then there was Reina’s love. It was disappearing right in front of my eyes. I twisted the wedding ring on my finger,

welcoming the silence. My throat burned, the weight on my chest squashing my soul and my heart.

If I were a better man, I would walk away and let her be. *Fuck that.* She was the essence of me, and if I were to live without her, I might as well slice my own throat now.

Returning my focus to the present situation, I met Marchetti's eyes. "If you want me on your side and in the Omertà, you'll drop the subject of Angelo Leone's murder."

"I don't tolerate blackmail."

"Neither do I. Nor do I tolerate threats made against my family."

Before he could say another word, an agonizing cry sliced through the air, sending me sprinting out of my office.

REINA

A mon's compound was surrounded by beauty.

The early morning sun reflected rays off the ocean's still surface. Trees and hills made up most of my view, their luscious green leaves dancing in the light of the early March breeze. I'd always wanted to visit the Philippines, but never once did my dreams include being confined to a pocket that had been converted to a sterile mini-hospital.

Outside, on the other hand, was paradise. The wing was built on stilts and supporting beams to give the illusion of floating above the turquoise lagoon below. The water was so clear you could see the fish swimming beneath, and every corner was furnished with rattan furniture and soothing beige fixtures. It truly was a tranquil space, one that my friends were touring with Dr. Freud, their *oohs* and *aahs* reaching me through the open windows.

My bathroom was a short walk down a glass-bottomed hallway, which was where I currently hid, hunched over the marble sink, staring into the mirror. I needed one more minute of solitude before braving their faces.

"Where are you, Phoenix?" I whispered, watching my mouth move around the words and no longer seeing the same person. Someone else stared back at me. Someone older, more damaged, and... filthy. No matter how hard I scrubbed, I couldn't manage to get the invisible remnants of grime, blood, and fear off my skin.

It was on me to protect my sister, but right now, I was the one who needed her. I needed the peace that seeing her alive and well would afford me. My eyes fell on the razor, and before I knew what I was doing, I reached for it, pressing the blade against my wrists.

A hiss escaped me as the first drop of crimson spilled. I pressed it harder against my flesh, relishing the pain. *You said you wouldn't do this anymore*, a small voice whispered. I ignored it and switched to my other wrist.

The burning. The pain. I pressed harder, red droplets of blood falling onto the marble and the pristine tile under my feet.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The images of my mother bleeding in the tub flashed in my mind, and I wondered if this was how she felt before she ended it. She'd left us, seeking refuge in death. Was I destined to do the same?

"Reina, what the heck are you doing in there?" Isla's voice startled me, causing me to drop the razor with a clang against the countertop.

"Nothing." I turned on the faucet, then rushed to clean myself off. The cuts stung and blood refused to stop flowing. "Fuck." My eyes darted around frantically until I found the first aid kit. I rifled through it, searching for some gauze and wrapping it around my wrists, then pulled my sleeves down to my palms.

Once done, I exited the bathroom and came face-to-face with my girlfriends.

"Jesus, I thought you drowned in there," Raven grumbled, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Raven!" Athena scolded her, giving her a pointed look.

Tugging on my sleeves, I shook my head. "Nope, no such luck."

Raven closed the distance between us and wrapped her arms around me. "I'm sorry, that was a shitty thing for me to

say.” I shook my head. “We’re worried about you,” she added.

“Don’t be. I’m fine. I’d be even better if Phoenix were here.”

“I know. Soon.” Isla’s response was as vague as everyone else’s, and I was getting fed up with their placating.

“When?”

She grumbled a response, and I forced a smile—grimace, really—while the three of them shared a look. Ignoring their glances, I padded over to the arched doorway that led outside, the blue of the sea everywhere and clean ocean calming the demons inside me. I lowered myself to the cold marble. I braced my hands on either side of my hips and leaned over, watching my feet swing forward and back. I could almost feel the water under my toes, so I guessed it was almost high tide. This was the only thing that calmed me these days. One step out of my bedroom and you could dive in, swimming in the crystal blue ocean.

I felt safe out here. Not inside Amon’s mansion. Not when the windows were closed. Not when Papà and Amon lurked around.

That feeling of being trapped gripped me unless my feet were dangling above the blue waters.

“Jesus, this place is gorgeous,” Isla remarked.

“So majestic,” Athena added, kicking off her shoes and taking a seat next to me. Her shoulder bumped into mine. “How are you?”

I smiled, watching a school of fish rush by. “Good.”

Raven and Isla slipped their shoes off and took a seat on the other side of me.

“You’re not,” Raven declared softly. “But that’s okay.”

My lips thinned. Everyone wanted to talk about it, and all I wanted to do was forget.

“I still struggle sometimes,” Isla remarked, her tone hesitant. “It’s been months since I was taken, and I was only

gone for a few days. It's okay to admit you're not okay."

Two heartbeats of silence passed.

None of this was helping. I knew they were trying to make things better by wrapping me in cotton wool, but I almost wished they acted like assholes.

"Where's Phoenix?" I asked, frustration bubbling inside me. "That would help me."

The tension that permeated the air was thick. Isla smiled, but there were so many things off with it. For one, it didn't reach her eyes.

"Maestro booked her for the season and insisted she not take any days off," Athena elaborated.

My brows furrowed. *Not even to come see me?* I took a deep breath, recalling how Grandma and Papà evaded answering me too. The memory was fuzzy, but I couldn't lose my shit like I did with them. *Breathe, Reina.*

I had to keep it together.

"Yes, he's a real dick," Isla added. "But a great opportunity."

That didn't sound like my sister at all. She never—fucking ever—put anything or anyone above us. We were always there for each other, through thick and thin.

"B-but she's okay?" I whispered, struggling to come to terms with it. Phoenix and I always stuck together. When I planned to run before marrying Dante, it was going to be the two of us disappearing. It never occurred to me to leave her behind. Unless... Maybe Phoenix followed through on her own. "Is she really okay?" I added in a stronger, more challenging voice.

Only Isla and Athena nodded in unison, while Raven avoided eye contact with me.

"She'll try to come as soon as possible," Athena said, and I thought I saw Raven shoot her a glare, but I couldn't be sure because she was sort of nodding her head, smiling.

Isla hooked her arm around me and pulled me into her.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Isla said, and I swallowed a lump in my throat, images and sounds I’d been trying to forget rolling through my mind. My throat tightened and I knew it’d be pointless to open my mouth because I wouldn’t be able to utter a single syllable. “You want to talk about it?”

I shook my head, returning my attention to the horizon.

“You don’t have to,” Athena murmured softly. “We’re just happy you’re safe.”

“That’s right,” Raven agreed. “All the Omertà shit can go to hell.” I shot her a curious look. It was an odd comment to make. She waved her hand in response. “Isla’s husband is hunting for Sofia Volkov like his life depends on it. Of course, Athena and Manuel are *helping*.” She drew out the word, shooting a look at our friend, then rolling her eyes.

Athena flipped her off.

“Ignore those two. Anyhow, Enrico’s convinced that he can get to Sofia through her daughter, which I disagree with,” Isla added, frowning. “Liana shouldn’t be the one to pay for her mother’s sins.”

Alert shot through me.

“Liana?” The word was out of my mouth before I could think. “You don’t mean... No, it can’t be. W-what does she look like?” I looked between the girls, crossing my arms over my chest and rocking back and forth, my breath catching. “Light golden eyes?”

They studied me. “Yes...” Isla whispered, dumbfounded.

“Dark blonde hair?” I asked, and Isla nodded. “Honey color?” Another nod. “How do you know her?”

“Remember when we were in that nightclub in Moscow?”

“Yeah...?” It seemed like a different lifetime. A different me. Isla had flown back home to Russia and we’d met up in Moscow.

“I ran into her. She seemed... normal.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. My short time with the girl who called herself Liana lingered in the back of my mind. It had to be the same one. That would make her an illegitimate daughter too, and she'd seemed to know a thing or two about the underworld. I probably wouldn't be here today if it weren't for her. I didn't imagine all that. Right?

"Her English is good?" I asked.

"Perfect, in fact," Isla confirmed.

A shudder zipped down my spine and goosebumps rose on my skin. "I think I saw her when—" I swallowed a lump in my throat. "She was auctioned before me."

Three sets of eyes widened in shock. "You were auctioned?"

"Something about illegitimate mafia princesses," I muttered, then a worry pierced my chest as another ounce of doubt made its way into my heart. "You're sure Phoenix is okay?"

"Yes." The answer came from all three at the same time, but there was something off. "Can we FaceTime her? I haven't been able to get through to her. I know she's been waiting for her big break for years, but... I just can't believe she hasn't even tried to call."

Nothing would stop Phoenix from replying to my text messages or calling me. Even when she was really sick all those years ago and had to be admitted to the private clinic, she would message me every day. That was the only time we'd ever been apart. This was out of character for her.

"She's been so busy, they're having their most promising year so far. Maestro Andrea keeps them all on a tight leash," Athena offered.

"You know how Maestro can be," Isla chimed in.

My eyes landed on Raven and a heartbeat passed.

"For fuck's sake," Raven said exasperatedly, flapping her hands in the air. "We should tell her. This isn't helping her."

I swallowed. "Tell me what?"

“Don’t,” Athena warned her softly. “She’s—” *Cutting herself*, she mouthed. Did they think I was suddenly blind?

“Don’t what?” I asked, eerily calm while a tornado whirled inside me. If anyone dared lay a hand on Phoenix, I would skin them alive.

You’re going to bleed for me so prettily.

I pushed the voices and images out of my mind while my heartbeat sped up. *Ignore the voice*, my mind chanted.

“Breathe, Reina,” Isla cooed. “I’m sure Phoenix is fine. We just can’t find her right now. But you know your sister, she’s so tough.”

Buzzing in my ears increased. “We’ll find her. Bad guys don’t have her.” Raven’s assurance was no assurance at all.

“For fuck’s sake, Raven. Wrong thing to say,” Athena hissed.

Was another Perez Cortes torturing my sister? The tremor started in my fingers and spread over my body. I gripped my hands, my knuckles turning white as I attempted to gain control of myself.

Torn limbs. Terrifying screams piercing my ears.

A hand reached out to touch me, and a month of memories burst to life. I let out a scream, my vocal cords scratching at my throat as I whipped around, ready to fight whoever dared put their hands on me.

My eyes darted around and the room tilted. Someone tried to restrain me, but that only made it worse. My lungs squeezed, my heart raced, and my vision blurred while I fought my demons.

Until two warm hands came around me from behind. “No,” I whimpered, caught somewhere between the nightmare and reality.

I attempted to headbutt whoever held me but to no avail. Fuck whoever it was, he wouldn’t have me. I’d go down fighting.

“It’s me, cinnamon girl. Calm down.” A soft whisper against my ear was enough to confuse me, making me pause. “You’re safe.”

Slowly, the nightmare faded and the world came into focus.

Eyes wide and heart racing, all I was able to do was stare, seeing my friends’ horrified faces, Papà and Marchetti studying me with blank expressions. The scent of lemons and apples registered, and I lowered my eyes to the two strong arms around me.

They were Amon’s, and if there was any doubt about it, the bracelet I gifted him all those years ago was wrapped around his wrist, soothing my panic slightly.

Desperate to get myself together, knowing too well that I looked like a batshit crazy person, I kept blinking until I choked out, “I... I need Phoenix.”

Marchetti’s brows pinched, watching me with a confused look on his face. “What?”

Grandma appeared, and in the far corner in my mind, I noted the diamond tiara on her head. She only wore those when she was getting married or divorced. The girls shot her odd looks. Papà muttered a curse, though I could hardly hear past the ringing in my ears.

And all the while, I observed the scene like I wasn’t part of it. I had left the jungle and captivity, but I was still a prisoner of my own mind.

Papà stepped forward, ignoring everyone. “I know you do, but you have to trust us that she’s okay. We have to get you better. That is what’s most important right now.”

“I just want to make sure she’s okay,” I croaked. “Just one call. Please.”

“Not now, baby,” he pacified. “When you’re better.”

My control evaporated like a wispy cloud on a sunny day, and I descended into madness. Another scream ripped from

my throat, and in the next moment, I felt a prick against my neck.

AMON

My chest constricted as I listened to Reina's little whimpers.

I clenched my jaw as my gaze fell on her wrists and noted the cuts. Fuck! I made a mental note to remove all razors from her bathroom and to speak with her therapist.

Reina's body jerked slightly, her eyes moving behind her closed eyelids. It gutted me from the inside, her pain slicing clean through me.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Marchetti cursed. "I thought she was getting better."

"She's better than she was," Romero answered somberly.

Marchetti's brows scrunched. "*Ma che cazzo!*" he muttered. What the fuck. "You were right to protest, Amon. Don't bring her in front of the Omertà like this. She'll get herself shot if she loses her shit in front of all of them like that. We'll wait a bit."

"Enrico." Isla tugged on her husband's sleeve. "You cannot seriously mean that. She's been through enough."

"She's never appearing in front of the Omertà," I gritted. "Not even when she's better."

"You know patricide is forbidden. The Omertà knows she killed Angelo. If we let it go, it will open the doors for others to do the same."

My jaw clenched. "You won't put her through more shit just to prove your point," I gritted. The Omertà better watch

out because I stop at nothing to protect what's mine. "Angelo showed up at her apartment. She didn't seek him out. So fuck you, and fuck the Omertà. Reina won't be judged by anyone. Now, kindly get the fuck out so that Reina can get some rest."

Dante chose to make his entrance at that very moment, his eyes landing on Reina.

"What the fuck happened? And why is she sedated again?"

Raven answered him. "She asked about Phoenix and..." Her voice trailed off and I caught Marchetti's wife giving a subtle shake of her head. "It went downhill from there."

"What else?" Marchetti demanded.

Raven's shoulders slumped. "We talked about Sofia Volkov's illegitimate daughter. Reina said she was auctioned before her."

Dante narrowed his eyes. "Didn't we fucking say don't upset her?" he growled. He was becoming more protective of his half sister. "I swear to God, if you cannot follow simple rules and keep Reina calm when you visit, you'll be cut out. Friendship or no."

"You have no right to make a decision like that," Raven snapped, her hands on her hips. "She's capable of making her own decisions. We can't keep hiding shit from her, and in case you haven't noticed"—she gave me a pointed look—"hiding the fact that we have no fucking clue where Phoenix is only makes things worse."

She might have had a point there.

"Okay, whatever the case might be, Reina has to answer to the heads of the Omertà for Angelo's murder." Marchetti was clearly getting annoyed with all of us. "I don't give a shit whether you two agree or not."

"And I don't give a shit about the Omertà," I glowered. "You can take the whole organization and shove it up your ass for all I care. Reina won't be answering for anything."

"Ah, I see my brother's already embracing the rules of the Omertà." God, his sarcasm had the worst fucking timing.

“When will you get the tattoo that we all carry?”

“Fuck off,” Marchetti and I answered at the same time.

The Omertà tattoo wouldn't happen, not unless the organization could guarantee Reina's safety.

“Hold on,” Raven exclaimed. “You guys have matching tattoos? That's so stinking cute.”

“Definitely not what I was going for,” Marchetti grumbled, turning to face Romero. “I suggest you bring your son up to speed on the significance of our rules. I'm taking my wife home.”

“Amon's taking over my seat and has the freedom to do what he thinks is the best for his family,” Romero answered diplomatically. “And I also agree with his sentiment. My daughter here has been through enough, and I still have to find my other one. The Omertà rules are the last thing I care about. I won't stand back and watch you pass judgment on Reina.”

Well said. No wonder Reina had stuck by him all these years despite his failings.

“Well, Marchetti, sayonara. I wish I could say I was sorry to see you go, but we all know I'd be lying.” I let my gaze travel over the room. “Girls, please say your goodbyes. I'll get in touch when Reina's up for visitors again.”

I didn't need a disaster whirling around my wife.

Isla turned to her husband and set her hands on her hips. “Enrico, you and I need to talk.”

“Not now, *dolcezza*.”

“Yes, *now*.” Her eyes darted to her friends, and the three of them shared a glance.

“Just fucking tell him,” Raven hissed. “If he wants to be an ass to Reina, he'll have to be an ass to all of us.”

“I already like the sound of that,” Dante remarked dryly. “I was going to be on my way, but I'm eager to hear this before I hit the road.”

Athena smiled shakily. “It might be better if you weren’t here.”

“Considering it involves your fucking dick-wad father,” Raven spat. “Angelo Leone deserved what he got.”

Everyone tensed as silence descended on the room, promising nothing good. I pulled Reina tighter to my chest, and for the first time since she was brought home, she nuzzled closer as if she knew—even in her unconscious state—that she’d need protection.

“The girls and I helped Reina,” Isla finally announced.

One heartbeat. “Helped her with what?” Marchetti’s voice was cautious. Low.

“We helped her finish off Angelo Leone.”

“Finish him how?” Romero asked, dread filling his voice.

“We killed him,” Raven said, almost sounding proud. “He attacked Reina, so we all killed him and sliced him up.”

The ticking of the clock above Reina’s bed was the only sound to be heard.

“You all did it?” Marchetti asked.

I suspected they were lying. If I had to guess, Reina killed Angelo in self-defense, and the girls helped her after the fact. Not that I would correct them. If Marchetti wanted to put Reina on fucking trial, he’d have to do the same with his wife.

And we all knew he would never allow that.

“We had to chop him up,” Athena muttered, her voice riddled with guilt. “We couldn’t take him out of the apartment undetected.”

“So you... what? Cut him into pieces?” Marchetti stated. “Because that makes a lot of sense.”

“It made sense back then.” Isla took her husband’s hand. “We were scared. He beat the shit out of her. Do you think we wanted to be slicing up a body?”

Then, as if to prove her point, she gagged. Dramatically.

“Yeah, there was a lot of puking.” Athena offered a sheepish smile.

“I guess if we’d known you or Manuel then, we could have just called you.” Raven blinked her eyes innocently.

“Definitely Manuel,” Athena murmured, offering Marchetti a dazzling smile. “I bet he would have cracked jokes while chopping up the body. Not us, nuh-uh. We had to fight over whose turn it was to puke in the toilet.”

“This is some fucked-up shit,” Dante finally said.

“That’s rich coming from a *killer*,” Raven muttered, glaring at my brother.

“And an unhinged mobster who went after his brother’s ex-girlfriend,” Isla grumbled. “After promising Phoenix... what was it, girls?” She looked around, feigning cluelessness. “Oh yeah, you vowed there’s nobody else. Not for me, you said.” She even deepened her voice. “Fucker.”

My brows pinched and so did Dante’s.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Dante asked.

Isla scoffed. “Whatever, dude. I don’t have time for your bullshit.” Dante’s questioning look landed on me, and I shrugged. I didn’t have time for any of their bullshit.

“Does this change your position, Marchetti?” Romero said as he took a seat, his breathing labored.

All our eyes were on the head of the Marchetti family. His answer didn’t matter to me, because as far as I was concerned, the issue was closed. I wanted them all out, and judging by Marchetti’s body language, he’d prefer to get the fuck out too.

“I don’t like to be tricked,” he remarked dryly.

Isla offered him a private smile. “Neither do I, yet here I am.”

Then he seemed to relent, pulling her into a hug and kissing her temple.

“I’d hate to be a rude host, but—”

“As if you give two shits,” Dante interjected.

“You’re right; I don’t even give one. Everyone out. Except Romero.” I met the old man’s eyes. My eyes roamed the room to discover Reina’s grandmother had disappeared, along with that ridiculous tiara on her head. “What’s the deal with your mother-in-law and that headpiece?”

He rolled his eyes, shrugging. “She’s determined to send me to my grave early,” he stated wryly. “And who the fuck knows about that tiara. Every so often, she struts around with it.”

“You can remain here with her.” I lowered my gaze to Reina’s sleeping form in my arms. “I’m taking Reina away from all this shit for a bit.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” His concerns were justified, but I’d made my choice. She needed peace that this place couldn’t offer her.

“I’m sure,” I told him. “I have it all lined up.”

REINA

I jolted awake after yet another nightmare. My bedsheets were a tangled mess, proof of my tossing and turning.

Every night I was back in that dark basement. Every night I heard terror-filled, skull-piercing screams. And then there was the familiar shadow, Perez Cortes, toying with me. Biding his time.

Until, finally, I'd jolt awake, my shirt clinging to my body with sweat. My hair damp, sticking to my forehead, and confusion swirling in my head.

Fear cocooned me and refused to let go. I kept hearing the pure terror in those women's screams. I kept seeing the missing limbs and blank eyes of the innocent girl that I didn't even attempt to save. And then there were men I'd killed.

I never would've imagined that reality would be worse than the drug-induced fog I'd become so dependent on, the lows that always followed it.

The haze in my brain was gone. The tremors were as well. But the pain in my heart remained a constant companion. It was ironic, really. I'd fought to live, to keep from being touched, for however long I was in captivity, only to learn that death would have been better than staying alive.

I would have finally been at peace.

No more fighting the agony or the mess clogging my brain, no more having my heart shredded to pieces by shame. Wait—no. Amon would never betray me. Why would I think that?

He'll never want you again. Not with those scars.

Fucking Cortes. He's dead! Why can't I get him out of my head?

The breeze swept off the ocean and cooled my cheeks. The moon glimmered in the sky, weaving shadows through my room.

Suddenly, my bedroom door swung open, and there stood a different dark shadow. The outline of my prince in shining armor.

My husband.

But I was the furthest thing from goddamned Cinderella. I was filthy, dirty, untouchable.

I turned my gaze to stare back out the window. Stars surrounded the moon and admired its glow. It reminded me of the two of us, this fascination with him that started the day I met him by the castle on the Gulf of Trieste.

It wasn't a good fascination. It wasn't a fairy-tale kind of love. No, it was a dark, twisted type of pain, complete with secrets that tore at everything in their wake.

"Reina, baby," he said roughly. "When will you finally talk to me?"

I couldn't fall under his spell. I didn't deserve to.

"I don't want to talk to you," I whispered. "I don't want to see you." My lips trembled, and I was forced to suck them between my teeth or risk the sobs breaking through. "I don't love you anymore. You need to let me go."

Ruined. Broken. Filthy.

An internal war waged inside me, the one that screamed there was no happy ending for me. And then it was that romantic part that had shriveled to a tiny pebble that still needed the light. That still needed him.

"You don't love me." His tone was flat. "Then I need to work harder."

I shook my head. "You'll be disappointed."

The rippling water forged its own symphony in the steady rhythm, matching my throbbing heartbeat. The silver moon reflected against its dark depths, calling to my broken spirit.

“Break my heart, Reina. As many times as you want. It was only ever yours to break.” My gaze snapped to him. “But I will never give up on you. My heart beats for you. I’ll love you until my last breath, but I’ll also fight for you until that day comes.”

His words did weird shit to my heart, melting the ice walls I’d worked so hard to construct.

“Where is my sister?” I rasped, focusing on something else, something that terrified me in a different way. I promised my mamma I’d protect her. I needed to make sure I stayed true to that. “I want to see her, but no one is giving me a straight answer.”

Every time I brought her up, I was met with vague answers and averted looks. Nobody had brought her up since I returned. Papà was here. Grandma came to visit. Even the girls called and texted and visited. Everyone but my sister, and that was not like her.

Amon paused. “She’s not here.”

It had been three weeks since I was rescued from the jungles of Brazil. Since Amon, his brother, Darius, and all their men decimated the compound to nothing. Which meant it’d been almost two months since I’d left Paris.

I had regained some semblance of sanity in the last week. I no longer lost my shit when I felt Amon nearby. Some nights, I woke up to him stroking my hair, whispering warm, reassuring words that were so beautiful the old me would’ve cried. Instead, I lay motionless, pretending I was asleep, hiding behind the comfort of my walls.

The old me was dead. I was no longer his cinnamon girl. I was no longer innocent or naive.

“Talk to me.”

I clenched my teeth. “Where is my papà?”

“He’s asleep. Want me to wake him up?”

Guilt slithered through me... I was being selfish. His cancer was attacking him from the inside, and he needed his rest.

“No, don’t wake him.”

I turned my back to him, only for the mattress to dip right behind me.

Tension stiffened my every limb, and I didn’t acknowledge him. It was for the best. If I faced him, my panic and anxiety would take hold and wouldn’t let go until he sedated me. I was tired of being drugged.

Determined not to risk another one of my episodes, I closed my eyes and kept them shut, refusing to react to him or any life around me. It wasn’t easy. For some reason, every stupid fiber of me was so attuned to him.

My body shuddered at his proximity, but I ignored it. I kept trying to distinguish reality from hallucination, my truth from the lies Perez spun in a poisonous web around me. Rubbing my chest, the throbbing ache slowly expanded with each breath. Perez left scars on my mind, not only my body.

“Reina, please talk to me.”

“I can’t.”

I could feel him stiffen behind me. Silence descended upon us, his breaths, my heartbeats, the room swaying ever so slightly over the water.

“Then who?” he demanded. When I said nothing, his hand came to my shoulder.

I jerked away from his touch. “Don’t touch me,” I hissed, making him wince. I shifted around, watching him warily.

My eyes darted past him and focused on the horizon.

“Cinnamon girl, please don’t lock yourself away,” he said roughly. “Don’t leave me alone.”

I wanted to tell him I, too, felt alone, but the words got stuck in my throat.

“You’re safe now,” he assured softly. I sat up slowly and shifted away from him, bringing my knees to my chest. “Tell me what you need.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“I can’t be with you anymore.” My voice was barely above a whisper. “You and I... We were never supposed to be. We both know it. It’s okay. There’s too much hate surrounding our family and—” I broke off, the sob catching in my throat. I didn’t think I could bear any more heartbreak. Once he saw my scars, he wouldn’t want me anymore, so it was better this way.

His body dripped with tension. “That’s fucking *bullshit*. You and I were *always* meant to be. You can hate me all you want, cinnamon girl. But don’t regret me. Never fucking regret us. If you don’t want me anymore, put a bullet in me.”

I’d rather die than hurt him.

“Why didn’t you pay the ransom?”

His brows furrowed. “Ransom?” I nodded. “What are you talking about?”

I gulped, the lump growing bigger. “P-Perez said you refused to pay my ransom, that you left me there because I was ruined.” But didn’t I also think he was taunting me? I didn’t know what to think anymore. Maybe that conversation never even happened. I buried my face in my hands, blocking out the world.

“He never asked for ransom, Reina.” The seriousness of his tone signaled the truth, and the gentle way he pulled my hands away from my face and stroked my cheeks promised it. “He never even reached out, only dropped a video of your torture. We had no idea where you were for *weeks*. I would’ve given my everything, down to my last cent, for you. Don’t you see? None of it matters to me if I don’t have you.”

My eyes flitted to his and I murmured, “I see.”

“What did he do to you?”

My lungs burned and I fought to suck in air. I couldn't go there with him. Not yet. Not now.

So I focused on other things instead. Other ghosts.

"Did *you* kill him?" I croaked, my arms coming around to hug my knees. Perez and his bottomless eyes haunted me during every waking and dreaming hour. But it was more than just that. It was the secrets of our parents we were paying for. The memories that resurfaced. The enemies that lingered in the shadows.

"I did," he said, shifting closer before catching himself. "I still can't believe you're here." His voice dripped with relief.

"Are you going to kill the others?" My voice quivered. "Are you going to kill your mother?" Papà didn't have to name the culprit; we all knew who it was.

Chancing a look at his face, I could feel all my muscles tensing. In the dark of the night lit only by the moon, his face looked harsher, his jaw more angular, and somehow he looked older. But his eyes... They were always what pulled on my heartstrings the most.

"If she's done what I suspect, I will." The tone of his voice left no room for doubts. "But I will question her. I want to understand why she was willing to destroy us when she could have had everything."

I didn't understand exactly what he meant, but I didn't ask. The concept of so much evil surrounding us was hard to grasp. It was like the universe was against us from the moment we met.

"They will all pay," he vowed, leaning closer. A shiver rushed down my spine as his scent registered. Breathing became a chore and goosebumps erupted on my skin.

I'd dreaded this moment since I first woke up in the safety of his home. He'd be repulsed by me once he got too close and saw my scars.

"We can't do this," I stated. "I can't stay with you."

His brows furrowed. “Why not?” he demanded. “You’re my wife.”

My lips thinned. I wasn’t sure who was the romantic fool anymore, and I was too tired to figure it out.

I leaned back, fatigue slowly creeping through my broken body. “Never mind. But know this, Amon. I’m going back home to Europe when Papà leaves.”

There was a long, tense pause, and then the mattress shifted as he stood up. I could hear the heavy thud of his footsteps on the wooden floor as he made his way to the door.

I opened my eyes, catching a glimpse of his tall frame as he lingered in the doorway.

“In that case, your papà’s staying. We’ll get through this together.”

“You’ll never have me again,” I rasped, emotions clogging my throat.

He stood still for a heartbeat or two. “I will have you in any way you’ll let me, Reina Romero,” he whispered. “If I have to wait ten lifetimes, I will. In every life. You and me against the world.”

It should have given me the reassurance I craved, yet it didn’t. Insecurity and doubt were inked into my marrow.

I exhaled a shuddering breath. “I can’t give you what you want.”

“I want you to be okay. To live. Just fucking be with me, because you’re home. *My home.*” My heart trembled at the passion in his voice. “Think about it, but know I won’t give up. I’m not familiar with that concept when it comes to you. I gave you up once, and I’d sooner die than do it again.”

Our gazes held and so did our breaths.

Except, I wasn’t ready to let go of my demons. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

AMON

Reina stared at all of us like a deer in headlights.

A month had gone by since the rescue. It had been a constant up-and-down battle. She still refused to talk to anyone about what happened. She still refused to let me in.

Her hair was still wet from the shower and she was dressed in black yoga pants and an oversized white T-shirt. I missed seeing her in pink. She belonged in bright, happy colors.

Her gaze flitted to the ocean, across the horizon, seeing who knew what, then returned to the three of us.

My yacht was docked and waiting for us on the other side of the property. The four of us crowded in the bedroom, the one I hadn't slept in since I brought her here. Every door and window was open despite the rain outside.

Ever since the rescue, Reina couldn't stand enclosed spaces. It would become a problem once we moved back to Europe.

She hadn't even left the compound yet and I could see her becoming overwhelmed. It was in the tremor of her fingers. In her dilated pupils as they responded to the adrenaline flooding her body—which was normal, according to the doctor.

I just had to convince my wife to get on the yacht, and once we sailed away, we could work on rebuilding our life together. I could throw her over my shoulder, but I wanted her to take the first step.

“Just the two of us.” Her voice was raspy and she twisted the necklace around her neck, the diamond on her wedding ring catching the light with her every move.

“I don’t want to go.” She jutted her chin stubbornly, her gaze locked on her papà and grandmother.

Unbeknownst to her, I had already spoken to Romero and got him to agree on the best path forward for Reina. I’d take her on a honeymoon. A week or two exploring the world and just enjoying the little things. And if she needed the therapist, I’d fly Dr. Freud out to us.

“Reina, it’s for the best,” her father reasoned. “He loves you; he will keep you safe.”

“Since when do you approve of him,” she grumbled while pleading with her eyes at her grandma to intervene. I kept my face impassive, but my eyes betrayed me.

“No, baby. You’re just confused. Go on this trip and—”

“Please, I can’t—” Her voice broke, and the terror on her face felt like a stab to my heart.

Reina was my wife, in sickness and health until death do us part. But fuck if I’d sit back and let her perish in front of my eyes while she fought her demons.

“Maybe she just needs a divorce. She has the right to her independence.” Of course the woman who’d been married multiple times would be okay with the divorce.

I could feel the tension boiling inside me, strung so tight that I worried it would explode.

I was fucking annoyed that the dragon would encourage her to up and quit on us. *In her fucking dreams.*

“Reina’s my wife,” I gritted. “We’re going to work this out, not give up on each other.” Her grandmother stood there in some sheer golden gown, looking like she was ready to strut down the runway, not hang around the house. “Speaking of, don’t you have your own husband to get back to?”

Something flickered in Diana’s eyes, and suddenly I knew. Judging by Reina’s and Romero’s gasps, they’d also picked up

on it.

“No, Grandma,” she muttered. “Not again.”

She simply waved her hand like she was a pageant contestant.

“It was time to move on,” she announced. “Grandpa Glasgow is just getting too old to keep up with me.”

“Like you’re getting any younger,” Romero muttered under his breath, only to pale when he realized he’d spoken out loud. Ah, the old man just became my favorite.

Reina’s grandmother shot him a glare. “I’m in my prime.”

“And I’m the Buddha reincarnate,” I murmured. “Anyhow, whatever your deal with your husband is, you’re not starting shit in my marriage. You don’t have to go back to him, but you’re not coming with us.”

Reina’s shoulders straightened and she narrowed her eyes on me.

“Don’t be rude, Amon,” she scolded, and I felt the corner of my lips curve up as relief washed over me. It was the first sign of her old fire.

“Sorry, cinnamon girl,” I said. “But there’s no room for a third wheel on our honeymoon.”

My fingers itched to touch her soft face, the apples of her cheeks. She’d lost too much weight and her appetite had yet to return. Dark circles lined the contours of her sapphire-blue eyes, making them appear bruised.

We stared at each other, the entire world fading away, until Diana cleared her throat, ruining the moment. “Reina is not interested in a honeymoon.”

Romero let out a heavy sigh. The man must be a saint to have put up with that woman for as long as he did. “Let’s go pack you up, Diana. You need to go back to your husband and work on your marriage. You’ve been through too many, and whatever you’re doing, it isn’t working.”

Well, that was the understatement of the century.

Reina turned her head in their direction. “I’m afraid Papà’s right. Grandpa Glasgow is a good man. Just talk to him.”

Ironic, but I kept that thought to myself. It wasn’t exactly a comparison. Reina had gone through a deeply traumatic experience.

Once the two of them exited the room, she turned around wordlessly and headed to the bathroom.

I watched her grab the hairbrush off the counter, then yank it through her wet, tangled hair. Her breathing was ragged, as though even brushing her hair was an insurmountable task.

“Reina, be gentle.” I took a cautious step closer to her. “Let me brush it.” Her shoulders slumped, but tension lingered in her slim shoulders. She didn’t move away, which I took as a good sign. “May I?”

A heartbeat passed. Then another. Finally, she handed it to me over her shoulder.

My fingers caressed hers as I gripped the brush. It was barely a touch, but it was enough to send a jolt through me. God, I missed her. So fucking much that my own hands trembled as I started to carefully untangle the knots.

“Is this okay?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The pitter-patter of the rain against the open windows surrounding the compound created a haven, enveloping us in its fresh scent.

The constant movement of the sea in the distance seemed to soothe her with each passing second, and her breathing evened out. I brushed her hair for far longer than was needed, enjoying her cinnamon scent and her closeness.

I set the brush down on the counter and gathered her strands, then started braiding. I was tempted to figure out how to put ribbons through it like she used to wear it just so I could keep touching her.

“Did I ever tell you about the time we first met...?” I started softly, keeping my voice low. “I felt this anger.

Resentment toward the world and everyone in it.” She didn’t respond, but I could tell she was listening by the way she tilted her head. “There was a reason the bitter prince nickname suited me.”

“H-how so?” she rasped.

“I *was* bitter,” I admitted. “I guess it came with the territory.”

Pitter-patter. Pitter-patter. The rain came on stronger as two heartbeats passed.

“Why were you bitter?”

“Because I was an illegitimate son. I had a father who loved to beat the shit out of me and my brother. I knew that I’d be an outsider for the rest of my life. That I wasn’t good enough.” She didn’t interrupt, holding her breath. “But then you came along and lifted it off my shoulders. Whatever you did—are still doing—helped me realize that none of it mattered.” I gently tapped the side of my head, her eyes following the movement in the mirror. “It’s all in here. The perception of how the world views us. The things I was taught, what everyone said mattered... None of it was important. You accepted me without a care for who or what I was. You accepted *me*.” Our gazes met in the reflection and I drowned in her blues. “I accept you for you. Nothing else matters to me. Just that you’re here. Let me shoulder your pain, Reina.”

She dragged in a ragged breath. And for the next two minutes, she said nothing at all, just stared at me. Then she uttered quietly, “You’re pretty good at this,” and gestured to her hair.

“I used to do it when I was a little boy.” She scrunched her brows, questions in her eyes clear as day. “My father—Angelo,” I corrected myself. “He beat the shit out of my mother, and I could do nothing besides take care of her. Both Dante and I would, except my brother never quite mastered the art.” I chuckled.

“He wasn’t a good man.” Her words came out in the softest whisper.

“He wasn’t. It’s why I keep thinking that maybe all of her mistakes... everything she’s done... maybe it’s the effect of all those years spent with him. I don’t know. Hurt people hurt people, they say.”

Her shoulders stiffened again, and she shifted an inch away from me. Goddammit, it was one step forward and two steps back. I should have never brought up my mother.

“Reina,” I said softly, careful not to rattle her. “It doesn’t mean it’s excusable. I promise you, she’ll pay for all of it. It just helps me make sense of it all in the meantime, because I can’t fathom why anyone would ever hurt you. But I’ll make things right, I just need you to trust me.”

I’d find the culprits that had a hand in the attack. If they thought they could evade my wrath, they had no idea who they were up against. I refused to be fooled anymore. I’d bring them all down, one by one.

“Really?” I watched her delicate, slim neck bob as she swallowed. “Are you really prepared to kill your mother?”

My movements paused. Was I prepared to kill my own mother? I believed so, although part of me struggled to understand her betrayal.

“Yes. If she sold us out, I’ll kill her.” There wasn’t an ounce of doubt in my mind, she would pay. Turning Reina around to face me, I drowned in her eyes as I uttered my next words. “I won’t risk our lives for hers. You’re what matters to me. All my mother has done so far is manipulate me to get her way.”

I would never—and I meant fucking *ever*—let my wife go. She was my life.

REINA

I believed his words.

But dread still swirled in my stomach and a heaviness lingered low in my gut. Maybe it was due to the knowledge that she was out there somewhere, probably ready to pounce again. Or maybe it was the fact that I didn't want Amon living the rest of his life with that kind of stain on his soul.

My gaze traveled over the horizon. I saw Amon's yacht pull up to the marina earlier today, but I didn't think it was so we could pack up and leave.

"How come you're not kidnapping me and throwing me onto your yacht?"

He smiled. "No more kidnapping. I want you to want this. After all, I seem to remember you telling me to stay alive so we could go on a honeymoon."

"You heard that?"

"Every word. It's what kept me going with that bullet lodged in my chest."

I was trying to keep my distance from him, but I was failing miserably. The more I spoke to Amon, the deeper I got myself into the same spot as before, and the harder it was to resist him. We were like two magnets of opposite poles. Yin and yang.

But the moment I let myself imagine the disgusted look on his face when he learned what I'd done, letting some man put his dick in my mouth—even though I'd sliced it off afterward

—or when he saw the scars on my body, I quickly retracted into my shell.

“So what do you say, cinnamon girl?” He smiled, making my heart flutter. “You and me, lounging on the yacht. Then off on our honeymoon.”

“Wasn’t I supposed to plan it?” My voice trembled, matching the faint tremor of my heart that begged to leap out of my chest and go to him, fighting all the barriers I set.

“How about I help?” he suggested. “After all, it’s a marriage. We’re supposed to decide things together. Our honeymoon. Where we’ll settle down. Our children’s names. The school they’ll attend.”

“We’re moving fast,” I remarked, the corners of my lips lifting slightly for the first time in months.

He grinned. “We are, but that’s us. Fast and furious.”

I croaked a laugh. “That’s so goddamn cheesy.”

“I guess that’s the new me ever since that bullet almost took me away from you. Fast and furious.” Tension remained, even as he smiled and offered his hand. “So help me out, cinnamon girl. Let’s start our life together.”

The look in his eyes sliced me open, and the intensity of it had me swaying. Ultimately, my bleeding heart won out, and I found myself sliding my fingers into his warm palm.



Stepping foot in the office for the first time, I joined my papà where he sat and studied the multiple monitors spread across the desks. Amon and Grandma were bickering on the opposite side of the house in an attempt to keep it under the radar, except Grandma’s voice traveled through the compound like the shrill notes of a piccolo on steroids.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay, Papà?” I asked.

He waved his hand. “You know me. I’m too stubborn to die.”

My expression morphed to worry. “Maybe I should worry about leaving you and Grandma alone.”

This time, he let out a booming laugh, which made him cough into his handkerchief. When he caught his breath again, he said, “You should worry about that for her sake, not mine. I might strangle that one if she doesn’t go back. Glasgow has his hands full.”

I released a long sigh. “What happened?”

“Who knows,” he muttered. I studied his face as he spoke, taking in the wrinkles he’d amassed in the last month alone and the gleam in his eyes that was no longer as sharp. “You won’t get the truth from your grandma, that’s for sure. Are you all packed?”

“I am.” Although Amon packed most of the clothes. While I continued to reach for yoga pants and long, baggy shirts, he insisted on my old stuff. *Pink, pink, and more pink.*

“He’s a good man,” he said, pulling my gaze to his. “And no, it has nothing to do with learning he’s my son. The moment he opened his eyes in the hospital, he refused to slow down until he could get to you. He started calling people around the world and cashing in on the debts owed to him. He was looking for that bastard Perez, his cousin, his mother and Hiroshi, anyone who might be able to shed light on your whereabouts.” He jutted his chin toward the monitors. “He killed his cousin. He’s still looking for the last two.”

Three years ago, I couldn’t even fathom having this kind of conversation with Papà, and here we were today. I didn’t even flinch at the knowledge that Amon killed his cousin. I wished he’d ended them all.

My fingers tightened, nails digging into my flesh. “What if he never finds them?”

I didn’t think I could sleep peacefully knowing they lurked in the shadows, waiting to strike again.

“He will find them,” Papà claimed. “Now that he’s the head of the Yakuza—”

“What?”

“He told me earlier today. The Yakuza syndicate called a meeting and voted him in unanimously to replace his idiot cousin. And they didn’t even know that Amon *ended* Itsuki.” He put his hand on his chest, rubbing it. “And he’ll take over the Romero family—our family’s seat in the Omertà. He’ll have two of the strongest organizations in the world protecting you and your sister.”

Another screech traveled through the hallways, startling me. My papà just rolled his eyes.

“Aren’t you worried about Phoenix?” I asked. I couldn’t comprehend why there was no uproar about her disappearance. Except for Dante, who was slowly growing on me. He was off searching for her and had been sending Amon short updates.

“Right now, I’m more worried about you.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be. I’m fine. I won’t let Amon’s mother hold the cards to my happiness.” I had some issues to overcome, but I planned on working through them.

“Listen, Reina. I know his mother wronged you.” I nodded hesitantly, unsure where this was going. “But keep your eyes and ears open. Hana is many things, but I don’t think a killer is one of them.” I disagreed. She’d driven my mamma to suicide. She practically handed her the weapon. “Especially when it comes to her own son. She might hate you, but she wouldn’t risk losing him just to hurt you.”

“But she did hurt us,” I rasped, keeping a tight rein on my anger. “She’s the reason Mamma killed herself. She attacked the store where we shopped that day.”

He let out another heavy sigh. Somehow I got the feeling that Papà hated drama, yet it was all he got from women in his life. Except, he missed the point that he indirectly caused it.

“Hana was jealous, yes. She did wrong by us all, including her own son. But putting Amon’s life and yours on the line...” He shook his head. “It’s not like her.” His conviction angered

me, but instead of spitting out words, I pressed my lips together and remained silent. “I can see your thoughts turning over from here. Just promise me you’ll keep an open mind and learn the truth before Amon does something he might regret forever. You’re the only one he’ll listen to when he’s faced with Hana.” It almost sounded like Papà didn’t doubt Amon would kill his mother. “It’s a hard burden for anyone to carry.”

I tried not to let hate simmer in my veins, but it was hard to control it. I despised the woman, maybe even more than Amon did. She’d told her son we were half-siblings, knowing full well we weren’t. She caused the loss of my baby—although indirectly—and stood by while we endured three years of agony and pain.

The whole time I was in captivity, I’d let anger and betrayal fuel my hatred. I had no clue how to see past it.

“What if I can’t?” I whispered. Yes, there was anger in my heart, but also the longing for happiness. To live, not just exist.

“You can, baby. I believe in you.”

He gave me too much credit. Way too much credit, but I still heard myself murmuring softly, “I promise.”

“Thank you.”

I turned my attention to the painting of floating lanterns, studying it wordlessly. Releasing a long breath, I remembered that date at the racetrack. It felt like a different lifetime. God, I wished I could turn back time.

I didn’t care how stupid or naive it made me sound. I didn’t *want* to know how cruel the world was anymore. I wanted to forget it all and go back to the old me.

Amon interrupted my pity party. “It was my ojīsan’s.”

“It’s beautiful,” I remarked, keeping my eyes trained on it. “We should definitely hang it in our permanent home.”

He tipped his head back, a deep laugh pouring from his throat, and I couldn’t resist looking at him.

“It’s settled, then,” he said, amusement weaving through his voice. “We’re not raising our family here.”

“It can be our vacation spot.”

“Agreed.” My chest swelled, and I resisted blurting something like *Are you sure?*

“Please spare me that catastrophe.” Grandma appeared behind him. “Reina, promise me you won’t start a family until you’re at least thirty.”

“Didn’t you have Mamma when you were eighteen?” I retorted.

I was in no rush to have children. I had some major things to heal from first, that much was clear, but I wouldn’t allow anyone else to dictate how I chose to live my life, no matter how well-meaning.

Papà chuckled. “You waltzed right into that one, Diana.”

She shot him a glare. Poor Papà, he’d be stuck here with the brunt of her full attention. That couldn’t possibly bode well for anyone.

“What were you two arguing about?” My eyes met Amon’s side profile, and I noticed the tic of his jaw. It was enough to tell me they hadn’t settled matters.

“Nothing,” Grandma answered quickly.

“Phoenix,” Amon said at the same time. I stared at the two of them. It was the first time anyone had voluntarily brought her up, and my heart raced at the prospect of finally getting some real answers. “Your grandmother signed off on a large sum of money that Phoenix withdrew after that cursed rehearsal dinner. Similar to you, she wasn’t due to get her inheritance until her twenty-fifth birthday.”

My brows furrowed, not following. “Maybe she needed it for piano stuff?”

Phoenix could easily spend a million dollars in a few days when it came to her music and instruments.

“No, but I suspect she’s in hiding.” Amon’s attention was on Grandma. “That she needed the money for something else entirely.”

I stiffened, my eyes darting between the three of them. “Is she in trouble?”

Papà shook his head. “No, she’s safe and sound with two million dollars in cash. Somewhere. Your sister ran.”

Phoenix ran. My lips parted, although deep in my heart, I was proud of her. Worried, but proud. “You don’t know where? How do you know she’s safe?” Papà shook his head. “And you, Grandma?”

There was something in her eyes that didn’t sit well with me. It was uncharacteristic of her to relinquish control or for her to let either one of us disappear on her.

“Don’t get worked up, baby girl.” I could understand Papà’s concern, but I was finally feeling strong enough to handle the truth. I was sick of being left in the dark, even though I knew they were only trying to protect me.

And that was when it dawned on me. My heart was in my throat, but the panic wasn’t looming. For the first time in a very long time, I was reacting normally—or whatever the closest thing to that was.

“I’m okay, Papà,” I assured him, then met Amon’s gaze, who gave me a barely noticeable but encouraging nod. “Phoenix is strong and smart, but it worries me that she’s vanished and isn’t responding to anyone.” Grandma kept looking anywhere but at me. “Is she?” I asked pointedly.

“I was trying to explain to this... this...” Grandma waved her hand in Amon’s direction, face flushed, clearly struggling to find the words.

“To my husband,” I finished, giving her a warning glance. I was done catering. She should be on her knees thanking Amon, Dante, and the entire fucking underworld, not acting all stuck-up.

She let out an indignant sigh. “I signed off on her withdrawal as the head of Grace’s estate, and we agreed on no contact so she can’t be traced. The Leone family is a stain on this fucking family.”

“So you let her go out alone in the fucking world?” Papà bellowed, suddenly feeling stronger. “You should have consulted me.”

“She knows how to take care of herself,” Grandma reasoned. “She didn’t want to deal with that buffoon.”

I couldn’t keep up with all of this shit. Maybe I’d been in my shell, wallowing in self-pity too long. “Who’s the buffoon?”

“Dante,” Amon explained. “He insists on marrying Phoenix now that you’re off the table, being his half sister and all.”

I brought my hands up on either side of my face and began to massage my temples. None of this made sense. Yes, Phoenix’s disdain for Dante was unmistakable. The fucker broke her heart, but she wouldn’t be ignoring me. I was always on her side.

My attention returned to Grandma. There was something she wasn’t telling me. “Why isn’t she reaching out though?” I murmured. “We always keep in touch, you know that, Grandma.”

“Any digital imprint can be traced,” Amon explained. “She left her cell phone at the airport and then disappeared.”

“What he said.” A shadow passed Grandma’s expression, but it disappeared too soon and she was back to her old self, pointing her finger at Papà. “You created this mess for Reina with that agreement; I wasn’t going to allow you to do it to my other granddaughter too.”

Papà paled, a shaking hand coming up to rest over his heart. “That’s enough,” I snapped, glaring at her. “You can’t blame him for *all* this shit.”

“Try me,” she muttered.

I squared my shoulders. “You know what, that’s it. I’ve had it.” I pointed at Grandma. “You will go back to Grandpa Glasgow and work out whatever your problems are. I won’t be attending any more of your weddings or calling any other man *Grandpa*.” Then I turned to Papà and placed my hands on both

of his shoulders, boring my eyes into his. “I know that nothing about our life has been perfect, but both Phoenix and I love you. We’ll find her. Knowing my sister, she’s probably enjoying the sun somewhere.” *I hope*, I added silently.

I glanced over my shoulder at Amon, finding comfort in his loving gaze. “We’ll find her. And if we don’t, Dante will.”

REINA

A delicious scent wrapped around me like a weighted blanket.

I snuggled closer to the source, loving the strong, solid warmth beneath my cheek. It was so soothing that each time I attempted to open my eyes, it pulled me under its spell. I nuzzled my nose against the pillow that felt surprisingly hard, and my nostrils flooded with citrus.

I inched forward, needing more of it. My leg hooked over the hard mound, and that warmth spread to my core.

My hand roamed over the curves and ridges when something hard nudged my stomach.

My eyes popped open, latching on to the broad chest and bare skin. *Not a pillow at all, it would seem.* I looked up into a pair of dark, galaxy-filled eyes. Amon flicked his consuming gaze down, and I followed it to my hand on his length, covered only by the cotton of his sweatpants.

I jerked away, forcing my hand off his dick. Literally *forcing* it because my fingers refused to let go.

He grunted, and I watched his eyelashes brush against his sharp cheekbones.

“Sorry,” I muttered, trying not to ogle his lean torso. But it was the scars on his chest and shoulder that had all my attention. They were covered up with two new tattoos. The yin symbol was etched over the raised skin and seemed to be yearning to reach the yang, like they were trying to get to each

other by floating on his skin. The artist had done an incredible job, and I knew that no matter how long I spent looking at the beautiful, intricate designs, I would never forget that he'd sustained the scars they covered by protecting me.

My fingers reached out, tempted to touch, but hovered an inch from his skin. My heart beat a wild rhythm in my chest and a tremor started somewhere deep.

In the end, I let my hand fall to the sheets and just asked, "Why another yin and yang?"

"Because it's you and me," he answered simply. "Always trying to get to each other, and even when we're separated, we'll do all we can to find each other."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "I wasn't looking for you," I whispered. "I thought you d-d-died." Then, shaking my head and the memories away, I snapped my attention back to his face.

"You survived," he murmured. "That's all that matters to me."

Then it hit me. I didn't have a nightmare last night, not since he'd come into my bed. Nothing but peaceful sleep.

I rubbed my palm over the covers, fingers dangerously close to where I knew his hard cock lay.

"What if I'm never ready?" *To touch you. To show you my body. To tell you about the demons that followed me back home to you.*

"You will be. You'll know when you're ready."

"But—"

He cupped my cheeks. "You're strong. And I will wait until you're ready. We don't have to rush anything."

He leaned back, getting comfortable against the headboard. His expression was light, playful even, but there was also a seriousness there.

"We'll work on it together, my queen," he declared, almost as if he was uttering a vow in front of God.

I snorted softly. “What happened to cinnamon girl?”

He stared at me, eyes dancing with mirth. “She’s still there.” He tapped my chest gently. “And you’ll always be my cinnamon girl, but you’ve been to hell and back. You survived some bad shit. And, as a result, you became a queen.”

My teeth trapped my bottom lip, and his eyes traced the movement, blazing in return. But he didn’t move. I believed him—he would be patient with me.

“Can we sleep in the same bed going forward?” I asked quietly, then hurried to explain as I inwardly cringed. “Just sleep.”

A dizzying smile took over his beautiful face, brightening his features, and suddenly I felt like he was *my* light. My oxygen. My home.

“I thought you’d never ask, wife.”

He opened his arms wide, waiting, and I slowly leaned back into his heat and settled under his strong arms.

The backs of my eyes burned and words scorched my tongue, but they refused to leave my lips. So I did the only other thing that felt right in the moment... I cried.

Once the floodgates opened, there was no stopping the tears. And still he held me. Kissed the back of my head. Traced small circles on my skin. There, in the light of a new day breaking over the horizon and dripping through the curtains, I let myself be held, let him be the one to ground me, while my heart whispered all the things my mouth couldn’t yet say aloud.

AMON

A drink in my hand, I leaned on the railing and watched as the yacht cut through the blue water of the Indian Ocean. We were headed toward Sri Lanka through the open waters.

We'd left Jolo last night, and while our first night on the yacht wasn't originally spent in the same room, we did have adjoining rooms. After she woke up, plagued by yet another nightmare, I'd climbed in with her to let her know she was safe, and she'd fallen straight to sleep. When she'd woken with clear eyes for the first time since her rescue, we made a pact.

We'd sleep in the same room going forward.

I debated whether it was wise to bring Reina on the boat so soon after she was transported to Brazil on one. I still wasn't sure she was faring any better. I saw her using the breathing techniques Dr. Freud taught her as a coping strategy. I had her anxiety medication, but Reina and I agreed that if we didn't have to use it, we wouldn't.

Reina sat in one of the lounge chairs, wearing pink heart-shaped glasses and a pink one-piece bathing suit. She looked like a Hollywood diva dating back to Marilyn Monroe's reign, except she was still too thin.

Although there was hope there too. We ate breakfast together today, and she cleaned her plate for the first time since returning home.

I scrolled through my surveillance apps, checking for the two remaining people I had on my hit list, and for Phoenix. As if Dante was doing the exact thing, my phone buzzed with a message from him.

I got a tip from Lykos Costello. He spotted someone fitting Phoenix's description.

My brows furrowed. I usually didn't deal with the Greek mobster. I typed a message back.

How did he know we've been looking for her?

I glanced over my shoulder to where Reina lounged, her nose buried in one of Athena's smutty novels. The leather-bound sketchbook and charcoals I'd thought to pack lay scattered around her, pages and pages of designs rustling in the wind under the paperweight. I'd given her the supplies when we got her settled, but they'd sat untouched.

Until today.

It was the first time she'd shown interest in sketching, and it might be selfish, but I didn't want to worry her with this news. Not when she looked so at ease.

My phone buzzed again.

He didn't. Marchetti talked to him. His wife must have nagged the shit out of him.

I typed back.

Will you follow the lead?

I knew the answer would be "yes" considering it was the first and only lead since she disappeared.

Yes.

My eyes flitted to my wife again, only to find her watching me, her head cocked to the side. I smiled reassuringly.

"Want to go swimming before we hit land?" Her eyes traveled down my body, and my dick instantly responded. At this rate, I'd have blue balls by the time we docked.

"Reina, my queen, you really have to stop looking at me like that," I groaned, my cock throbbing.

She was still the most beautiful girl I had ever met. Every smile, as few as there had been lately, sent my heart racing in my chest. She was the best medicine, the only way to ensure my happiness.

I craved her so completely and so selfishly that I ached. I wanted her, yes, but I wouldn't risk hindering the progress she'd made in the past few days. If I wasn't careful with her, I knew she'd spook, and there was no way I'd let her revert back to the shell of herself.

So I'd wait.

Her tongue darted out, sweeping over her full bottom lip. "Sorry."

She didn't sound sorry at all. In fact, the flickers of the Reina I met and fell in love with stared back at me. But then she tensed, wrapping her arms around herself as if needing a shield, and the move nearly crippled me.

"I like your Moncler swimming shorts," she murmured, distracted. "They look good on you. I... I feel... dirty. Ugly." Her eyes lowered, focused on a spot on her pink toes. She brought her finger to her inner thigh, absentmindedly rubbing the fading scars.

"Cinnamon girl, anything and everything looks good on *you*," I hummed. She had to know I wanted her, no matter what she thought of herself. "When we're gray and shriveled, you'll still take my breath away. Do you know why?" She lifted her eyes, studying me with a guarded expression before she shook her head. "I love your fierce protectiveness, your loyalty toward the people in your life, your big heart, your soul. That's what matters to me."

The light in her eyes dimmed, pulled by the memories that tried to snuff it out. But her light was part of her. It was impossible for anyone or anything to steal it.

She worried her lip again, and ghosts flashed in her blue eyes.

"You're a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for," I said. "Trust me on that."

She let out a sigh. "The scars on my skin... on my belly... they might disgust you." The dark part of me that thirsted for blood demanded to be let loose, but it wouldn't erase my wife's memories. Only she could extinguish those ghosts.

“They won’t,” I told her firmly. “They only prove how strong you are.” She still didn’t seem convinced. “You and I are destined for more,” I rasped, praying she’d hear the conviction in my voice. “We’ll share every lifetime in any form, because you’re my yin and I’m your yang. You’re my yang and I’m your yin.”

Her breath hitched and those blue eyes snapped to me before she offered a shaky smile.

“When did you become such a romantic? Are you sure you haven’t been reading Athena’s novels?” I hadn’t, but if it’d make her smile, I’d read every fucking romance novel out there. “Sometimes I wake up,” she started, her voice raspy, “remembering... things. And I can’t tell what’s real from what isn’t.” I met her stare, the fear in her eyes gutting me. But I remained silent, waiting for her to continue. “The drugs, sometimes they made me hallucinate. I think.”

“Heroin has that effect. It dulls the world around you, but then when you’re off the drugs, the repressed memories surface.”

“It made me savage, then made me mellow.” Her hands curled into fists, her knuckles turning white. “H-he—” A hiccup escaped her. “Perez. He didn’t like me mellow, but I... he... he tried to rape me, but I hurt him.”

My jaw clenched but I kept my mask pulled tight. I was so fucking glad I dragged out his death. “Good. He deserved what came his way.”

That must have spurred her on. “One of his men tried to... to make me...” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I cut his dick off before he had the chance.”

“That’s my girl.” She made me so fucking proud. She was a true queen, a fighter.

Her nails dug deep into her calves. “Th-they didn’t rape me, though they tried. Made me an addict. Obviously. Cut me. Yes. Tortured me. Yes. The guards made other girls pay for not being able to touch me or for killing the ones who tried.” Her voice broke and a single, lonely tear rolled down her cheek.

“That’s the part that killed me. H-hearing what they were doing to them. Sometimes they’d bring them to my cell and show me.” She shivered, plagued by the horrors, and wiped at her cheeks with more force than probably necessary. “I should have saved them. Spared them. Somehow.”

I couldn’t keep my distance anymore. I strode to her side, dropped to my haunches, then grabbed her chin and turned her face to mine.

“They would have hurt them either way. It wouldn’t have mattered if you gave them everything, Reina. They would have still hurt them. Killed them.” She bit her bottom lip so hard it drew blood, but she didn’t even notice it.

“H-how did you kill him?”

The vulnerability in her eyes was gutting me alive. “He suffered. His limbs were sliced, his dick cut off—”

“I’m glad.” Fury radiated from every pore in her body. “I wish you could have kept him alive and made him scream in agony for a long time.”

“Me too. The next one I will.” Even if it was my own mother.

She gave me a shaky smile. “Let’s talk about our honeymoon,” she suggested, wanting to change the subject. She’d said more in these last few minutes than she had since I got her back, but she sounded drained, so I didn’t want to push for more.

“Ready to pick our next destination the same way, or did you have somewhere else in mind?” I asked her, referring to our game we started this morning after breakfast. Out of the blue, Reina suggested we play a game of darts against the world map I had hanging in my library. Each location the winner hit would be added to a list, then we’d decide where to visit next. I imagined it was inspired by her beloved bucket list concept.

I couldn’t resist her, so of course we played darts.

She tilted her head. “No darts today. How about Greece after Sri Lanka? We could stop at a few cool spots on our way

there.”

My shoulders stiffened at the coincidence. *It has to be*, I told myself.

Keeping my tone casual, I asked, “Have you ever been?” She shook her head. “Then Greece is our next destination.”

Finally, her hesitant smile turned into a real one. “But today it’s Sri Lanka.”

“Today it’s you and me in paradise,” I agreed.

REINA

“**T**hey call this island the pearl of the Indian Ocean.” Amon’s yacht was anchored a mile from the shoreline, and even from here, I could see its natural beauty rising above the clear turquoise water. “Want to walk the beach?”

I turned to look at him, rolling my eyes.

“Is that even a question?” Sri Lanka was famous for its picturesque beaches, and it’d make no sense to be here and not experience them. The sound of the waves was a steady presence and the scent of the ocean drifted through the air.

The clear blue sky above us made the water sparkle under the afternoon sun. And there was Amon, leaning over the railing with his arms crossed, wearing his swimming shorts and white polo shirt. His eyes hid behind sunglasses, but even still, I could picture the stars that shone in them. For me. The boy from all those years ago lingered beneath the surface, but a harshness and ruthlessness dominated his features. It was etched into his furrowed brows, set jaw, and firm line of his lips.

My hand came up to my necklace, twisting the pendants. It didn’t matter to me how much he’d changed. He had been saving me since our first encounter, and my trust in him was unwavering.

His stars shone just for *me*.

He raised a brow. “You okay? Did you get a text?” I shook my head. “A call?”

“There were a few messages from the girls. Everyone’s fine.” I grinned. “Should we just swim to shore?”

He removed his shades, uncovering his beautiful eyes, and discarded them on the nearby table.

“You’re on, cinnamon girl.” I dropped my cover-up, thankful I opted for a one-piece so nobody could see the worst of my scars, and started to run to the back of the yacht.

I glanced over my shoulder just as he was pulling his shirt over his head. “Catch me if you can!”

An easy laugh broke free from my mouth. I got to the end of the yacht and jumped without stopping. The water enveloped me as I went deeper and deeper into the cold, but this wasn’t the darkness. My eyes wide open, I could see fish bolting away from me, the sun above the surface, and Amon diving in to meet me.

His hand reached for mine and I took it, then we started kicking our way to the surface together.

It didn’t take us long before my feet touched the soft sand. My toes curled into its warmth, the sun throwing its rays over our skin. But it was Amon who took my breath away. He stood like a god amidst our very own paradise, a mischievous, playful gleam in his eyes.

He charged toward me and I let out a squeal, running back into the water. Just the way the fish had when they rushed to get away from me. First right, then left. I didn’t stop, my feet splashing over the shallow blue water. My toes dug into the wet sand, clouds puffing up around them.

I could hear splashing behind me. He was closing in, and I felt a strange sense of excitement take over. A grin on my face and the water up to my waist, I chanced a glance over my shoulder. There was no trace of Amon.

I faltered, the first flicker of fear making its way up my chest. Where did he go? Did he leave me? Panic flared, my mind feeding it—

My thoughts came to a halt when something touched my calf. I shrieked but it was cut short when a firm grip yanked

me under. The cold water engulfed me and strong hands wrapped around me.

Fear was replaced by a sense of security as I was led back to the surface. I inhaled a lungful of air, my fingers holding on to his muscular shoulders.

Blinking away the water from my eyes, Amon's drenched face came into focus. "Got you."

He did get me. Always.

Acting on impulse, I leaned forward and crushed my mouth against his.

The lump in my throat grew. Tremors rolled over my skin and the ringing in my ears got louder as invisible fingers clutched at me. My heart sped up, thundering in my chest, and each beat drove a wave of panic through me. *Calm down*, my brain whispered, but memories suffocated, touching me with their bony hands.

He must have sensed my panic in the way my lips stopped responding, in the way my fingernails dug into his shoulders. He pulled away, putting distance between us. Just enough to let my demons scatter.

"I'm sorry."

His lips brushed over my nose. "We'll take it slow."



"Grandma's groveling and it's so much fun to watch."

I laughed at Papà's smug tone. I'd been gone only three days, but he managed to force Grandma on a flight to escort her back to England.

Right back into Grandpa Glasgow's arms.

"Did he forgive her?"

He chuckled. "I think he will, but he's making her work for it."

“Good.” Grandma had to stop going through husbands like they were a commodity. Grandpa Glasgow loved her and she loved him. They were good together. “Anything from Phoenix?”

“No, but I know she’s okay. In my bones, I know it.” Maybe it made no sense, but I found comfort in his assurance. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Really good.”

“Amon treating my baby girl right?” My cheeks heated. Amon sat on the sofa next to me, his attention on his laptop even though I was certain he was listening in on my conversation. The library on the lower deck was our go-to place, and I loved how timeless it felt, no matter where in the world we were.

“He is.” We slept in the same bed. We shared kisses. We touched. I had been exploring his body and enjoying his touch more than ever before, actually. We hadn’t gone further than that, but with each passing minute, hour, and day, I felt the old flames igniting and the need for him rising.

Feeling my eyes on him, he raised his head. The heat in his eyes flared.

Leaning forward, I kissed him softly, hoping he knew how much he meant to me. I’d been trying to take the time each day to be thankful for the good things in my life, for him. His hand dove into my hair, his hold turning savage and possessive. But he pulled away too soon.

He tugged my hair gently. “Your papà’s on the phone,” he mouthed softly.

“Reina, you there?” Papà’s voice came in promptly.

“Yes, sorry. I was...” I tucked my hair behind my ears. “I was thinking.” Amon let out a soft snort and my hand slapped him on his bicep. “Stop it,” I mouthed, grinning and turning my body away from him. “How are you feeling, Papà?”

“Not bad. I’m strong, taking care of myself. I don’t want you to worry about anything,” Papà continued, oblivious to what was going on in the middle of the ocean on a yacht with

the boy I fell in love with almost two decades ago. “Not Grandma. Not Phoenix. Not me.”

I sighed. “I’ll try to, but it’d be easier if we knew where Phoenix was.”

Amon returned his attention to his laptop, ruling the world from a little device.

“She is *fine*. Now, tell me how the honeymoon is and where you’re headed next.”

“Greece. Not sure after that.” A wide smile spread across my face. Our honeymoon had barely started, but so far, the days had been dreamy. I hadn’t even needed to check in with Dr. Freud, though knowing her number was programmed into my phone offered ample comfort.

We docked each day and walked around, checking out the nearby ports. We talked. We swam. We dreamed, talked about the future. My artistic streak flared and I poured it onto the paper. “We’re about to have dinner, so I’ll let you go. I’ll text you what comes after Greece.”

After a few more moments, we said our goodbyes and my gaze found Amon’s again.

Silence.

It stretched between us for a second before he set his laptop aside and pulled me closer to him, tenderly tracing my jaw with his thumb. “Everything okay?”

“Yes.”

His thumb glided up and down my skin, and I leaned into his touch like he was my gravity. He dragged me onto his lap. His hand lowered from my cheek and came down to my neck while I was trapped in his gaze.

His possessiveness fueled the fire burning in my chest.

“So what’s for dinner?” I asked.

“If you keep looking at me the way you do, it’ll be you,” he teased, but his voice was raspy, a deep desire lacing through it.

My mind blanked and my throat dried at the images my mind conjured of Amon worshipping me.

He must've sensed my body tighten, because he brought his hand up to my throat, his long fingers covering the expanse.

My brain faltered, certain there should be a reaction, but the lack of it rendered me almost giddy. My body took charge suddenly, becoming hyperaware, but it had nothing to do with the instinct to fight.

The door in my mind closed with a soft click, pushing all my fears away.

His other hand trailed down my shoulder, his finger hooking on the strap of my pink dress. Amon's gift from Sri Lanka, along with a golden bracelet with eight emblem charms of the Wheel of Law—a conch shell, a victory banner, an umbrella, a lotus flower, a vase, a pair of fish, and an endless knot.

The charms jingled as I reached up and tugged on my straps, letting the dress pool around my waist and expose my scars.

His fingers traced them, one by one. Somewhere in the corner of my mind, I recognized the touch and drowned in the familiar, masculine scent.

The two of us stared at each other, the feral pull of his desire leaving me dazed. Each breath he took awakened a dormant chamber inside of me that I thought Perez Cortes had killed.

I moved to straddle him, feeling his length against my hot entrance. Still no panic. Still no urge to flee.

My hand trembled lightly as I pressed my palm against his chest. *Bu-bum. Bu-bum. Bu-bum.*

His heartbeat drummed in sync with mine. Strong and warm.

He clenched his jaw, and it was the only thing that gave him away. I knew it pained him to remain still.

“Are you sure...” He trailed off when I nodded my head once, the look on his face dark and emotional.

My fingers tightened around the material of his shirt.

“I don’t want to keep talking.” I swallowed. “I don’t want to feel broken anymore.”

Amon cupped my cheek, the touch so soft that it had me tearing up.

“You’re not broken.” His voice deepened, the heart-wrenching tone shaking me to my core.

The look in his eyes took me back to the first time I saw him. The boy who watched me with stars in his eyes.

All these chaotic emotions twisted in my chest, suffocating me and stealing my breath. I brought my hand to my chest, twisting the necklace to calm down. Then I tapped my chest once, twice, hoping to release the pressure.

Amon shifted, putting space between us.

“No,” I whispered, reaching for him. “Don’t leave me.”

A muscle clenched in his jaw and his eyes darkened.

“I’ll *never* fucking leave you.” He squeezed my thighs to emphasize his words. “There’s nothing that will keep us apart. Not in this life. Not in death.”

My heart pounded.

“I’m scared,” I breathed, ashamed.

Tension oozed out of him. “I’ll never hurt you, cinnamon girl.”

Deep down, I knew that, but fear was an unreasonable animal. It taunted and destroyed you until you were left empty and alone.

“I know.” I gulped audibly, tremors rolling through my body. “Can I ask you something? Just this once...” He waited for me to finish while I gathered the strength for this fucked-up side of me. “Can you hurt me?”

Shame filled me. Hot moisture burned the backs of my eyes, but I knew they wouldn't come. I must have cried my share of tears granted to me for this lifetime.

He stilled, then swallowed. "Why?"

My throat bobbed as I held his gaze. "You know my... history. The cutting. Pain was my release, but Cortes..." I shuddered. "I don't know. He fucked with my head, Amon. I need to replace that pain he caused with this. You... Us. I need to take it back, because I just feel so out of control all the time. I don't want to feel that way anymore."

Something passed his expression—understanding, or maybe resignation. I didn't know.

"I'm sorry. Never mind."

I started to move away but he stopped me. Pulling me closer to him, he stood up, my legs wrapping around his waist and his hands gripping my hips. He claimed my lips and my body pushed against his hard ridges.

I sensed he was moving us through the library, then into our bedroom.

I tugged on him as he lowered me, my back hitting the soft mattress, and pulled him down with me.

The tip of his nose brushed against mine as he took my wrists into his hands, pressing his warm lips on one, then the other, the scars a stark reminder of how far I'd taken things.

Slowly, his graceful fingers traced my skin and the scars. I held my breath when he leaned forward and started peppering kisses over each one, my tension evaporating more with every brush of his lips against my ugly marks.

My breasts bounced free when he unclasped my bra, and my nipples tightened with need. My panties followed as he gently slid them down my thighs, leaving me completely naked in front of him.

My hands flew to my abdomen to cover my scars. I wanted to be beautiful to him, and all these scars covering my body, from the beatings and the needles and from the cuts I'd

inflicted, stood in the way of that. “Can we turn off the lights?”

“No.” His mouth pressed against the scar under my ribs, softly and reverently. Then he traced it with his tongue. “I want to feel every single scar.” His hot breath skimmed my breasts, my nipples hardening to painful buds. “Do you know why?”

His eyes lifted, watching me. “Why?”

“Because they’re proof that my wife is a survivor.”

I gulped, pushing my fingers through his thick hair. “Please, Amon. I need—”

Something was wrong with me, because I craved his roughness. I vibrated with the need to be hurt combined with the knowledge that I was safe. I wanted the pain and pleasure to cleanse my mind, to reset it.

My thoughts scattered when he grabbed me by the wrist and hauled me off the bed. I stumbled, but he kept me upright as he led us into the bright en suite with the view stretching over the Indian Ocean.

But that wasn’t what caught my attention. It was the giant mirror above the sparkling marble counter and our reflections that stared back at us. He pushed me against the sink and stood behind me, his eyes flashing.

I focused on the image of us. I was naked as the day I was born, while he was fully clothed. I was completely at his mercy. Releasing my wrist, he brought his hand around my throat from behind. The grip was firm, stealing my breath and telling me who was in control.

His other hand drifted down my hip, leaving goosebumps in its wake, then disappeared between my quivering thighs. My heart threatened to crack my ribs as I watched every detail of his unapologetic ownership in the mirror.

Two of his fingers thrust inside my core, and I stilled.

My skin flushed red, my scars whitening. There were many, but none were as ugly as the ones I’d inflicted on

myself.

I shifted my attention to the floor, but Amon used his hold on my neck to force my eyes up.

“Watch us.” He thrust a third finger in, stretching me so fully that my knees almost gave out. “I want you to see me owning every part of you. You’re mine—your demons, your fears, your happiness, your fucking tears. They are all *mine*.”

The hoarseness of his voice put a spell on me, fading everything else into the background and leaving only us. He scissored his fingers, and a burst of pleasure flooded through me. My toes curled and I let my head fall back against his chest.

He pounded his fingers harder and faster, sending me to the brink of madness. My eyes fluttered halfway closed, but I couldn’t look away from our reflection. He said I was his light, but in truth, he was mine. Darkness had swallowed me, and even through my heroin-induced episodes and the horrible withdrawal afterward, it was the memory of him that had me hanging on to life.

Swallowed by the intensity in his eyes, I let myself drown in him. He teased my clit in two expert strokes, and I fell apart. I came undone with a throaty moan and would have collapsed if not for the way he held me, caressed me.

“That’s it, my girl,” he grunted against my ear before biting down on the sensitive flesh. My thighs shook and the orgasm heightened in intensity from the sound of his voice alone. He was my aphrodisiac. There was something about the way he called me *his* and the way he looked at me. Like I was his sun and moon, his whole world. “Let it all out for me so I can hear you.”

His hand disappeared from between my legs to unbuckle his belt. I felt his erection brush against my backside, sending a shudder through me. His cock nudged against my ass cheek. Once, twice.

I gasped. “Amon...”

His huge cock pushed against my ass again. The anticipation grew alongside my pleasure.

“That’s *my* ass.” My hand found his thigh and I dug my fingernails into him, needing him with renewed urgency. “Every fucking piece of you is fucking mine.”

He drew my wrists behind my back and used his thick leather belt to bind them together before his fingers moved back to my throat.

“Your pussy needs this, doesn’t it, my love?” He slid his cock between my legs while I was rendered completely immobile.

“Yes,” I choked out.

He thrust inside, and I gasped as pain exploded all over my core. “You’re so tight. So fucking tight.” His grunts filled my ears. “So fucking mine.”

His thrusts were hard and deep, the slap of his skin against mine echoing all around us. My body still remembered him and immediately fell into the rhythm, adjusting to his size and accommodating him. Pleasure started to war with the pain, and it was exactly what I needed.

Amon’s hold unwavering, we stared at each other in the mirror. The sight in front of me was breathtaking. He looked like a larger-than-life dark cloud devouring me alive.

My skin was sweaty and flushed. My body molded to his, meeting his thrusts. With his hand around my throat and my wrists bound, he owned me.

“More,” I whimpered.

His grip tightened, making my ears buzz.

“Look at how your body submits to me.” The dark possessiveness in his words should scare me. *It didn’t*. Instead, I relished in the pain and pleasure of him pounding me within an inch of my life. “Nobody else will ever have you. I’ll soak in their blood if they even try to take you from me.”

His rhythm ramped up the intensity. Harsh, hard, and fast. Sweat beaded on his forehead from the exertion. My breasts

bounced and ached with arousal. My hip hit the marble counter, the sting of pain adding to the savage pleasure building in my core.

My moans mixed with his grunts. He tightened his grip on my throat, cutting off my oxygen. I couldn't breathe. Black dots swam in my vision. It felt like I was about to experience the most blissful death when the orgasm slammed into me like a category-five hurricane.

Air and ecstasy rushed through me, making me feel deliciously faint. My knees buckled and I started to sway, but Amon bent me over the marble counter. The cold of it was a shock against my heated skin. My nipples pressed against the marble, scraping back and forth with each new thrust.

My pussy clenched around his length as he fucked me through my orgasm, hitting all the right spots. Again and again he rammed into me, pulling out only to slam back in, deeper than ever before.

The world spun and my cries intensified as he drove into me like a wild animal. He fucked me on and on, pleasure blending with pain. I didn't know where he began and I ended or whether he was doing this for me or himself. We both needed this.

He took what he wanted, using me for his own pleasure. Flesh against flesh, my thighs slick with arousal. Another orgasm built in my core and erupted across my entire body. My mouth opened with a silent scream.

He pulled me up by my throat, my back hitting his clothed chest.

"Mine." His hot breath filled my ear as he continued thrusting. "I love you, cinnamon girl," he rasped.

He let out a feral, carnal growl, pounding harder for one, two, three strokes until warmth filled my insides. He shuddered, stilling suddenly, while my hips continued rolling against him until we were reduced to ash.

Both of us breathing harshly, time ceased to exist.

Amon held me tightly, the universe pushing us even closer together.

“I love you too. I always have and I always will.”

It was at this very moment that I knew for certain: we'd get past anything life threw at us.

REINA

We fell asleep somewhere in the Suez Canal and woke up at a port in Greece.

Another night without nightmares. I woke up with a smile on my lips and his erection pressed against my thigh, feeling more at peace than I could remember.

His scent was all around me. I peered an eye open and spotted our clothes lying all over the floor. Last night he held me against him as we took a bath. He massaged every inch of my body, murmuring words in Italian and Japanese before translating them to English.

He worshiped my body, and it felt so right.

The sunrise commenced its journey over the horizon, throwing oranges and pinks across the sky. Our bedroom was positioned with a view of the blinding sea and the white houses on the shoreline.

It looked like a postcard.

I turned to look at Amon's sleeping face and had to admit that the Greek gods had nothing on him. My husband was the best view in this world and, for a stretch of time, I refused to look away from him.

I ran my fingers through his hair, but he was in such a deep slumber, he never even stirred. My ring caught the light and my eyes locked on it. For a brief moment, my mind flashed back to that cell, but I pushed the thought away.

Barely newlyweds, yet somehow it felt like we'd been together several lifetimes. My first hero. My first love. My first lover. My first heartbreak. My forever savior.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to the top of his head, then continued to dot kisses all over his face, growing impatient. "Wake up, sleepyhead," I murmured, tracing my mouth down his jaw, then his ear until his scar on his shoulder. My movements paused before I placed a lingering kiss on it.

"Mmm." He nuzzled his face against my neck. "Now if that's not the most perfect way to wake up, I don't know what is." Amon's raspy, sleepy voice vibrated through his chest. I could feel his lips smile against my neck. "Morning, wife."

"Good morning." God, I was so grateful to be back in his arms. Happy. There were still obstacles and worries—especially about my sister and Cortes's accomplices—but I was working on staying present and in the moment. "We're not being lazy today," I teased, nipping him gently. "Let's get dressed and have breakfast on land." He peeled one eye open as if to check whether I was serious. "Yes, we're getting off this boat. It's our honeymoon and we're going to explore. Right after we eat." I grinned.

He let out a chuckle. "If that's what you want."

"It is."

It was another hour before the tender dropped us on land. We found a little local bakery by the sea where we ate pastries and drank cappuccinos. Then we roamed the streets, talked to locals, and bought little trinkets to remember this place by.

A small boy snapped a photo of the two of us with a Polaroid camera, then hassled Amon for money. The boy won, much to my delight, although I suspected Amon let him for my benefit.

"You gotta be kidding me," Amon scolded teasingly. "Fifty bucks for a photo? What a rip-off."

But Amon was already handing him a hundred-dollar bill. The boy wore rags, and I hoped it helped him some.

“It’s worth the money,” I murmured, looking at the two of us in the 2x4 frame. We looked relaxed, no signs of the nightmares we’d experienced over the last two months. Just pure happiness and love.

Studying the photo over my shoulder, Amon was smiling too. “You’re right, it is. I would have paid double for it.”

The boy’s eyes widened and he let out a string of what I could only assume were curses.

“Want to take another photo?” I asked him. “If it’s a good one, we’ll buy that one too.”

Amon cupped my face and kissed me, and the boy captured the moment perfectly. Then Amon proceeded to give him another two hundred bucks for it.

As we strolled away in the direction of white-washed houses, Amon hooked his arm around me. “Maybe we can ask Raven to paint us a portrait from one of those photos,” he suggested.

I eagerly nodded. “That’s a great idea.”

I typed a message to her, and her response was almost immediate.

Heck yes I’ll paint it. It’s my wedding present to you.



For the next three days, we hiked the mountains that only goats inhabited, we rafted in the blue sea, we kayaked over the clear blue water, we had sex in secluded coves and empty beaches, and we swam naked at night under the stars and moon.

On the fourth night, we were out for dinner in Athens, sitting on the terrace and enjoying the weather. It was early April, but it was warm enough to sit outside in the evening.

The scent of food drifted through the air. Stars sparkled. The soft notes of some sad Greek song filled the air.

I was soaking the scene in, memorizing every single piece, when a woman in a vivid blue dress caught my eye. She was walking by holding a little girl's hand in hers. My brain struggled to comprehend. Familiar curls resembling mine, except the wrong hair color. Red. Similar build. Except... Why would she have a little girl with her? *No, it can't be her.* Phoenix would never color her hair. She said it was a waste of her time sitting at the salon for hours on end.

The woman looked left, then right as she readied to cross the cobblestone street, and I caught her profile.

I gasped.

“Something wrong?” Amon's voice barely registered as I shot to my feet and ran across the restaurant. It was too crowded, too dark. I pushed my body through the crowd. “Reina, slow down.”

“Phoenix,” I called out, which made no sense, knowing my sister was deaf. And still I did it again. “Phoenix.”

I didn't dare look behind me, scared I'd lose sight of her. I was certain it was Phoenix.

A man stopped in front of me, tall and dark, and I almost screamed. I tried to sidestep him, but he had the same idea.

Finally, I let out a frustrated growl. “Stop moving,” I snapped. Taken aback, the stranger stilled, our eyes meeting for a flicker of a second. Just enough to see that he was older with a dominant aura around him. But I had no time for manners. I'd just seen my sister and I needed to get to her.

I bypassed him without a word, but it was too late. The woman was gone. My eyes darted around, searching for any sign of blue, but it was as if she'd vanished into thin air.

I ran to the last spot I'd seen her, spinning around in a three-sixty turn, arms wide.

I took a deep breath, then screamed, “Phoenix!”

The world froze and so did everyone around me. But the woman in blue was nowhere to be found.

AMON

I gulped down the contents of my glass, dropped a stack of bills on the table, and ran after my wife who seemed to be chasing the devil himself in her pink polka-dot Givenchy dress. Or was it Bottega Veneta? Fuck, it really didn't matter.

Pulling my phone from my shorts, I typed a quick message to the captain to have a boat ready for us. By the look on Reina's face, we were in for a hard night. She looked like she'd seen a ghost.

And it had nothing to do with the man she was manically trying to step around.

"Lykos," I greeted him, not even bothering to stop to acknowledge the head of the Greek mafia. Lykos Costello. "Apologies, in a rush."

"Phoenix!" Her scream drew more than a few eyes.

I closed the distance between us, then grabbed her by the wrist and turned her around to face me. She thrashed against my chest, her breathing harsh and her face turning red. Her curls flew wildly around her head and matched the expression in her eyes.

Her lips moved but there wasn't a sound.

"Reina, look at me." I took her cheeks between my palms. "Look at me." Our eyes locked and seconds stretched. One... two... three. The wildness slowly receded, though her breathing was still choppy and uneven. "You think you saw Phoenix?"

Her bottom lip trembled. “I s-swear.” A hiccup escaped her. “It looked like her. But—” Her left hand, shaking uncontrollably, came to rest against my own.

“But?” I urged, brushing her cheek with the pad of my thumb. She kept swallowing, over and over again, her eyes darting around me, avoiding my eyes. I took my free hand and slid it to her chin, gently pulling her attention back to me, brushing our lips together. “But what?”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“Never.”

“She had red-colored hair and a little girl with her.” Her lips moved against mine as she spoke her fears into my mouth. “Phoenix would be alone, not with a little girl.” Her voice shattered, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Maybe I’m going mad?”

“You’re not.” My fingers stroked her soft skin. “You’re worried about her. The two of you are close. It’s not unusual.” I found it hard to believe this was a coincidence. Lykos saw someone resembling Phoenix’s description and slipped a tip to Marchetti, then Reina presumably saw the same person. Maybe she was here after all. I trusted Dante would find her if that was the case. She blinked her tears away, one stubborn droplet clinging to her long eyelashes. I wiped it softly before kissing her forehead. “But she’s a big girl. A woman. And you said it yourself, she’s strong.”

“I... I said that?” Fuck, the insecurity in her voice gutted me. I nodded. “She is. She’s much stronger than I am, but I can’t help worrying. Mamma made me promise.”

“Promise what?”

“To watch over her,” she rasped, her gaze distant. “To protect her.”

It pissed me off that our parents hung their sins and crosses on us.

“You hit Dante for calling your sister inadequate. You almost spent your eighteenth birthday in a jail cell because of some asshole being grabby with your sister.” A sardonic

breath left me. “You’ve been protecting her, Reina, and you’ve done a good job. But now it’s time to take care of yourself. Trust me when I say Phoenix will be fine.”

She took her bottom lip between her teeth, chewing on it while considering my words.

“I can’t let anything happen to her,” she whispered, the fight leaving her.

“Nothing will.” Maybe I had no right making that promise, but fuck it, Phoenix should have at least told her sister her plans and that she was okay, knowing how close they were. I looked around at the people still staring at us. My eyes landed on Lykos Costello, who slid his hands into the pockets of his Italian suit and started to make his way to us. “I’ll send a note to my men and have them scout the area. Just in case it was her. Okay?”

“Thank you.”

Lykos stopped right behind Reina, and I promptly pulled her into my side.

“Hello, Amon,” he greeted me, his eyes on my wife. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Lykos,” I returned the greeting, my voice tight. “We’re on our honeymoon.”

His expression remained a firm mask, untelling whether he’d heard what happened. The Greek mobster liked to keep to himself. It was probably what helped his operation and subsequent business dealings run problem-free. With the Omertà’s families and the Yakuza, there was always some sort of diplomacy going on with other alliances.

“Yes, I heard you got married. Kidnapped your bride.” He offered Reina a sly smile, which only made me want to paw it off his face. He had no right addressing her, and if he thought I’d stand by and let him disrespect me, he had another thing coming. “I can understand why, now that I’ve seen her.”

Reina’s cheeks flushed, and for a second, I forgot to breathe. If we lived two hundred years, she’d still take my breath away. She was truly my yang, my oxygen, my life.

“Sorry I snapped at you earlier,” she muttered, extending her hand. “I’m Reina.”

Lykos’s lips curved into a grin. “Ah, that’s right. Reina Romero. I’ve heard about you.” He took her hand into his. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Then the fucker dared to bring her hand to his lips, bending his head like some medieval fucking knight. Reina stiffened, and before he could make contact, I yanked her hand out of his grip. *Kiss your own hand, motherfucker.*

Judging by the light dancing in his eyes, Lykos knew precisely what he was doing. He let out an amused breath.

“I see your husband’s possessiveness has followed him across the seas,” he remarked wryly.

“I give him a run for his money, so you’d better not kiss his hand either.” She kept her tone light and her expression even lighter, but there was a seriousness in her tone. My fierce queen.

A deep laugh tore from his throat. “You found yourself a match, Amon Takahashi Romero.”

His eyes returned to my face, and with Reina no longer the focus of his attention, I found myself relaxing.

“I see news travels fast,” I said, tightening my hold on Reina, who leaned further into me, keeping her eyes on Lykos.

“It does, but this is news I’m quite satisfied by.” My brows shot up in surprise. “It’s the best of both worlds. You being head of the Romero family and the Yakuza. Your cousin was a dumbass.” I had to agree with that, which was why my cousin was no more. “And no offense, but Romero wasn’t exactly the best businessman.”

“Hey,” Reina protested. “You do realize he’s our papà, right?” Her brows furrowed, then she smiled sheepishly. “That sounds wrong, doesn’t it? He’s actually Amon’s biological father, but he raised me. For all intents and purposes, he’s mine as well.” She shot me a look tainted with guilt. “Sorry.”

I let out a chuckle. “It’s okay.”

“I don’t want him to think we’re siblings.”

“That’s reassuring,” Lykos drawled. It was probably the last thing Lykos cared about. “By the way, very curious that I’m seeing you here considering I saw Dante earlier today.”

I feigned surprise. “Get out. Really?” He shot me a suspicious look while Reina tensed next to me. “I thought he was back in Italy.”

There was one long-standing rule that everyone in the underworld abided by. *Give the courtesy of a heads-up to the head of the mafia in whichever country you’re visiting.* Anything less might be perceived as a direct attack on them, a threat on their territory.

“Hmmm.” Yeah, he totally wasn’t buying it.

“Dante’s here?” Reina turned to me, her voice slightly pitched. “You think—” She returned her eyes to Lykos. “Did he say why he was here?”

“He keeps evading my men.” That was my brother. He knew how to move with the shadows. “So I’m afraid I’m not certain why he’s here.”

Talk about a vague answer.

Hope flickered in her eyes and she straightened her shoulders. “I bet you it has something to do with Phoenix.”

“Phoenix?” Lykos’s brow furrowed, but I wasn’t sure why he was confused. He’d been the one to slip the tip to Marchetti. “Your sister, Phoenix?” She nodded eagerly. “Why would he be looking for her?”

Reina let out an exasperated breath. “I don’t know. Those two have a hate-hate relationship, but maybe—” She broke off and shrugged her slim shoulders. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s trying to help.”

The tone of her voice suggested the exact opposite, not that I could blame her. But Dante *was* trying to help, in his own way. She just worried he’d force a marriage on Phoenix.

“I’m sure he is,” Lykos muttered, the look in his eyes telling. He was on to Dante.

Reina quickly added, “They won’t get married. He’s too crazy, too unhinged for her.” She waved her hand. “Besides, he’d have *a lot* to atone for, and something tells me he’s not the type to grovel.”

Despite Reina’s objection to her sister tying herself to Dante, I actually thought it’d be good for my brother. For both of them.

“Anyhow.” Lykos was clearly done with the topic of Dante and Phoenix. “I heard rumors your cousin was on the run for a while before shit caught up to him.”

“More like he was hiding and now he’s rotting in a dirty rathole,” I muttered.

Lykos nodded his head. “Glad to hear he’s dead though.” I nodded. Itsuki’s death was long overdue. I wasn’t surprised that the news of his death spread quickly. It was the way of the underworld. “Anything on Hiroshi?” I shook my head. “Sometimes answers are found where it all began. It’s worthwhile to go back to the beginning.”

Well, nothing beats a vague suggestion more than a cryptic comment like that. But then, what else could you expect from a Greek?



“Are you sure?” Dante questioned. “I’ve been here for days and there’s been no trace of her. And it hasn’t helped that fucking Lykos’s men have been shadowing me like damn bloodhounds.”

The hands of dread dug their fingers into me and refused to let go. They inched up my spine and promised retribution. Lykos’s words kept nagging at me. He’d said to go back to the beginning, except I wasn’t sure where the beginning was.

Where I was born? Did he mean Japan? Or somewhere else?

I didn't know what it was, but I could feel a storm brewing.

"She's certain of what she saw." With Reina in the shower, I used the window of opportunity to call Dante and update him on the woman Reina spotted. It had rocked her to her core, and I struggled to brush off her concerns. Phoenix *was* in Greece. There were too many coincidences between Lykos's initial intel to Marchetti and the earlier incident. I had no interest in making Reina feel crazy over something that had to be true.

"Fucking Lykos and his men."

"You could have just told him you were coming and stayed at his place," I scolded. "It would have saved you time and energy. Instead, you were a stubborn ass and sneaked into the country like a thief in the night."

"I don't want to be wrapped up in his problems," he muttered.

I let out a sardonic breath. "What problems?"

"Dunno." Dante could be a stubborn ass. "We all have problems. I doubt he's an exception. Besides, I didn't want his little kids running around me. Annoying me."

I sighed. Dante's logic always left me scratching my head.

"Anyhow, there's one thing you should be aware of."

"What?"

"Reina swears the woman had red hair and a little girl with her."

"Huh?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "A girl, Dante. If it was Phoenix, she had a little girl with her, so make sure you add that to your search profile."

"I don't care for redheads," he muttered and I could sense an oncoming headache. "A child?" His delayed reaction aggravated me. "She better not have gotten married," he gritted, his voice flaring with annoyance. "She'll be a widow faster than she can say *bang*."

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. The last thing we need is you making a mess here. Your mission is simple: find Phoenix and get out. Keep it clean, brother.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to think? Phoenix with a little girl?”

“Think about finding her.”

“I’m going to murder—”

I cut him off before he could finish that statement. “You know, maybe you should worry about me murdering your crazy ass. She’s my half sister after all.”

He completely ignored me, and I took it to mean he was lost in his own world. “She better not be living with a man either.”

“I swear, Dante. Your obsession with Phoenix worries me.”

He scoffed. “Well, aren’t you the pot calling the kettle black.”

I recalled what he’d said three years ago. That she seemed familiar to him. “Remember when you said she looked familiar to you?” He hummed his answer. “Ever figure it out?”

“No, but I will,” he answered with conviction. “And she’s going to help me.”

“Don’t fucking dare hurt Phoenix when you find her.”

“I don’t beat women,” he answered, indignant. “I’m not Father.”

“I know you’d never hit a woman. It’s your obsessive nature I’m worried about. It’s obvious she’d prefer to keep to herself.”

“No, she wouldn’t prefer that. She wants to be my wife. She’s just stubborn and refuses to admit it.”

“If you say so,” I remarked wryly. I certainly wouldn’t be the one to tell him there might be some delusion going on there.

“Do you think she’s living with a man?”

“How in the fuck should I know?”

“Well, you’re her brother now,” he grumbled. “Shouldn’t you know what she’s doing?” I groaned inwardly but didn’t comment. “Whatever man she might be living with, I’ll cut his balls off.”

I reached for my glass of cognac, throwing both fingers back in one go and savoring the burn. “Since when are you such a chauvinist?”

He let out a dark laugh. The warning kind. The kind that reminded me of Ghost when he prepared to pull the teeth out of his victims’ mouths.

“Never mind me and my ways, anything about Hiroshi?” I noticed he didn’t ask about Mother.

“No, nothing.”

“Maybe he’s dead already?” he suggested.

I let out a dry breath. “I doubt it. Hiroshi is a sneaky bastard and death won’t find him by accident. He’ll have to be outsmarted.”

“More like he’s been stabbing everyone in the back, starting with your ojīsan.”

“And there’s that,” I agreed. “It just pisses me off that I didn’t see it sooner.”

I’d had a lot of space to think over the past weeks about the signs that went unnoticed for years, and I was starting to see with clear eyes. His push to strike Itsuki, even eliminating the heads of the Yakuza syndicate. He claimed he was against flesh trading, but he never tried to do anything to stop it. Not with Ojīsan, and certainly not with my cousin.

And then there was the way he hovered around my mother. I had attributed it to his love for her, but now I wasn’t so sure. He wasn’t the type to stand on the sidelines. He would have been demanding she get divorced and marry him if that were the case.

He and I were similar on that front. The need to possess, to always reach for more, it was part of our DNA, a need that couldn't be stopped.

It was power.

For him, it was to bring the world to its knees. For me, it was to protect the people I loved. My family.

“What’s your plan now?” I asked, knowing I had to wrap up this call. The shower had stopped and Reina would be in the library at any moment.

“I’m not leaving Greece till I find Phoenix. I’ve never been the giving-up type and I certainly won’t start being one now.” Silence followed. “How is my newfound sister doing?”

“Better.”

“That’s good. Being a Leone really didn’t serve her well, did it? No matter though, she was a Leone for a hot second before you snatched her back to the Romero side.”

“She’s still your half sister,” I pointed out. He’d been slowly processing it, but then that was Dante. It took him a while to warm up to people, and that was if he ever managed to.

“Yes, although I get the sense she sees Father when she looks at me.”

“If she does, she’s never said it. Besides, once she gets to know you, she’ll see you’re nothing like him.” For the most part. Cruelty was something we both learned from Angelo.

“Maybe if she’s still on drugs. If they’re out of her system, she’d have to be blind not to see.”

“We all resemble our parents in one way or another,” I told him cautiously. “If she’s accepted me and forgiven me for all the shit I’ve put her through, I know she won’t hold who your father is against you.”

“The girl’s head over heels for you. She’d forgive you for burning down the world.”

“Angelo is Reina’s biological father too, and she knows to hold it against you is to hold it against herself. Trust me, she’s not seeing Father when she sees you, and if she does, it won’t last.”

A heartbeat passed. “Yeah, maybe,” he agreed, then added, “Maybe I’ll kidnap Phoenix and marry her like you did Reina so we won’t have a choice but to be a family.”

“That won’t make Reina like you more. If anything, it’ll piss her off.” I knew he was being purposely insensitive to mask his true feelings on the matter, but it still smarted. It was too soon to joke. “And tone your humor down. It might scare Phoenix.”

“Pfft. Women crave my comedy.”

“In your dreams.”

“There too, but mostly in reality.”

“Well, this woman probably doesn’t.”

“She’ll have to tell me that herself.” I palmed my forehead. I was too old for this shit, and I wasn’t even close to being old. Dante’s humor made me feel that way. “But if it makes you feel better, I promise to handle Phoenix gently.”

“I honestly can’t wait until she puts you in your place. Now stop whining and find her so my wife can be happy.”

“You’re no fun since I learned you’re a Romero,” he muttered under his breath. I shook my head. I was always the more serious one, but I’d always attributed it to my mother’s genes. Maybe it was time to rethink the nature-versus-nurture debate as it related to my fucked-up lineage. “Maybe that’s why Phoenix evades me. Because she thinks like you.”

The door opened and I whipped around. Reina strode into the library barefoot, wearing light pink lingerie with dainty white buttons. Her hair was loose, falling over her shoulders and down her back in wild curls. Her eyes shone with such brightness it could easily blind me.

The peaks of her nipples under the sheer material captured my full attention, and I locked on the sight of her soft curves.

In the past few days, I'd touched every inch of her skin. She still hid her scars—she thought she was being sneaky about it—but I was determined to show her just how beautiful I thought she was.

She'd been sleeping better, but I knew bad nights still came for her. It would take time to completely purge those nightmares from her mind.

“Let me know if you learn anything. I have to go,” I told Dante, ending the call without waiting for his reply.

She stopped in front of me, her bare knees touching mine. “Who was that?”

“Business.”

“Anything on—”

“No, nothing.” I wrapped a hand around her ass and pulled her so she stood between my legs. “You look ready for bed.”

A smile graced her full lips, her hands coming to rest on my shoulders. “Well, I didn't see the point of getting dressed when you're going to strip it all off in an hour anyway.”

“Cinnamon girl, an hour would be a miracle. I don't think I'll make it even five minutes.”

My palms already roamed her thighs, but before I could get to where I really wanted, she gently whacked my wrists. “Don't get ahead of yourself, husband.”

This time a grin overtook my face. “God, I love it when you call me that.”

She shifted so she could straddle my lap, my cock brushing against her entrance. Her breathing visibly hitched and her nipples turned as hard as pebbles, straining against her silky camisole.

“I was thinking...” Her words drifted off as I clamped my teeth around one of her nipples and tugged. She dug her nails into my shoulder as a moan tore from her lips.

“What are you thinking about?” I said, tucking a strand of hair behind her delicate ear. “Me licking your pussy? Or you

riding my dick?”

Her chest thrust into my face. “How am I supposed to think when you’re d-doing... s-saying... th-that.” Another tug on her nipple. Another moan.

“Continue,” I ordered.

“You continue,” she hissed, pushing into me shamelessly, and I couldn’t resist a chuckle. I fucking loved her spirit.

I raised my head, finding lust but also anxiousness in her blue gaze. That stopped me. “What is it?” The urge to protect her and wipe away any uncertainty from her expression flared within me. “Did I hurt you?”

Shaking her head, her curls bounced as she rushed to say, “No, you didn’t.” She pushed her hand in my hair, her fingernails dragging across my scalp lightly.

“I phoned Dante,” I told her softly. Her eyes met mine curiously. “I told him about Phoenix. He’ll know to look for a girl with red hair.”

She took her bottom lip between her teeth. “Should we help him?”

I shook my head. “No, he works best alone. We’ll only be in his way. We’ll continue our honeymoon and he’ll keep us updated.” She nodded reluctantly. “I know you’re worried, but we”—I wagged a finger in the narrow space between our bodies—“we need this. For us. For you.”

I suspected Phoenix had her own path to follow, and for the moment, it didn’t include us. My gut told me she would reach out when and if she needed us.

“You’re right,” she agreed with a sigh, then turned slightly pensive before continuing. “What do you think about Venice being our next destination?”

My brows furrowed. “Venice,” I repeated slowly. I lifted my hands so they rested on her waist. “Why Venice?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It feels like that’s where it all started,” she muttered, and my earlier musings came back to me. Maybe my wife and I were more alike than I thought. “It

was where your mother told mine that Phoenix and I were illegitimate. Mamma's death." The spark in her eyes slowly dimmed. "I know it's odd, but it feels right to go there." She blinked once, twice, and the light slowly returned. "Besides, it's where our first kiss happened. It's where we got married."

I pulled her closer to me, cradling her to my chest. She was right; it did feel like it all started there. "Then to Venice we'll go."

Her fingers trailed over my shoulders, searing my skin. A soft smile curved her lips.

"Just like that?"

"Yes, just like that. Lykos's words have been bugging me. It makes sense to go back to where it all started, and maybe Venice is *it*."

"We can stay at Papà's place." Before I could protest, she quickly added, "Might be some secrets there worth digging up."

"We'll sleep in a hotel or on the yacht," I told her firmly. "But yes, we can snoop around Romero's place."

"You don't think of him as your father, do you?"

I kissed the tip of her nose. "Queen, that ship has sailed." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. Her pain lingered. "I'll forever be grateful to him that he kept you—intentionally or not, I don't care. Angelo would have destroyed you just like he tried to destroy everything else he touched."

"I'm sorry he was such an asshole," she said sadly.

"You made up for it by killing the bastard."

She grimaced. "I don't know if you should be praising me for that."

I pecked her cheek. "I totally should. You deserve a medal."

Her gaze turned melancholic and she looked away, lost in her thoughts. Reina was unlike anyone else I'd known. She was strong but also vulnerable. She'd seen horrors, starting

with witnessing her mother's suicide, yet she still saw the beauty in things. I wanted to keep her that way, a sparkle of light in the dark.

After the rescue, she'd shied away from the world, but even at her lowest, she couldn't keep her eyes off the horizon, watching the sky burst into color every day at sunrise and sunset. It was as if she stopped breathing each time, losing herself in it wholly.

Kind of like how I felt each time I saw her.

“What's the matter, cinnamon girl?”

A smile pulled at the corners of her lips as she met my eyes. “I was thinking about those floating lanterns. You think your grandpa had a romantic date with your grandma in that garden, hence the painting?”

My forehead creased and she jutted her chin to Ojisan's Zen garden with floating lanterns over it that I brought along when we left Jolo. As suspected, my cousin never figured out that a fake hung in his office—correction, my office now. I had already started scrubbing the organization clean of assholes who'd supported my cousin's sick ways.

“That's a romantic notion, but no. It was where my great-great-grandfather was first elected to be the head of all four Yakuza syndicates, and that night his own father decided he'd marry the woman of his choosing.”

“Wow, all in the same day?”

“He didn't believe in wasting time.” Romero's words rushed to the forefront of my mind. My ojisan told him it contained a secret, but what if he literally meant that the legacy of his family was in that painting. Her hand came down to my wrist, tracing the kanji symbol inked there now. “My ojisan was lucky. He got to choose who he married for love.”

Sliding my hands to her ass, I stood up, taking her with me.

“Are we getting freaky?” Heat blossomed in her cheeks and her lids fluttered shut as she wrapped her legs around my waist.

I was tempted to just say *fuck the painting* and take her to our bedroom. Or better yet, bend her over this desk and slide into her tight heat. Except, in the back of my brain, I knew there was something to Ojisan's words.

"Right after I check one thing," I told her, brushing the tip of my nose against hers. "Then it's you and me, my queen. And I have something special in mind."

Her gaze found mine, sparks of desire burning like blue flames, as her fingers intertwined at the base of my neck. "I can't wait."

I set her down on the console table, then unhooked the painting.

"Is this the one you had Raven paint for you?" The curiosity in her voice was unmistakable.

"Not exactly," I told her. "She painted a replica of it."

Reina's eyebrows shot up. "You like it that much, huh?"

I chuckled. "I actually stole the original and left my cousin with the fake."

"Oh."

I planted a kiss on top of her head. "You married a criminal."

She rolled her eyes. "An art thief, apparently." I grinned at the way her eyes shone with delight. "The painting means a lot to you."

It wasn't a question. Reina knew me inside and out. I'd give it another few years before she started to know what I was thinking before I did.

"Yes, it was my ojisan's. Or maybe it was a reminder of something that should have been mine but was snatched from me," I admitted as I turned the painting around. I didn't see anything odd about it. "I'm not sure. But now your papà's words are making me wonder—"

"What?" she asked excitedly. She scrunched her eyebrows as if trying to recall his words. "Wait, what did he say?"

“That the painting holds the secret to Ojisan’s legacy.”

“Well, that’s not vague at all.”

The clock ticked in the background. Our breathing mixed and our hearts drummed in sync. “Forget our parents and grandparents. I want to enjoy you and our honeymoon.”

Her lips curved into a soft smile. “Maybe I can... ummm... dance for you?” Her cheeks turned so crimson that even her blonde strands appeared red. “Spice up our sex life.”

I grinned, all my worries fading away. “Our sex life is spicy enough, but I won’t ever say no to seeing you dance for me.”

I’d never cared much for it until she came along. With her, I’d dance through life with my eyes closed and I’d love every second of it.

REINA

I didn't know what possessed me to suggest it.

It was random, silly, and would likely end in me looking stupid. I'd never done anything of the sort, although I'd read about it plenty in Athena's books. My cheeks were burning, adrenaline rushing through my veins with anticipation of his touch.

"Stand there," Amon said, positioning me over by the small seating area in our bedroom suite. Nerves pricked my skin—the good kind. He hooked his cell up to his sound system. "Radio" by Lana Del Rey filled the room, setting off a romantic mood. "Any song with the word cinnamon is our song."

He lowered himself into one of the chairs before me, spreading his thighs and smirking. "I'm ready whenever you are."

I scoffed softly. "Are you sure? You might have a heart attack."

The truth was I was nervous to let him see the scars. Every time his hands and eyes roamed my body, I feared he'd be disgusted by them. It was difficult to see myself through his eyes.

"I want to take my time drinking in every inch of your beautiful body before I devour you with my fingers, my tongue, and my cock."

I squeezed my legs together, a gush of liquid warmth flooding my panties. I raised my trembling fingers to the hem of my silky lingerie, working each button one at a time until the material dropped soundlessly to the ground.

Heat flared in his eyes, giving me the boost of confidence I needed. His gaze traveled lazily over my breasts. My nipples pebbled behind my sheer pink material and adrenaline sizzled through my veins, flicking a switch inside me.

Moving my body to the sultry beat of the song, I swayed my hips as I leaned forward, offering him a glimpse of my cleavage. Turning around, my hair cascaded down my back as I danced, the music loosening the tension in my muscles.

“Turn around,” he grunted, and I bit my lip as I did what he said.

His dark gaze burned my shoulders, my throat, my hips... *my scars.*

“They don’t repulse you?” I rasped.

“Cinnamon girl, there’s nothing about you that repulses me,” he murmured. “You’re even more beautiful than the first time I saw you. You never cease to take my breath away.” I released a shuddering exhale. “If you need proof...”

He lowered his eyes to his groin and I noticed the bulge in his jeans. I gulped, my heart skipping a beat.

Darting my tongue out to lick my lips, I let the sight of his arousal spur me on.

Amon’s eyes were like silk on my skin. Lowering to my knees, I crawled over to him, then placed my hands on his thighs to shimmy myself into a kneeling position. My hands trembled as I worked the buttons of his jeans. The outline of his long hard cock had me shuddering with excitement.

The best part: panic was nowhere to be found.

My eyes were glued to his groin, his black boxers veiling the outline of his cock. As if he could sense my uncertainty, he slipped his hand beneath the hem of his boxers and started stroking himself.

My lips parted and my insides liquified, orbiting me into an oasis filled with lust and desire. I leaned just far enough to let his cock brush against my soft breasts as he jerked himself off.

“Fuck, I want you so much,” he groaned, his eyes glued to my chest.

Liquid lust coiled in the pit of my belly. Sultry notes bounced off the wall, giving way to another, slower song. His cock came between my breasts and I leaned even closer, pushing them together.

“Fuck,” he hissed as he reached out, his fingers brushing against my sensitive nipples. One pump. Two pumps. “Sit on my lap. I want to taste you.”

He could easily yank me off my knees and set me on his lap, but I loved that he was giving me a choice. I rose to my feet and slid a leg on either side of his thighs, straddling him as requested. His tongue darted out, licking one of my nipples, and my pussy throbbed in response.

I pushed my own hand into my panties. As he concentrated his attention on my nipples, sucking and tugging on my taut peaks with his teeth and hot tongue, I rubbed my clit faster and harder. My skin was on fire.

Locking eyes with him, I breathed, “I need you inside me.”

Not wasting any time, he stood and slid my panties down my thighs, his knuckles brushing against my scars.

“Never again, cinnamon girl,” he rasped roughly, tenderly caressing one of the scars on my thigh. “If you’re in pain, you come to me.”

I swallowed hard and nodded. “I’ll come to you,” I vowed, kicking the panties off my feet.

He lowered down onto his knees and gripped my hips, pulling me closer. He buried his face in my bare pussy and a loud moan escaped my lips.

He parted my pussy lips with his thumbs, exposing me to him, and then to my shock, he inhaled deeply.

My hands on his shoulders, I curled my fingers into him. “You taste just like cinnamon,” he said, keeping me open as his tongue licked a line up and down my entrance. “Like my wife.”

A shudder rolled down my spine.

“Oh my God. Amon,” I whimpered, my pussy quivering with need. “Please.”

Pulsing and clenching with throbbing desire, he plunged his tongue inside my tight inner walls and murmured against my core, “So fucking sexy.”

I gasped, gripping his shoulders tighter as he ravished me with his tongue. My eyes fluttered shut and my hips ground against him. The noises he made, like I was the most delicious dessert he’d ever had, vibrated through me, raising me higher and higher.

Then, without warning, he pulled away. I let out a frustrated cry.

“We don’t have to rush,” he said, standing and removing his jeans, sweater, and T-shirt. “We have all night. The rest of our lives.”

I soaked every glorious inch of him in. He’d always been beautiful, but he was even more ripped than I remembered. Broad chest, six-pack abs... my mouth watered. Even his biceps were bulkier.

I dragged my gaze from his body to his face. Roughly, he grabbed the nape of my neck, pulling my mouth to his for a soul-crushing kiss that stole the breath from my lungs.

I pressed myself against him, rubbing against his erection and clawing at the tight flesh on his back. He sucked on my lower lip while effortlessly setting the rest of my body on fire. Amon was the only one who could quench the flames of my desire.

“I want to bury my cock so deep inside you.”

“Please,” I panted, arching my neck to grant him easier access as he sucked on my sensitive skin. He was as tender as

he was possessive with his touch. “Please, Amon. Don’t make me wait,” I whimpered.

He slapped my ass, drawing a yelp from me.

“No rushing.” He wrapped my curls around one of his palms, tilting my head back a little. “And no begging. My queen never begs.”

His lips brushed against mine softly.

“Get on the bed, on all fours.”

I raced across the room despite his instructions not to rush. He moved around behind me and then I heard shuffling as he was pulling things out of a drawer.

My pussy clenched, and when the bed dipped behind me, a moan slipped between my lips, desperate to feel his cock inside me.

He came up behind me, his mouth against my ear, and said, “Sit up.” I leaned back against his chest, eager to please. “Trust me?” he whispered, his warm breath fanning the side of my cheek.

“Yes,” I rasped.

He slipped a blindfold down over my eyes, and my heart skipped a beat.

“Still good?” I nodded, and he pulled my hands behind my back. “I’m going to bind your hands with a silk tie, but I won’t tighten it.” I nodded again as butterflies swarmed wildly in my stomach. My rapid breathing and his steady breaths were the only sounds in the room, the music only a faint whisper across the hall now. “Is that okay?” he asked.

“It’s fine.” My chest rose and fell, my breaths coming out as pants.

The bed shifted and I sensed Amon’s presence. Heat rolled off his body in waves, changing the chemistry in the room.

“Open your mouth, wife,” he commanded, and I obeyed without question. “Suck.” He shoved his throbbing cock between my lips.

He squeezed my shoulder gently but firmly in a way that assured me he had me, that I was safe. He thrust into my mouth and I let my jaw go slack as I accommodated the weight of his arousal, working him over with my lips and tongue.

“Fuck,” he muttered, pulling his cock from my mouth.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, love. Gonna come,” he grunted, smoothing a hand over my hair.

“Oh, okay. That was fast.”

A dark chuckle filled the space. “I can’t decide whether to punish you or reward you for that. Months without you will do that to me.” My lips curved into a smile, and I thought I heard him inhale a sharp breath. “I missed your smiles.”

The vulnerability in his voice felt like a dagger ripping my chest. “I missed *you*,” I whispered, so low that I worried he didn’t hear me.

“I know.” Deep feelings bounced off the walls and ping-ponged between us, heightened by my lack of sight. “Lie down.”

My face lowered to the comforter and he crawled up to reach me, parting my legs wider. I felt my desire drip from my pussy and trickle down my thighs, but I couldn’t find it in me to hide from him. Not anymore.

He slid a finger inside me, and I cried out as my walls clenched around him.

“You are so fucking wet.” A shudder rippled down my body, so strong that it had my teeth chattering. “Is this for me?”

“Yes, Amon, I need more.” Lying flat on my stomach, I wiggled my ass. “Please.” He spanked me again and I muffled my scream in the comforter.

“No begging, my queen,” he purred, rubbing my ass with his large, warm palm. This time I just moaned, pushing against his hand. “Good girl.”

He pressed a soft kiss to each cheek before diving into my pussy and plundering my channel with his skillful tongue.

Moans and whimpers fell from my lips. Stars spun beneath the blindfold and sensation spiraled as he devoured me in his all-consuming way.

His fingers came around to the front of my pussy, reaching for my clit, and he rubbed it in sync with the thrusts of his tongue.

My climax built fast, and before I could fully understand what was happening, I shattered into pieces, soaring high as the most intense orgasm I'd ever experienced racked my body. I was a quivering mess, and I didn't want to ever come back to earth.

"Fuck, Reina. You're my life, my stars, my moon," he rasped before slamming inside me. His hands gripped my hips. We both stilled, my walls clenching around his length. "I'm nothing without you."

After that, all I could do was hold on for the ride as he pistoned into me like a madman. His cock stroked my inner walls as he rammed in and out of me, his fingers digging into my thighs as he pulled my ass higher, spreading my legs a little wider, giving himself better access.

Another orgasm built as he worked my body thoroughly. Suddenly, the silk tie was slipping off my wrists, followed by the blindfold. He flipped me over, stretching my thighs wide as he climbed over me.

Propping himself up on his hands, he bracketed his forearms on either side of my head, crashing his lips to mine as he slid his erection back inside me. "I want to see your face when I come."

"I love you," I whispered in his ear, wrapping my legs around his waist and pulling him in.

"I love you too. So fucking much."

We kissed and touched and bit and licked like two horny teenagers. We climbed higher and higher together. His grunts. My moans. Our whispers of love.

“Come for me again, cinnamon girl. I need you to do that for me,” he demanded, pinching my clit hard as he rocked into me. Sweat rolled down his strong chest, gathering at the V of his waist. My hair was a tangled mess as I arched my back. Amon pinched my clit again, and I screamed as my release hit me with full force.

I clung to him for dear life, my pussy walls gripping his cock. Amon wasn't far behind as he shouted out his release and came inside me.

He collapsed on the bed next to me, instantly pulling me into an embrace.

“You and me. Together.”

“Forever,” I murmured, peppering kisses against his strong chest. “I love connecting with you like this,” I admitted. “I didn't realize how much I missed it.”

He grinned devilishly. “Good, because we're nowhere near finished.”

He rolled me over onto my back, and I could feel his cock hardening as his smirk promised a long, satisfying night.

REINA

We were almost in Venice.

No updates on Phoenix. If I thought too long about all the dangers that might be lurking around her, it threatened to pull me under. But I held enough faith and trust in Dante that he'd find her and protect her. Why? I had no idea, considering what Phoenix had shared about her history with him, except that I felt in my gut that Dante would never physically hurt her. Phoenix wasn't the type to forgive and forget, and I knew she'd stand her ground against him too.

The journey back to the city on the water was like déjà vu. It was only a few months ago that we were docking the yacht in here and I was putting on a wedding gown.

This time, I stood in Amon's office wearing a white Valentino dress with wide pink straps and matching pink flats, admiring the city's skyline.

Amon was on the phone with someone, his eyes locked on the painting. He kept turning it over, left and right, up and down, hoping for something to jump out at him. I felt his disappointment as if it were my own.

My phone buzzed. *Unknown Number.*

My brows scrunched as I slid it open.

It's Dante. Your shiny new brother.

I really didn't know how I felt about the man. Before I could come up with a response, another message came

through.

Found your sister. She's safe and sound. We're eloping. Tell Amon I'm taking a page out of his book. Sayonara.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

I started typing vigorously.

Call me.

I tapped my foot impatiently. Nothing.

Now!

Still nothing.

I whirled around and put my hands on my hips. "Have you heard from your brother?"

Amon's expression darkened and he gripped his phone tighter. "Let me call you later. Something's come up." He hung up without waiting for an answer. Must be nice to be king. "What's wrong?"

I strode over to him, waving my phone in the air like it would project his message. "He texted me that he found Phoenix."

Amon's eyebrow shot up. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"Did you know?"

He shook his head. "I haven't heard from him since Greece."

My temper boiled, making my cheeks warm. "He texted me and now he won't reply."

"Tell me what it says," he ordered.

"He's taking a page out of your book and he's eloping. Then he said 'sayonara.'"

He let out an exasperated breath. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

“Papà’s going to kill him,” I gritted. “And I’m going to help him.”

He stood up and came around the desk, pulling me into him. “How about we let Dante and Phoenix figure out what they’re doing, huh?”

“But—”

“Has she sent you a message asking for help?” I shook my head. “Then let those two figure it out.”

“But... ugh. Amon, he already broke her heart once.” He tilted his head, waiting for me to elaborate. “I didn’t know about it until three years ago. She still won’t talk about it, but your brother hurt her.”

“He hit her?” His tone turned sharp.

“Oh, no. Not that. She said they had something going on and then he pretended not to know her.”

He stiffened. “When did that happen?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured. “She can barely talk about it, but I’m telling you. She hates him; she wouldn’t marry him. Not willingly, anyhow.”

He reached for his own cell phone and dialed his brother. Nothing. He did it again. “Goddammit, Dante,” he gritted. Then he started typing fast, his graceful fingers moving across the screen. It took a minute, maybe two, and he let out a frustrated growl. “Fuck, he’s gone dark. I have no way of tracking him.”

“We’re going to kill him,” I spat, then hesitated. “Right? I know he’s your brother, but he can’t get away with this.” My hesitation evaporated and chaotic emotions swirled through me instead. “Yes, we have to kill him.”

Amon let out a chuckle. “Actually, he’s your brother, and no, we won’t kill him. Trust me, Phoenix would have reached out. Maybe it can be their second chance, like how we got ours.”

My mind buzzed with the reminder of the pain I saw on my sister’s face, sending goosebumps erupting over my body.

“I don’t like it, Amon. Besides, I think we’re on our third chance.”

He smiled. “Only because people keep meddling.” He tightened his arms around me, his scent clashing with mine. “Five years ago, Dante was kidnapped.”

I gasped. “What?”

“To this day, we don’t know who did it, but when I finally paid the ransom, he came back... different. He was darker, needed an outlet for his anger—”

“What?” I screeched. “And you think it’s safe to leave Phoenix with him?”

Amon ignored my question. “The torture he endured resulted in a form of amnesia. He still doesn’t remember certain things from our childhood, but the weeks and months surrounding the kidnapping is a blank canvas. It’s like it was wiped from his mind.”

Understanding dawned on me.

Dante really didn’t remember her. Jesus Christ. How many men, women, and children in the underworld had suffered? Somehow it seemed like the answer was every single one.

“So you saved him too,” I murmured.

He shook his head. “I should have worked faster. Angelo Leone refused to strike a deal, letting them torture him within an inch of his life.”

“So it was all about money?” I asked incredulously.

“That’s what they asked for.” He looked away. “It never made sense why Angelo refused to pay it or even disclose it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. How could a father not pay his own child’s ransom?

My eyes landed on the painting, still sitting on the desk, facing down. An idea struck.

“You know,” I started. “Raven told me once that artists like to add information about their work in the backs of their paintings. She said *some* painters, dating all the way back to

the Renaissance, even liked to pass on sensitive information through the art world in this way.” I picked up the painting. “May I?”

“Be my guest.”

I ran my finger along the seams, bringing my face right up to it, and studied it with a keen eye. “Of course, she could have been blowing smoke up my ass,” I muttered, but just then, I heard a soft click, and a secret compartment in the frame was revealed.

“Good girl,” Amon praised as I handed it back.

“I guess Raven wasn’t totally blowing smoke.”

He grinned, his smile blinding me. “You have good friends.”

I smiled. “I do. I miss them. All of us together.”

“I haven’t forgotten that I promised you a party to celebrate with our friends and family.” He kissed my forehead, his lips warm against my skin. “I intend to honor that.”

I watched him unfold the yellowed paper, my curiosity piqued.

“Well, that’s not fair. I can’t read Japanese.” Although, judging by the tension lining his jaw, the message wasn’t good. I rested my palm against his shoulder blade, worried for him. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m going to murder them with my own bare hands,” he gritted, stormy clouds raging in the darkness of his galaxies.

AMON

Betrayal.

It tasted sour on my tongue. It was pure rage that shook through me though. It drove the need to spill blood and tear the enemy limb from limb. And while I walked the streets of Venice, I knew exactly how I'd make them pay.

Perez Cortes's torture would be mild compared to theirs.

My thirst for violence was almost debilitating. Each step I took fueled me. It wasn't until now that I realized this—I'd hoped something would save my mother's soul. Or that the woman I thought I knew and who birthed me would come through.

Now, the only way to keep my wife permanently out of their reach would be to end them.

So I'd channeled these feelings that threatened to explode and focused on what mattered. The woman by my side. If it weren't for her, I would be halfway across the world.

Hiroshi. Hana—my own fucking mother.

Oh, the plans I had for them.

Reina's stare cut into my murderous internal rambling.

"I'm worried about you," she finally broke the silence.

I squeezed her hand gently. "Don't be. When this is all over, we'll never have to think of them again."

She let out a heavy sigh, probably seeing more than I wanted her to. I didn't want to keep secrets from her, but I also

didn't want to implicate her. She'd been through so much and had earned the right to some peace.

"I know that," she murmured, returning her eyes to the crowd of tourists. Did she realize she scanned each person, searching for threats? "But you have that look in your eyes I know all too well. Rage that feels like fire, and hate that can make you blind."

Despite everything, I let out a chuckle. "My clever wife."

Her lips curved into a smile. "Not always, but I'm a quick study."

"That you are."

"Don't be rash, okay?" I gave her a questioning look. I wasn't exactly known to be rash. "It's just something Papà said. He asked me to help you see things clearly and not jump to conclusions. I feel like this is what he was talking about."

I didn't know whether to think Romero was wiser than I ever gave him credit for or—

Fuck, maybe even *he* knew about this fucking letter. Inwardly, I shook my head. If he did, he wouldn't be giving the benefit of the doubt to my mother.

Reina bumped her shoulder against mine, except she only reached my bicep. "So will you finally tell me what that letter says?" Her eyes caught on the shop's façade and her eyes lit up, so I followed her gaze.

"I'll tell you after we get that," I told her. There, through the shop window, was a yin-yang charm.

She let out a soft groan. "You can't buy me everything I look at."

I grinned. "Yes, I can."

"You know, I have my own money too. And now that I'm married, I have access to all of it and can buy stuff for myself."

"Spend my money, leave your money for our kids." I nudged her into the jewelry store, signaling the salesman for

the piece we wanted. “Besides, I like seeing you marked by me.”

Her hand flew to her neck where I left a bruising mark last night. She flushed so beautifully that my dick instantly responded. Nothing like going from furious to aroused. Snaking my hand around her waist, I pulled her closer to me and nipped her earlobe.

“Your blushing makes me so hard.”

Her cheeks turned crimson and she lightly punched my shoulder. “Stop it.”

Ten minutes later, we were out of the jewelry shop with a new charm on Reina’s bracelet.

“Don’t think I forgot about it,” she said the moment the store door closed behind us, her pink flats silent against the Istrian decorative stone. The streets of Venice were always filled with mystery. The city even gave the impression of floating on water, inviting tourists from all around the world to admire the impossible for centuries.

The note from my grandfather was another one of those impossibilities.

“Tell me what it says,” she pleaded. “I want to help you.”

My chest tightened. I didn’t know why in the fuck I was shocked. I’d been sure of their betrayal. All the evidence pointed to it.

“It states that if my mother marries a Japanese man, he would be eligible to become the head of the Yakuza, but only if the Takahashi line doesn’t have an heir. That means that my right-hand man and my mother set us up. They almost cost you your life.”

“Don’t discount your life,” she murmured pensively, eyes narrowed. “And your cousin? How did he play into it?”

“Itsuki was probably too dumb to realize he was being used. Or maybe too desperate.” He was never bright. “It doesn’t matter. He’s dead and will never be a threat to you or anyone else again.”

“Hmmm.” Her footsteps halted and she turned to face me. “Then why hasn’t Hiroshi married her already?” She tilted her head. “Unless he has and that’s the reason for the attack.”

I finally saw where she was going with it. “Hiroshi doesn’t know that your papà and my mother are legally still married.” My brows furrowed. “Why wouldn’t she tell him?”

After all, it was my mother who ensured that annulment never went through.

I pulled out my phone and shot a message to Illias Konstantin. He’d be able to get an answer quickly.

She wrapped her hands around my waist. “Don’t crucify her just yet. I don’t like your mother and I’ll never forgive her for hurting my family, but she values *you* too much to harm your status. She only hates me, Mamma, and my family. Not you.” It was my turn to be confused. “I remembered something that happened right before Mamma killed herself.”

“What was that?” I said, my heart pounding all of a sudden.

“Mamma, Phoenix, and I were shopping and your mother showed up. She told Mamma both her daughters are illegitimate bastards and we’d be in danger one day.” She pressed her face into my chest, a shiver rolling down her spine. “I still don’t understand how I could’ve forgotten something so important. It all came back to me when I was... taken.” *Who in the fuck is my mother?* I wondered if everything I thought I knew about her was a lie. She had done so many wrongs. “My mamma killed herself that night.”

I hugged her tight, offering comfort that wouldn’t be necessary if my mother had been a decent person. So not only did she put a hit on Romero’s attorney, but she also drove Reina’s mother to suicide.

“I’m so sorry, cinnamon girl. About so fucking much.” No wonder she battled panic attacks, and that was before all the shit with Cortes. “Your subconscious probably forced you to forget.” I cupped her cheeks and brought my forehead down to hers. “I promise she won’t get away with it.”

She loosed a heavy sigh. “I didn’t tell you this to punish her. Just hear her out, okay? I don’t want you to live out the rest of your life with regret. She is your mother, and I think she loves you. If Papà’s convinced that she’d protect you with her life, there has to be more to it.”

She inhaled a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. Just the way Dr. Freud taught her.

“How are you so calm?” I questioned, eyeing her with worry.

“All my conversations with the doctor helped, despite my initial resistance. Years of therapy and yoga didn’t scratch the surface on the methods that Dr. Freud used. Or maybe it’s all a process of moving on.” She took a deep breath in, then exhaled slowly again. “Hana’s name still causes havoc in my chest, but I also recognize that I cannot give her more power. Like Dr. Freud said, I have two choices. I can move on and hold all the power, or dwell on the past, letting Hana and ghosts keep their grip on me.” Then she smiled shyly, her cheeks turning rosy. “Plus it helps that I’m happy and the honeymoon has been amazing.”

“My smart, beautiful, far-too-kind wife.”

My phone buzzed and I flicked a glance at the screen.

“What is it?” Reina asked.

“It’s a message from Illias Konstantin. He said that Hiroshi married my mother the day before the attack on us.” The confirmation only left me more confused. “It makes no fucking sense why she’d marry him, knowing she was *already* married.”

Reina hummed at that. “Maybe she had a good reason for it and was trying to protect you.” I hated that a part of me wanted to agree, to find an excuse for her inexcusable betrayal. “We have to keep an open mind,” she rasped. “I love you. I want our future to be free of this hell. No ghosts chasing us.” There were days I still couldn’t believe she was mine—body, heart, and soul. “Now, buy me a gelato, husband, before

your wife's wrath descends." I tipped my head, a laugh working its way from my throat.

"God, I love your laugh," she said, catching me off guard.

"Life with you is worth smiling and laughing about," I told her, heading toward the square of San Marco. "Now let's go get you a gelato. I know what flavor I'm getting."

She side-eyed me. "I don't know if they have a cinnamon flavor."

I smiled. "They will. I found a little local shop that happened to be experimenting with the flavor. He called the flavor *disgustoso*, but I made a deal with them. I bought every scoop and every flavor of their ice cream on hand today so they'll keep the shop open only for us. I'm having a date with my queen."

Her eyes shimmered. "I love you more and more each day."

A chuckle left me. "Good, because we're in this for life and I'm never letting you go."

But in the back of my mind, I could feel the darkening clouds and taste the impending storm in the air.

REINA

Our gondola floated along the water, sending ripples across the canal. Silver moonlight battled with the heavy clouds, and the usually busy and vibrant city was emptier tonight thanks to the light drizzle.

The gondolier rowed us through the canals while he hummed a soft song, filling the air and my chest with contentment.

I had succumbed to the darkness and disappeared during those weeks in captivity and the ones that followed, but Amon had managed to pull me out and show me what it was to live again.

Amon's hand wrapped around me, the yin and yang bracelet from years ago still around his wrist. Then his tattoo. The same symbol that hung around my neck. I traced it with my fingers. My throat tightened, and I felt my eyes mist—whether from joy or sadness, I wasn't sure.

“What's on your mind?” Amon's voice was a warm whisper against my forehead.

I turned to look at him. The boy I fell in love with. Raising my left hand, I cupped his face. So much hurt and disappointment, but also love and gratitude. The latter two outweighed anything else.

From the very first moment I met him, I belonged to him.

“You. Us. Everything.” I tilted my head to the sky. There was no need to fight the darkness. It was a part of us. “I hope I

never forget,” I rasped.

“Forget what?”

I smiled. “I don’t want to forget a single moment with you. You make my life more beautiful than I could’ve ever hoped. Thank you for not... giving up on me.”

His lips found mine. “I’m not a perfect man, cinnamon girl, but I’ve always been yours. You’re my sun, my moon, and my tides.”

Just as he uttered those words, lights filled the sky despite the drizzle, and I turned to look at it. A soft gasp escaped my lips. Thousands of lanterns floated over Venice. The backs of my eyes burned and my chest expanded with love for this man.

“You and me against the world,” he murmured.

“Together.”

Our happily ever after was within our grasp, and I’d be damned if I let anyone snatch it from me.

If only I could share it with my sister.

Amon’s and my phones buzzed at the same time with a message from Dante. We shared a fleeting glance before opening the text. Two photos—a marriage license and Phoenix’s smiling face.

“She colored her hair,” I remarked, unable to think of anything else to say. Yes, Dante had messaged they were eloping, but somehow it didn’t sink in. Or maybe I thought it was an empty threat. Phoenix wouldn’t have forgiven him that easily.

“She looks happy,” Amon noted, staring at the same photo.

I turned my head to meet his eyes. “She does,” I acknowledged. There was a spark in her eyes that I hadn’t seen in... well, in a long time. “Maybe everything will work out after all.”

“It will.” There wasn’t an ounce of doubt in Amon’s voice, and I believed him.

Because my husband would make it so.



We'd been in Venice for three days when we both agreed we couldn't avoid it anymore.

We had explored every corner, church, and street. We should have gone to Papà's place first thing, but instead we opted to enjoy our honeymoon for just a bit longer.

Now, as Amon punched in the code on the sleek device that looked odd against the centuries-old door, I was on edge.

This place was home, yet it wasn't. There was too much death surrounding it.

The sensation that danger was imminent had been with me ever since Amon read that note, and if the armed men lingering in the shadows everywhere we went were any indication, my husband felt the same way.

We entered the villa with a loud creak of the door. It was the middle of the day, but darkness bled out of the foyer.

"That's odd," I whispered, not even sure why I was keeping my voice low. The blackness swallowed us whole as the door shut behind us, and I reached in front of me, gripping the hem of Amon's shirt.

Amon glanced over his shoulder. "What is it?"

"Every curtain is drawn. Maria hated closing them. She said it made the place feel like a crypt, and I think I agree."

"Where is she?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. She has family around, so maybe she's visiting them." He turned the knob to the first enclosed room that led to a dark office. Papà's office. "Should I open them?"

"It's your house."

I rolled my eyes. “Ours. Probably more yours than mine, considering you’re his biological son.”

“Cinnamon girl?”

“Yes?”

“It’s probably best we don’t talk about your papà being my papà to anyone.”

I choked out a laugh, tension seeping out of my shoulders. “You don’t think people would understand?” I teased.

“They’ll assume. And then the morality police will come after us,” he mused.

He kept alert, and at each new window, he reached above me and helped me open the curtains.

The kitchen was drenched in darkness as well, but something felt off about it. I couldn’t quite pinpoint it. We opened the large French door that had built-in shutters, letting the fresh air and sunlight in.

My eyes roamed over the kitchen. It almost looked like it had been used recently. A cutting board with a knife resting on it. A dish rag thrown carelessly on the counter.

Someone’s here, my mind warned. Yet, it was as quiet as a midweek church service. I let my gaze trail over the rest of the kitchen.

There were two empty pots on the burner. A teapot.

Papà didn’t drink tea. He could force it down, but he hated it. Maria, like a true Italian, only drank espresso or cappuccino.

I shook my head in dismissal. Maybe she left in a hurry...

Maybe Maria had guests, I speculated. After all, Papà’s housekeeper surely had a life and friends outside of her job. Since she always took care of him, it’d make sense she brought her friends here every now and again.

I headed to another door, Amon right behind me. We emerged from the kitchen and started toward the grand staircase.

“I never would’ve predicted we’d find ourselves back in Venice. Or that you’d be such a wonderful and amazing husband,” I teased as we made our way up the stairs. “Life works in mysterious ways, doesn’t it?”

He smacked my butt lightly. “It sure does.”

“And wherever I go, I don’t have to worry about snakes, because you’ll keep them away.” His soft chuckle traveled through the empty house. “Maybe we should settle here.”

But the moment the words left, my steps faltered. We were in front of my mamma’s room.

“Should we leave that one as is?” Amon asked gently.

I shook my head. “No, let’s air it out.”

The moment I pushed the door open, the chill coerced the goosebumps to rise across my flesh, making every hair on my body stand on end.

Amon’s hand came around my waist and I leaned into him, his heat and strength at my back a comfort that chased the ghosts away. We passed the outline of the bed and reached the window.

Another curtain opened. Light poured in as if promising a new beginning. I drifted through the room, my fingers tracing the furniture my mamma once used. Her hairbrush. Her nightgown. I froze as I turned to face the bed and nightstand.

“Those are not her sheets,” I murmured, shaking my head.

“What?”

I faced Amon, meeting his questioning gaze. “Those are not the same sheets and blankets that were there when I visited last. Papà insists on washing and keeping the same sheets on this bed, just like he insists we keep guns hidden around the house.” Amon’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and I waved my hand in dismissal. “It’s beside the point. What matters is nobody ever stays in this room. He forbids it.”

His shoulders tensed and alert marred his expression. He shoved me behind him and pulled out a gun from the back of his jeans.

“Someone’s here,” he said, echoing my earlier thoughts. “Stay behind me.” I nodded just as a shuffling sound came from downstairs. He froze, then glanced back at me. “Did we cover every inch?”

“Yes,” I whispered, but then a thought occurred to me. “Except one place.”

“Guide me to it,” he ordered, the gun firmly in his grip. I went to sidestep him but he blocked my way. “With your words, cinnamon girl. You stay behind me.”

I let out a frustrated breath. “You had two bullets in you, Amon,” I hissed. “You won’t survive a third.”

“I won’t survive if my wife gets shot,” he retorted wryly. “Stay behind me and tell me where to go.”

“I won’t survive if you get killed,” I snapped back, keeping my voice low while following him. “Ever think of that? I got a taste of it, and it almost destroyed me.”

His movements paused, then he turned my way and kissed me. “I won’t die. I promise.”

“You better keep that promise,” I murmured against his lips, breaking away only to keep moving. We cut a path as one through the hallway, down the stairs, and into the living room. It was massive, with a few sofas and a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall above the fireplace, frozen on the image of some serene beach.

Amon pressed his finger against his mouth, the universal sign for quiet. I nodded, then pointed to the spot I remembered from all those years ago. The one that Papà made us hide in.

My fingers trailed over the redbrick fireplace, looking for the spot that would open it.

I finally felt the little button. I flicked a glance over my shoulder and Amon caught it.

“Open it and then take cover,” he mouthed. I nodded, knowing full well arguing with him would get me nowhere. I pushed it and the wall with the fireplace shifted.

One heartbeat. Two. On the third, all hell broke loose.

Bang. Amon pulled the trigger, his gun aimed at a person I couldn't see, then sprang into action. He rushed into the hiding spot. I took cover just in time as a knife flew through the air. I narrowly dodged it, my breathing heavy.

I crawled to the spot where it landed and hid behind the couch, the cool metal handle biting into my palm. I peeked around and my lips parted as I stared at the three people behind him.

Hiroshi, Hana, and... Maria?

AMON

“Get out,” I growled. Out of all the places on this planet, I never thought we’d find them *here*. In Romero’s home. “Now.”

My mother was as pale as a ghost. The second woman, whom I didn’t recognize, stared at me, pouty with displeasure. And then there was my right-hand man.

Hiroshi’s arm hung limp, blood spurting out of it like a waterfall. *Good*. He should bleed like a fucking pig. I patted him down and found no weapons.

“Any guards?” Reina called out.

“Just these fuckers,” I spat. “Hiding like cowards.” I locked my eyes on the woman hanging on to my mother’s hand like she was her salvation. So fucking wrong. My mother only ever managed to leave a trail of destruction in her wake. “I have no fucking idea who you are, but you get out too.”

“That’s M-Maria,” murmured Reina. She was standing now, but kept her distance. Fuck, I wished she was hidden away. I didn’t want her anywhere near these people. “She works for Papà.” Reina’s voice came from my side now and I groaned.

“Cinnamon girl, I told you to take cover.”

“I did, but now I’m here. What queen cowers, anyhow?” My eyes were locked on Hiroshi. He was the bigger threat. “Don’t you think that’s odd?”

“What?”

“That there are no guards.”

“I might if my cousin were still the head of the Yakuza.” Her gaze flitted between my mother and Maria. “But the moment any guard supporting Hiroshi and Mother learned I was elected as the head of the Yakuza, they dispersed like chickens. Didn’t they?”

No answer. Not that I expected anything to come out of Hiroshi’s traitorous lips. I wondered how long he had before that arm bled him dry.

“You’ve been playing me and Itsuki all along.” I locked my eyes on him, noting clenching of his jaw. “Did he even kill Ojisan?”

“He did.” He grinned. “With a little help.”

I ground my molars, fighting the urge to empty the magazine into his skull. “It didn’t all go according to plan, did it? You fucking snake.”

“You’re an annoying little shit,” Hiroshi grunted.

“Like I give a fuck,” I deadpanned.

His gaze turned to my wife when he spoke his next words. “And this one just fucking refuses to die.”

“Hiroshi!” My mother’s acting was up to par. She looked and sounded astonished.

I took a step, my grip tight on my gun, but my wife’s fingers wrapped around my wrist, shaking her head.

“Answers first,” she whispered, then turned her attention back to the three individuals who should have been behind us, supporting us, not stabbing us in the back. “Maria, what are you doing here?” Reina sounded more disappointed than I’d ever heard her. “Why did you let them in?”

Her face contorted into a menacing grimace and her lips curled.

“I *hated* your mother. Selfish prima donna,” she spat. “She thought the world revolved around her yet all she did was destroy it.” *Huh?* There had to be a language barrier. I wasn’t

quite following, and judging by Reina's expression, neither was she. Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away. "She didn't deserve Tomaso." Okay, if Maria announced she loved Romero, shit was about to get awkward. You'd think he was some kind of casanova of Venice. "She took Hana away from me."

Confusion rushed through me. *Wait? What? Did she mean Hana, my mother?*

Reina glanced at my mother, then at me. I shrugged, not understanding the woman I'd never seen before. "Who took Hana away from you?"

"Your mother," she screamed. "Aren't you listening?"

"B-but how?" Reina was starting to sway on her feet, her face turning red. This all had to be overwhelming, no matter how far she'd come in her recovery. I took a step closer as she continued. "I don't understand."

"Your mother broke the Romero family apart," she screeched. "Before her, things were perfect. Then Grace swooped in, snatching Tomaso for herself and taking Hana away from me."

I let my eyes wander over to my mother, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say she'd rather have been anywhere else than here right now. Shifting back and forth on her legs, she didn't look to be doing much better than my wife.

"I'm assuming you led her on to get what you wanted?" I gritted, starting to see my mother's manipulation.

"It's not her fault," Maria protested loudly, clearly delusional.

"You came to California with us." Reina still couldn't believe the betrayal. "You cared for us, watched movies with us, even brought us food to the boarding school."

"So I could keep an eye on you," she sneered. She turned her gaze to my mother, and it transformed to something entirely different. The understanding flowed through me. Maria, Romero's housekeeper, was in love with my mother. This was getting weirder by the second. "For Hana."

“I thought of you like a mother,” Reina hissed. “And here you were, a two-timing villain.”

Maria took a step forward and I trained my gun on her. “Don’t even think about it.” She halted. “Good, now the three of you will go sit down on that couch. Together, like the sleazy, sick *family* that you are, and then we’ll have a talk.”

“I’m not telling you anything,” Hiroshi hissed in Japanese.

I didn’t even hesitate, aiming for his foot and shooting a bullet through it. His scream pierced the air and could probably be heard all the way across the canal and into the heart of Venice.

“You will tell me everything.” My voice was calm, doing nothing to reveal the turmoil and rage I felt at his betrayal. My mother’s betrayal. “And you’ll tell me in English so my wife can understand every fucking word.”

He opened his mouth and I squeezed, applying pressure on the trigger. “Go ahead, it would make my fucking day.”

“Stop it, Hiroshi.” Ah, so it would seem my mother did have a voice, despite not saying the words she should’ve. *I’m sorry for almost killing the love of your life. I’m sorry for all the lies I told. I’m sorry for almost destroying something beautiful.*

No, it was to stop Hiroshi from blabbing.

The three of them hobbled to the couch together, my mother and Maria helping Hiroshi walk and trailing blood all over Romero’s living room floor.

I wrapped my hand around Reina’s waist while still holding the gun with my other hand. “Should we call your guards?” she muttered under her breath.

“They’re on the way.”

The two of us made our way slowly over to the couch just as the door opened and two of my men and the captain of my yacht, Asher, appeared.

My eyebrows shot to my hairline noting Asher’s clothing choice. He wore a designer shirt and trousers. His hair was

styled almost as if he were in the middle of a date and got interrupted.

His features were sharp and he was highly professional, but it was his reputation as a killer as well as his past experience in piracy that made him stand out among other applicants for the position. I knew the ladies liked him, although he never brought them around. But regardless of where we docked, he always seemed to find himself either in a woman's bed or in a gunfight.

“Asher, good to see you,” I greeted him.

He rolled his eyes. “Wish I could say the same. You interrupted my date.”

Ten points to me for guessing correctly.

“Sorry.” Granted, I didn't sound sorry. “Did you happen to bring rope?”

Asher shot me a dry look. “Yeah, I go on my dates carrying rope. That always reassures women of my good intentions.”

It was almost comical to see everyone following our exchange. Except, maybe not, considering my mother was just found hiding in Romero's home.

I let out an exaggerated breath. “Well, do you have anything?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. Leather-padded handcuffs that no police force would *ever* use. Interesting that he drew a line at rope, and yet... “This is all I have. I guess you're going to have to shoot them.”

“Can you have the guys handle the *carabinieri*? We don't need them busting up this shit show and interrupting my honeymoon.”

Asher's left brow twitched. “'Cause these three are totally not interrupting your honeymoon.”

Ignoring him, I jutted my chin toward the secret compartment behind the fireplace. “When I'm done, I'll stash

them in there.”

He gave me a *whatever you say, boss* face and pulled his phone from his pocket. It was a miracle Asher and Dante didn't get along better. They were the same. “I'll be right outside if you need me.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I'm guessing there'll be some bodies to bury.”

“You guessed right. Also, have one of the guards shut the windows and outside shutters on the first floor. I don't want collateral damage or accidental witnesses.”

He nodded and left the room and it took a few seconds to hear someone outside the window, closing the shutters that barely ever got used.

I returned the attention to my prisoners. “Okay, Maria. Seems you have the hots for my mother.” She stiffened, her gaze darting to my mother for help. As fucking if. “Explain what exactly you did for Hiroshi and my mother.”

Almost as if Maria had detached herself from the current situation, she turned her head to the side, lips in a thin line.

I didn't like hurting women. I really didn't. But this one had been around Reina and Phoenix since they were little, conspiring against them the whole time. So I shot her. In the knee.

A loud wail traveled through the air. In hindsight, we should have probably left every window in the house closed.

“It will be your other knee next if you don't answer my question.” And I'd enjoy it too. The threat in my voice and the promise of the next bullet must have spurred her on.

“I slipped Grace the information regarding Tomaso's first marriage. I pretended it was a slip of the tongue, and then I begged her not to tell anyone. The idiot bought it.”

My jaw clenched. “Why?”

“Hana was suffering, and he was busy prancing around with his new wife.” Her tone was flat but her eyes were full of hate when she looked at Reina. “Angelo was beating her.”

Reina's eyes filled with pity as they darted to my mother. Even after all this, she found it in her heart to feel sorry for her. Well, I couldn't. I was no stranger to what went on in our house, but it was a poor excuse for ruining innocent lives.

“What else?”

“Stop talking, you stupid bitch.” Hiroshi was intent on keeping his secrets. I wondered what my mother was thinking. She remained silent, her gaze lowered to the ground. She wasn't in her pink kimono. Just jeans and a dirty white T-shirt that was three sizes too large for her.

I aimed at her other knee. “I suggest you keep talking.”

“Okay, okay,” she whimpered, her eyes locked on the barrel of my gun. “I nudged Grace into Angelo's arms, but instead of beating her, the idiot worshiped her. He wanted her to leave Romero and marry him instead.”

Angry tears filled Reina's eyes and her hands curled into fists. I pulled her closer.

“Continue,” I hissed through gritted teeth, keeping my attention on Maria from the corner of my eye.

“It went on for years. But then Tomaso sweet-talked her back into his bed. It was a few months before she got pregnant. There was no tearing her away from that baby. But we bided our time.” She turned her head to look at my mother. “It was better for Hana when Angelo was infatuated with Grace, so we tried to bring them back together.” Fuck! My mother was in on it the entire time. “I kept Grace's schedule and we arranged an accidental rendezvous. Knowing Angelo, he didn't take her rejection well.” A soft gasp came from my wife. “He raped her, and since I tracked Grace's periods, I knew exactly whose baby it was.” Her eyes flared when she said those last words.

“I... I'm a product of...” Reina couldn't utter the word. Fuck, I wished I could have spared her this. This was a whole new level of woman scorned.

“And you were part of all that, Mother?” I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I needed her to admit to her sins, but she

refused to acknowledge me. She wouldn't even look at me. "Answer me, or I swear to God, Mother, I'm going to end you right here and right now."

It sickened me to say those words.

"I was just so angry," Mother rasped, clutching her hands together.

"Was it your idea?"

"Yes, it was her idea." Maria grinned like a damn lunatic. "The only idea I had of my own"—she flicked a glance at Hiroshi—"well, not on my own. Hiroshi helped. It was when the Yakuza attacked Tomaso. Hiroshi wanted proof of Tomaso and Hana's annulment. Well, he got it, and then he disappeared back to his country."

The fake proof. My mother knew the annulment never happened, so why the pretense? I started to wonder who the true villain was here.

Reina's shoulders slumped and her eyes locked on my mother. "Why?" Her voice was coarse. "Why would you take it so far?" My mother remained silent, not a flicker of emotion. I didn't think she even knew who she was anymore. Reina's eyes locked on the woman she'd known for decades. "What was in it for you, Maria?"

"To see Hana happy. At the end of it all, it would be just her and me." Good God, Maria had a whole new level of delusion going on. "She was also very generous." I sure as fuck hoped she meant generous in a monetary way, not sexually. "And she promised to sign over this house to my family. I spend more time caring for it than any of the Romero family combined."

Reina let out a frustrated breath.

"If money was what you wanted or needed, all you had to do was ask and we would have given it to you." Despite all the darkness she saw, my wife still believed in human goodness. She turned to my mother next and said, "It wasn't my mother's fault Papà no longer loved you. None of it was on her. And you destroyed her." Reina's chin trembled and I gripped her

closer to me. “That day, at the shop, it was your words that pushed her to commit suicide.”

Maria threw her head back and cackled like a crazy witch, the strands of her hair flying wild.

“Well, I helped.”

“What?”

“I slipped a drug into her drink that made her docile and depressed, then convinced her it was for the best. It didn’t take much though, she was done with her life by that point.”

Reina lunged from the couch, grabbing Maria by her hair and shoving her onto the ground.

“You fucking bitch.” She slammed Maria’s head against the living room floor. Hiroshi and my mother just watched the entire scene, unfazed. “You’re sick, you psycho! You killed my mamma.”

Bang. Bang. Bang. The floor rattled each time she slammed Maria’s head into the ground.

Lots of wailing from Maria—*that’s rich.*

“Fuck your cooking and all the shit you’ve done. I should go after your family the way you went after mine.” Reina was choking out her words through broken sobs, but I knew she could handle this. This might actually be the best thing for her, to really unleash all her pent-up anger.

Maria attempted to claw at her face but Reina was quicker, snatching her hand and folding it backward. Her lessons with Darius certainly paid off. The loud crack sounded just as another scream tore from her.

Reina lifted her head, her feral smile that of a vengeful goddess. This was her moment, her revenge. And fuck, my queen was fearless.

Reina sat straddling her and then pulled out the knife I watched her snatch earlier. She plunged it into Maria’s shoulder. The scream had Asher running back into the room, gun in hand.

“Oh, look at that, bitch.” Reina was really in her element. “I missed your neck.”

Asher cocked his head but the story was too long to tell, so I just shrugged.

“The only reason I won’t go after your family like you’ve gone after mine is because I’m not psycho like you.” Her voice was full of pain. For her mamma. For her papà. For her sister. “It’s the only mercy you’ll get from me, which is more than I got from Perez Cortes and his men.”

Then she plunged the knife into her neck. Maria gurgled, her voice drowning in blood. Her hands flopped but Reina slapped them away while continuing to plunge the knife into her neck. Over and over again. Blood pooled around her, staining her clothes.

Pure adrenaline kept her going. She was panting but refused to stop stabbing her, deliriously spitting out curses in English that were brand-new even to me.

She didn’t stop until Maria’s body went limp.

REINA

The silence in the room was deafening, but in my skull, the pain, loss, fear, anger—it all pulsed through my body like it was a living entity controlling me, seeking justice and revenge. Each strike and stab was for my mother, my sister, those poor trafficked women, and myself.

Suddenly I was reliving it all over again.

Screams. My own. Theirs. Torn limbs. Theirs. Pain. Ours. Fear. Ours. Anger. Mine.

Days and nights when I was desperate to escape reality, lost in the fog of the heroin, flashed through my mind in fast motion, demanding I punish and bestow pain.

Darkness was now part of me, and it was a part that Maria, Hana, Hiroshi, and Angelo all had a hand in cultivating. They made this version of me. What goes around comes around.

Those nightmares and terrors would remain with me for the rest of my life. The memory of Mamma's life leaving her eyes. My eyes blurred with tears that refused to fall.

Focus, Reina.

I blinked, my muscles stiff. Numbness soaked into my bones, mixing with blood, and slowly a sound registered. It was my heavy breathing.

I looked down, finally seeing what I'd done. Maria's dead body, her eyes frozen in horror. I was painted in her blood. My senses didn't seem to want to work, because I should be petrified of what I'd done.

Except I wasn't. And I wasn't sorry either.

I refused to be anyone's victim or puppet again. I would protect my family and myself, no matter the cost. *That's what a queen does.* No more waiting to be saved or leaving revenge for others to handle. It was my job as much as Amon's.

I'd killed before and I realized I'd probably kill again, considering I was staying in the underworld. My family and loved ones came first.

Besides, nobody could deny that Maria deserved it. She hurt my mamma.

"Remind me never to piss your wife off."

I barely heard the words, but when I lifted my head, I found everyone staring at me. Hana and Hiroshi in shock. Asher's eyes held... It wasn't shock. It wasn't disgust either. I wasn't sure what it was, but it didn't make me feel bad.

And my husband... He looked at me like he was proud.

"I stabbed her," I croaked, still holding the bloody knife, my ears ringing. "I'm not sorry."

He quietly stepped closer and nodded. "She deserved it."

"Yes."

"Want to give me the knife?" Amon asked carefully.

"What about them?" I said.

He shook his head. "I'll take care of them."

I dipped my chin and he steered me over to the couch. Blood dripped off my hands, my clothes were soaked, but justice was served and I found my anger easier to bear.

My focus returned to the two sitting opposite of us. Hana stared at me like I was crazy and ready to snap at her at any moment. Maybe I was. It could be that I reached my tipping point. My eyes flitted to Maria's body on the floor.

The bitch deserved it for betraying my family. Let the fucking world know what happened when you fucked me over.

A terse nod from Amon and Asher left the room again.

“So, Hiroshi and Mother,” Amon drawled, his eyes narrowed on the two people who should have protected him but chose to betray him instead. Thank fuck for Dante’s loyalty. I didn’t think he’d be able to handle all three turning on him. “Anything to say for yourselves?”

Deafening silence fell over the living room that, once upon a time, had seen our family happy, however briefly. My parents had never stood a chance.

“I loved him,” Hana interrupted the stretch of silence. “I wanted him back.”

My spine jerked upright.

“That’s not love.” She ignored me, her eyes darting to her son. She might have betrayed us all, but there was no denying her love for her son. But then, maybe her love wouldn’t fare well for anyone around her. “You indirectly caused the death of my mother,” I accused. “Aren’t you sorry at all?”

Her eyes met mine. “No. I did what I had to for my son. Just like I had to endure years of Angelo Leone’s abuse so he’d believe Amon was his. I ensured my son was part of the Omertà, and I won’t apologize for that.”

Jesus Christ! This woman would go to unfathomable lengths for power.

“You almost caused my wife’s death.” Amon’s voice was lined with accusation.

She shook her head, a single tear rolling down her flawless skin. The woman was in her late forties but she looked like she was barely thirty. No wonder men and women alike fell all over themselves for her.

“You almost cost your son his life,” I whispered.

She kept shaking her head. “It wasn’t supposed to go that way.”

“So you did set it up,” Amon gritted. His jaw clenched and the vein in his neck pulsed.

Her eyes flitted to Hiroshi. “I didn’t. It was supposed to just be *her*.”

Amon jumped to his feet, his growl animalistic. I wrapped my hands around his arm. “Don’t. We don’t need you losing your shit today too.”

My heart hammered against my chest. I really just wanted to learn the truth and then finally rest. To stop worrying about people who wanted us dead.

“Why was Itsuki there?” I asked. “At the auction.”

Hana’s shoulders slumped. “He was supposed to buy you back. Outbid anyone else and then bring you to me.” I swallowed my emotion down and exchanged a look with Amon.

“Why?” The calm expression on his face portrayed nothing. He could be a hard man to read sometimes.

“I didn’t want her tortured,” Hana whimpered. “I know what Perez Cortes does... did... to women. So Hiroshi worked out a deal with Itsuki, promising him everything if he just outbid everyone and brought you to me.”

My back stiffened. “Why didn’t he?”

Her eyes moved to Hiroshi again, then back to me. “He said you died on the boat.” A muscle clenched in Amon’s jaw but he said nothing. “You have to believe me.” Her hands were folded in her lap and her voice was a soft plea. “I knew I’d lose Amon if something happened to you, but you were part of a deal I made five years ago.”

Amon’s spine stiffened. “Five *years* ago?”

She nodded, locking eyes with him. “Hiroshi helped me arrange a deal with the Cortes cartel, and going back on it wasn’t an option.”

“But... Amon and I weren’t together five years ago,” I said, confused.

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” Hana rasped, her voice shaking. “I would have pulled you out of Cortes’s clutches even if you had no connection to Amon.” Her eyes sought out her son. “Please believe me. I went too far, yes, but I would

never have done this. I wouldn't cost you, my only son, his life. Or hers." She looked at me begrudgingly.

I didn't like the woman, but I believed her.

"Do you have any idea what she went through?" Amon bellowed so loud I swore the house shook. "What she endured? It wasn't your place to risk her life. Fucking ever!"

She let out a whimper. "*Musuko*. It was the only way to save Dante." Five years ago. Dante. Holy fuck... Did this mean...? "Angelo broke his agreement with the Cortes cartel, and that put a target on our family. You were spared because the Yakuza had dealings with Perez Cortes. But Dante—"

"He wasn't so lucky." My heart shriveled in my chest.

Hana's eyes filled with tears. It was amazing to me that a woman who could hate so passionately could also love so fiercely. I had no doubt she'd burn down this world for Amon and Dante. But her love for Papà became twisted and ugly between her hate and jealousy.

"He wasn't," she whispered. "So I traded the only piece of information I knew. Angelo's illegitimate daughter's life for Dante's." Amon looked baffled, the struggle on his face clear. I didn't blame him. His mother saved Dante's life. "Cortes has been trying to get his hands on Reina ever since then."

Amon looked at me. He had been saving me all these years. I smiled even as tears burned behind my lids. He had been my protector since I was six. I knew for a fact I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for him.

"What about the ransom I paid?" I forgot Amon said he had to pay to get his brother back.

"It was a diversion," she admitted. This was truly a masterful deception. I didn't know whether she deserved a medal or to rot in hell.

"Did you or did you not marry Hiroshi?" I blinked at the sudden change of subject. Amon narrowed his eyes on Hiroshi and Hana. "You've been awfully quiet, Hiroshi. Is it wedded bliss? Or trying to figure out how to get out of this one?"

The plethora of information made my head spin.

“How... when...” Hana was at a loss for words, her lips opening and closing. “How did you know we got married?”

Amon ignored her question. “Who suggested it?”

“Hiroshi.” Somehow that didn’t surprise me. “Why?” Hana remained silent, staring at her son with a lost expression. “Why did he suggest it? And why did you agree when you knew the truth about the annulment?”

He needed to know how far his mother was willing to go for power. Although, as I watched this scene unfold, I had to agree with my papà. Hana would go to great lengths, but not at the cost of her son’s power. She wanted it all for him.

“You have no right telling your mother what she can and cannot do,” Hiroshi snapped, then followed it up with a mocking laugh. “It actually feels good to drop this fucking act. You and your cousin are the most annoying Takahashis to date.”

Amon sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Nobody ever asked you to be around us. You could have always left.” Hiroshi’s smile still held a note of mockery. “But you needed to get close enough to us, didn’t you? To get your hands on the document Ojīsan drew up.” He turned to glare at his mother. “Or was that your doing, Mother?”

“Aren’t you bright?” Hiroshi snickered while his mother looked slightly confused. “It was the only reason I stayed around. For that document, and to take over the Yakuza one day. Tomaso should have never been allowed to marry her anyhow.”

Overconfidence. It was his downfall.

“When did Ojīsan create that document?” Amon asked.

“Fuck you,” Hiroshi spat.

Amon didn’t waste any time. He pulled the trigger and shot him in the other foot. His scream filled the space. “When?” Amon repeated.

“It’s been in place for generations. After Hana married Romero, he added a clause stating only a Japanese man could take over. It was to eliminate the threat of outsiders.”

“Why give it to Romero?” Amon’s confusion was rightly placed. It made no sense to give it to him considering it wouldn’t apply to him in any scenario.

“He gave him a copy of the old version.” Hiroshi coughed, growing weaker as blood seeped out onto the floor. “That copy would have allowed any husband of Hana’s to take over. It was better than no copy at all.”

It was information overload. Hiroshi had been scheming this for at least a decade.

“Amon, you know Hiroshi could never become the head of the Yakuza,” Hana reasoned softly. “I’m still married to Romero.”

Amon smiled. “You sure are.” My husband’s dark gaze landed on Hiroshi, promising painful retribution. “You missed a little detail, Hiroshi.”

Hiroshi shook his head. “I saw the annulment document.”

Amon snickered. “What? My mother didn’t tell you she put a hit on the attorney before he could process the annulment? She falsified the documents. They were never filed with the courts.”

Hiroshi’s darkened expression shifted to Hana. “Is that true?” he growled, but she ignored him. He gripped her forearm, shaking her like a rag doll. “Is it true?”

“Yes. My marriage to Romero was never dissolved.” That drew a growl from Hiroshi, then he bellowed, spitting words in Japanese. “I needed your help with Perez. I couldn’t risk him coming for Dante again.”

Wait... did she say “again”?

“What the fuck have you done?” Hiroshi hissed, mouth twisted in an ugly grimace.

“We’ve been together for years,” she reasoned. “I saw no reason to change anything. You were never supposed to find

out that I was still married to Tomaso. It shouldn't have mattered."

"Except for the Yakuza empire and that little clause," Amon snarled.

Her attention was on her son. "You're the head of the Yakuza. The seat at the Omertà table is at your fingertips. I'm so proud." Her voice sounded raw as she choked on her tears. "None of it matters."

"You fucking bitch," Hiroshi spat.

"Watch it," Amon warned. "She's still my mother."

"I needed your help, Hiroshi," she continued, crimson embarrassment staining her cheeks. "To line up an exchange with Perez Cortes and coordinate with Itsuki. You kept insisting on marriage, so I went along with it."

"Hiroshi wanted to marry you to ensure his place in the Yakuza, because Ojīsan had a clause stipulating that your *husband* would become the head of the Yakuza in the event the Takahashi line didn't have an heir. Hiroshi ensured my elimination."

My lips trembled at the thought that Hiroshi almost succeeded. No wonder they kept putting bullets into Amon's body.

"How could you?" I rasped, my vision blurring with the images of Amon bleeding out on the gravel.

She ignored me, her eyes locked on her son.

"I would have never knowingly risked your life, *musuko*. I thought you'd be safe. I swear to you."

Amon snickered. "Even as grenades flew, you thought I'd be *safe*? Why would they be shooting if they planned on taking Reina alive?"

My brain felt like a whirlpool of details. Hiroshi had either fooled Hana like the rest of us, or she was an extremely good actress.

“Hiroshi planned to have Amon killed by the Cortes cartel.” Everyone’s attention turned to me.

Hana shook her head profusely as she stared at her son, then me. “No, I’d never risk his life.”

“You wouldn’t, but Hiroshi would. He wanted to be the guy to take over, and using Amon’s cousin made his elimination possible too. Once Amon was eliminated, he’d blame Itsuki and have him killed. Two birds with one stone. But Amon survived.”

Hiroshi sneered. “It should have been very easy, but this fucking asshole refused to die and swapped the paintings. Itsuki was too stupid to realize he no longer had the original, so I needed the only other copy of that document.”

There it was. “It sounds like he trapped Hana into marriage and then set the wheels in motion. Have Amon eliminated. Take over the Yakuza upon Amon’s death,” I summarized. “Surely he knew he’d never be elected like Amon. But one thing I don’t get... Why come here?”

“The stupid cow”—he shot his pathetic eyes at Hana and I almost rolled my eyes—“has been blabbing about the document her father gave to Romero for years. We thought it was here. I needed that document to present to the syndicate. All *you* had to do was fucking die.” He pointed a meaty little finger at me and Amon, spit flying from his mouth.

“That document was destroyed a long time ago,” Amon sneered. “So you lose on that front too, Hiroshi. No marriage, no document. It seems you’ve done it all for nothing.”

Sobs tore from Hana, full of agony. I imagined it had something to do with her poor choices, missed opportunities, lost loves. I couldn’t be sure.

“You...” Her lips trembled and her hands shook as she looked at Hiroshi. “How could you... My son... My whole life... I trusted you. My father trusted you.”

Hiroshi sighed, shaking his head, and his lips curled up. One second he was glaring at all of us and the next he was

reaching inside the couch. I let out a string of curses. It was one of Papà's hiding spots.

The next second, he held a gun and pointed it at Amon.

“Not another move. I'll kill you but let your woman live if you don't fight it.”

“You're delusional if you think you're getting out of this alive. My men have this place surrounded,” Amon said with a harshness that rattled my bones.

“We'll see who's delusional when I'm sitting on the throne.” He glared back at Amon. “It's your time to die.”

“Noooo—” Hana screamed.

“Nooo!” I screamed as the shot echoed in the air.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Everything happened too fast. Amon shot at the same time as Hiroshi, and I jumped toward my husband. Hana shoved me down.

Blood splattered all over me, but I felt no pain. I thought the world spun, but it was me. My head whipped left and right as I tumbled to the solid ground. Then I watched in horror as two bodies hit the floor with a loud thud.

AMON

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I shot Hiroshi in the heart. Twice. He got one shot in before he crumpled to the floor.

It happened so fucking fast.

The slimy bastard must have pulled a gun out of his ass.

My eyes flitted to my wife, relieved to find her unharmed. But then my gaze fell to my feet and my heart twisted in my chest.

My mother.

She gasped for air, blood pooling around her and staining her white shirt.

I fell to my knees, my chest twisting with pain. This was not how I thought my mother would meet her end. Her sweaty hair stuck to her forehead and her lips moved soundlessly while the bloodstain grew with each passing second.

Her eyes fluttered shut and her lips were turning an alarming shade of blue. It was a bad sign. We were running out of time.

“Fuck,” I gritted, pulling her against me. I lifted my eyes just in time to see Reina kick the gun to the other side of the room, then check Hiroshi’s pulse.

“He’s gone.” *Good.* Though I’d have quite liked to torture the fuck out of him. “I’m so sorry.” Reina crouched beside me, her hands coming to the bullet wound on my mother’s

stomach. “I should have remembered that the couch was one of Papà’s hiding places.”

I shook my head. “I should have searched the house.”

“We have to stop the bleeding,” she muttered, applying pressure.

“Asher, get water, bandages, and a first aid kit,” I bellowed the order.

The wound didn’t appear to be too large, but the position of it wasn’t good. Considering the amount of blood, the bullet had either pierced her liver or an artery. It was quickly soaking her entire shirt.

Just when I was about to lift her, the door swung open and Asher appeared.

“Stop. Don’t move her,” he ordered. “It’ll make it worse.”

Looking over his shoulder, he barked orders for some supplies, but I was focused on my mother.

“L-let me—” She broke off, coughing up blood.

“Shh, we’re getting you some help,” I told her.

“Save your energy,” Reina whispered to her, her hand still pressed against the wound.

She found Reina’s eyes, desperation coloring them. “I’m sorry,” she breathed. “F-for everything.”

Reina blinked hard, tears clinging to her eyelashes. “Amon’s right, you need to save your energy.”

Asher joined us on the other side of my mother’s body with a bowl of water and a first aid kit.

“W-was jealous.” It was as if my mother needed to get things off her chest. “Angry. I-it... w-was... wrong.”

“It’s okay,” Reina crooned, her crystal blue eyes rising to search my face.

“Can you do anything?” I questioned Asher.

He was already filling his hands with gauze and tweezers. “I can try.”

“Any internal bleeding?” I demanded sharply. He was using the warm water to clean the wound. “Asher, I swear to God—”

“Amon, let him do his thing,” Reina murmured.

My mother jolted, a gasp leaving her mouth. “*Musuko*, listen to m-me.” My mother’s trembling hand took mine, then reached for Reina’s. “It is my time. But I have m-many things to atone for.”

Alarms blared in my head. She was saying her goodbyes.

“Tell me when you’re healed.” Fuck, despite all the wrongs she’d done, I still loved my mother.

“I have to die in peace.”

Reina leaned over her, her pendant swinging like a pendulum. “You won’t die. We’ll save you, and then—” Her voice broke. She hated seeing anyone in pain.

“P-please forgive me.”

Reina swallowed, her eyes softening. “You’re forgiven. Just get better.”

Mother’s eyes flitted to the necklace and her blue lips curved up.

“M-my... n-necklace...” She reached for it around Reina’s neck, brushing her trembling fingers against it. “I always loved it so much.”

Reina’s brows scrunched. “Yours?”

She nodded. “I—I told your mamma about it. Not sure why Tomaso kept it.” Pain and regret flashed in her eyes, but Reina firmly held her gaze. “It looks good on you. It b-belongs to you.”

Compassion took over Reina’s features. We both knew my mother wasn’t going to make it.

“Thank you.” Reina’s voice was a choked whisper. “I’ll cherish it forever.”

“Give it to...” She gripped my hand with a newfound strength. “Give it to your children.”

Reina breathed heavily, tears streaming down her face, then nodded.

“P-promise.” A sob split from her lips. “*M-musuko.*”

I shook my head. “It’s okay. I understand.” Fuck, my chest twisted. None of it mattered anymore. Yes, it was all fucked up, but watching her like this, in pain, put it all into perspective.

“I love you, *musuko.*” Those were the last words she spoke. Her next breath would be her last.

“Love you too,” I rasped, my voice barely audible.

REINA

It had been two days since Hana's death.

The members of the Omertà came to visit us in the Romero villa and officially proclaimed Amon the head of the Romero family, taking over for Papà who would spend the rest of his days at peace in the Philippines.

All were present except for Dante.

It was pretty much a formality at this point. There were also additional men in the garden who came to visit and witness his anointing into the Omertà. First of its kind, and somehow it suited him. Amon was unlike anyone before.

I lingered in the shadows outside of my papà's old office in Venice, eavesdropping—some habits were hard to break.

A video call came in. Amon answered it and Dante's image came on the large monitor. He looked tired but content. *I thought so, at least.*

“Okay, I believe we're ready to start,” Marchetti announced. The kings of the Omertà sat around the table, a tense air creeping through the room on hands and knees.

“Before we move on making Amon the head of the Romero Omertà seat, we need to address Reina Romero's murder of Angelo Leone,” Giovanni Agosti declared. He was hot, younger than Enrico and Manuel Marchetti, but no less attractive. Although, compared to Amon, they all paled.

“How about we keep my half sister out of it,” Dante declared, flipping him off. Okay, that wasn't very mature, but

it warmed my heart. “She’s earned that much.”

“Agreed,” Marchetti declared. “It was self-defense.”

“I’ll make sure I remember that when I want to kill off my old man,” Agosti deadpanned. “Oh that’s right, he’s dead already.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about,” Dante drawled.

Agosti flipped off Dante this time. These men were so immature.

“And what kept you from coming in person?” Luca DiMauro asked. “After all, you’re the closest one in both location and relation to Amon.”

Nobody knew it, but Dante would be here tomorrow for Hana’s funeral. Amon said he couldn’t give me all the details, but he assured me it was for the best, that it was the safest thing for Phoenix and us.

“I’m busy.” Dante’s response was clipped.

“Doing what?” Agosti snickered. “Being an asshole?”

“Okay, let’s take a vote,” Konstantin cut in, putting an end to the bickering. “I want to get back to my family, as I’m sure we all do.”

Luca DiMauro’s eyes were narrowed and locked on the screen where Dante’s face hovered, and it struck me as peculiar.

The vote started. “Yes,” the first confirmation was uttered, followed by the rest of the votes. It was unanimous.

“Congrats, brother. Now we get to play, huh?” I kept my eyes glued to the screen, hoping to catch a glimpse of Phoenix. My efforts spying weren’t in vain, because just as Dante was flipping everyone off, I caught a glimpse of her. My sister. She was smiling and looked... very good. So things must be going well, although it puzzled me why Dante and Phoenix claimed it was best they kept away for now. Amon said she needed a bit more time before she was ready to address *something* and *someone* with us.

It left me confused, but I'd come to understand that she needed time and space and I had to respect it, no matter how much it killed me.

"I got a wife to tend to. So long, motherfuckers." Dante ended the call without waiting for a response.

Possessive and unhinged men. They'd be the death of us all. Although admittedly, they loved harder than anyone else.

"Are we done here?" Amon asked the men at the table as he stood up.

With some shifting gazes, the men all got to their feet and headed out of the room.

"Mrs. Romero, I presume." A voice behind me froze me in my tracks just as I was about to mosey back upstairs. For a second, I debated whether to pretend I didn't hear it and keep on going, but I wasn't a coward.

I turned on my heel slowly, coming face-to-face with Luca DiMauro. "Signore DiMauro," I greeted him. "How are you?" I asked politely.

"Were you listening in?" Okay, no formalities, then.

"I was."

"Why?"

I studied him, recalling what I'd heard about the man. Not much, aside from the fact that he was one of Benito King's sons. His brother, Cassio King, had a strong bond with some of the most powerful underworld families.

"I hoped to see my sister, Phoenix, during the video conference," I finally answered.

He tilted his head as if debating whether to believe me or not, but before he could say another thing, Amon came out of the office along with Manuel and Enrico Marchetti.

Amon's gaze traveled between Luca and me. "What's going on?"

I shrugged. "He caught me spying on your meeting," I admitted sheepishly. "I wanted to see Phoenix."

Amon's dark eyes found Luca DiMauro's. "We're in her home. She can do whatever she wants."

For three heartbeats, there was nothing but tension, then Luca shrugged his shoulders.

"I have a feeling we'll be seeing each other soon," he said, then proceeded to leave.

"Well, that went well," Manuel said from his spot. "Either he isn't getting laid, or he has a chip on his shoulder." An understatement if I ever heard one, except I hadn't done anything to piss him off. "Maybe it has something to do with the disappearance of Sasha Nikolaev's child?"

I had no fucking idea who Sasha Nikolaev's child was and I wasn't about to ask. Instead, I flicked a glance at Amon, who looked at me with that hooded expression that made my pulse flutter. I just wanted to be alone with my husband.

"I'm going to get changed," I said, my voice slightly breathless. I couldn't help the flush whenever he looked at me like he was about to devour me. "We have a few things to handle today, right?"

"We do. First we'll meet with Father Mario and then we can tour those properties."

We had to make the last few arrangements for his mother's burial, and then he promised we'd also take a look at a few homes that'd just become available in the heart of Venice.

We decided to set down roots here. Well, here and Japan. We'd started scouring the market before everything exploded with Hana, Hiroshi, and Maria. The Romero villa would be the base for Amon's meetings, which was his way of keeping business separate from our life.

"Ah, you decided to stay?" Enrico actually smiled. "Isa will be happy to have at least one girlfriend close by."

I chuckled. "It's not exactly close by, but we'll be in the same country," I agreed.

"We need lots of room to accommodate our family and your career," Amon announced. "Finding that in this city will

be hard.”

“But not impossible,” Manuel added. “The Omertà will be happy you’re staying in Italy.”

“We prefer Italy to be your main residence,” Enrico added as if they were in any position to demand anything. They all knew he had obligations to the Yakuza too and couldn’t do that exclusively from Italy. Papà told me that Amon was revered among the Omertà and Yakuza leaders. He held a prestigious position of power at the top, having clawed himself up from the rubble. The proof was in the number of people who attended the vote today.

While Amon was busy with the underworld, I kept busy with my fashion designs. I was finally getting back to it, and I had been thinking about launching my product line with Amon’s help. Of course, I learned he’d been buying out all my designs and selling them in his luxury hotels and casinos. He definitely kick-started it all, though he didn’t let me give him any credit.

“It will be hard to find a place with acreage,” Amon remarked wryly. He wanted space around us and no prying eyes.

“Or without snakes,” I added with a shiver.

After a few more minutes of discussion, Manuel and Enrico departed.

Amon’s arm hooked around me. “Did you see your sister?”

I nodded, smiling softly. “She looks well.”

“She does,” he agreed.

“Why won’t they come out here?” I asked. Dante was coming for the funeral but he made it clear he wouldn’t be staying. He was only attending because Hana meant so much to him, although he didn’t seem overly upset. However, Amon made it known that Dante was excellent at hiding his emotions. It was a result of their upbringing.

“Let’s give him until summer,” he murmured, kissing my forehead. “Then we’ll go to him and demand answers. Rain or

shine, heaven or hell, the four of us are spending the warmer months together.”

Summer was only a few months away. I could last that long.

REINA

The burial ceremony was short. Only Amon, Papà, Dante, and I attended the funeral. Ironically, it was in the same cemetery as my mamma's.

The spring rain drizzled and gray clouds wept, as though in mourning for the departed souls.

It was time to let go of the past and focus on the here and now. On the future. Thanks to our parents, I found the man who not only saved me but also loved me. Unconditionally. He gave me my beautiful, imperfect fairy tale.

Life wasn't perfect; it never would be. But as long as I had Amon by my side, I knew all the ups and downs would be worth it.

“We therefore commit this body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life.”

His mother was cremated. She practiced Japanese customs and Amon wanted to honor them—and her—in her death. He hoped Hana would find peace here, buried close to where we'd put roots down. Blending Shinto beliefs, Buddhism, and classical Eastern Philosophy, the Japanese had an ethereal practice of honoring deceased loved ones with a ceremonial cremation practice known as *kotsuage*, which consisted of close family members performing a unique ritual with the cremated remains. Amon and Dante led the ceremony.

I wished Phoenix were here, but we'd be visiting her soon. Dante claimed it was *their* honeymoon phase and they

wouldn't share that time with anyone. Fair enough.

With Dante and Amon on either side of me, I couldn't help but slide my hands into theirs and squeeze gently, offering comfort. The looks on their faces twisted my heart.

Dante's dark blue eyes met mine and we exchanged a hundred unspoken words. Amon told him what Hana had done, and although we agreed not to tell Dante it was at my expense, he came to the conclusion himself.

"Does this mean you forgive me?" he inquired, his voice low. Papà shot him a glare. He was furious he'd eloped with Phoenix and robbed him of his chance to walk her down the aisle.

"For kidnapping my sister, no. For everything else, yes."

He let out a sigh, but the corners of his lips betrayed him. "You're tough."

I rolled my eyes. "There is one way you can remedy it all." His eyebrows shot up to his hairline, but before he could get excited, I added, "Have a wedding ceremony so Papà can walk Phoenix down the aisle."

My eyes flitted to my papà who looked lost standing next to Amon, staring at the gravesite that now held two wives he'd had to bury. I wondered if he questioned whether he'd truly known them at all.

We might have all started off on the wrong foot, but I knew that our future was ours to craft. Not our parents'. Not the underworld's. Ours.

Letting go of Dante's hand, I pressed a kiss to Amon's cheek. "Are you doing okay?"

It was a silly question, but it was hard to see his pain. He'd had an unfair share of it in his life, and I wanted to spare him any in the future.

"Go talk to him. Then I have a surprise for you."

I loved his surprises. I loved him. The past three years were anything but easy, but they had made us into these

versions of ourselves and I was okay with that. We were stronger, and we were together. That was all that mattered.

I willingly drowned in his eyes. The stars were back in them, and just as I predicted, they shone only for me.



The first rays of sunshine peered through the clouds today, casting a glow over the horizon.

We rode in a vaporetto that Amon was navigating on his own, leaving the heart of Venice behind us.

When I asked him where we were going this morning, he just gave me a secretive smile and said, “You’ll see.”

We finally came to a stop in front of a building that looked like a palace with an exit right on the water.

“Welcome to Giudecca,” he said as he parked the boat. “And possibly our home, if you like it.”

It was quieter here, a breath of fresh air and lack of tourists giving it an appeal I hadn’t found yet in this floating city.

He jumped out of the boat and extended his hand. We were still wearing black, although my flats were pink. It would seem I didn’t own a single pair of black shoes, much to my husband’s delight.

In front of us was a building resembling an old castle, its balcony overlooking the Giudecca canal and San Marco. It was far enough not to hear the noise of the city and gave off the illusion of tranquility.

“So what do you think?”

I smiled at his excitement. “I like the location, but where’s the house?” He extended his hand. My mouth parted in shock. “That’s not a house, Amon. That’s a castle.”

“A castle that needs a queen.” He grinned at me. This place had to have at least twenty bedrooms. “With a fenced-in backyard. A pool. A playground.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can’t wait to go down that slide.”

“Me neither,” he mused.

I slid my hand into his. “I like it, but don’t you think it’s too much?”

“Money’s no object.”

“Aren’t those words every girl’s dream,” I mused. “What I mean is the place seems too big.”

His eyes darted to the building, studying it. “No, I don’t think so. When Dante and Phoenix visit, we’ll want them far from us. Not to mention your grandmother. We might have to build a suite in the backyard.”

I snickered, shoving my shoulder into his. “Smartass.”

Grandma had reconciled with Grandpa Glasgow, according to Papà. He said their marriage would last for the remainder of their days, but you never knew. I really hoped so. For her sake.

“It’s hard to get rid of your grandma once she visits,” he muttered.

“Okay, husband. Let’s see how it looks inside.” I lifted a shoulder at his questioning look. “I won’t diss it until I see the whole package.”

Twenty-five grandiose bedrooms. Two kitchens. Thirty bathrooms. One formal living room. One cozy living room. Library. Office. Ballroom. Obnoxiously large dining room. And a gym, complete with a rock-climbing wall.

But it wasn’t until I saw the backyard that I was sold. The strategically positioned trees. Wide-open lawn. Pool. A pavilion to house our cookouts. Even the playground was perfect. It was so inviting I could already see our friends and family gathered around this place celebrating our milestones—birthdays, anniversaries, anything and everything.

I turned to face him and smiled. “I’m sold. On one condition.”

He got closer until he was standing toe to toe with me and I had to tilt my head back to look at him.

“Anything, my queen.”

“There is no way in hell I’m cleaning all this.” Stress-cleaning in this monstrosity of a house would cause more stress. He yanked me into his arms and I wrapped my legs around him. “I think you’re right. It feels like home,” I murmured against his lips. “I can help pay for it.”

A muscle tightened in his jaw. “No, wife. I pay for our home. God knows I have plenty of money.”

I nipped his chin. “So do I. Mamma left me enough to live comfortably.”

Granted this place was a lot more than comfortable. It was a freaking castle; I didn’t care what he called it.

“I want to take care of you and our children. I want to be worthy of you and your love.”

“You are,” I rasped, emotions clogging my throat. “More than worthy. I have loved you since the moment I met you. It might’ve started off as innocent, but deep in my heart, I knew you were the one. It’s always been you.”

His nose brushed against mine, then his lips skimmed my neck. “You’re the light to my darkness. Without you, I’d drown in it and forever lose myself.”

I shook my head. “No, Amon. You were *my* light when I was lost in darkness. You always bring me back to life. There is nothing more I want than to live my life with you. I love you, for better or worse. You are the one thing I will never leave behind.”

His lips met mine, happy tears rolling down my cheeks. Then he carried me inside and showed me exactly how much he loved me.

EPILOGUE

AMON

Four Years Later

I was once the bitter prince, wishing to be king. I demanded to rule it all. It was unconventional, but I was granted both of those things in ways that I hadn't realized I needed until I crossed paths with the girl with hearts in her eyes. I was the king of my wife's heart and the ruler of this world we had created together.

And fuck, it was perfect.

Music filled the air, mixing with splashes and giggles from around the pool.

Lanterns floated all around the yard, waiting for evening to set in so that we could all make our wishes and set them free. I didn't know what my wife's wish would be, but mine was eternal: protection for our family.

When you'd seen and experienced a living nightmare, it was hard not to be paranoid. It was a concept most of us in the underworld were familiar with.

Dante was grilling, or attempting to, his sidekick stealing kisses and giggles, and it didn't take long before the hot dogs and burgers were burning. Neither of us were good at this BBQ shit.

We'd have to find an American to do it for us.

"Catch me, catch me, Papà," Reon squealed, not even bothering to wait for me to acknowledge him before jumping into the water.

Reina sat on the edge of the pool, rubbing her swollen belly and eating strawberries dipped in whipped cream and peanut butter—weird craving—as she smiled at our son’s recklessness. Much to my dismay, Reon took after his uncle in this way. I sure hoped our next child would have less energy.

“He’s just like you,” Reina said, her belly hidden under her pink bathing suit. She was ten days past her due date and eager for the arrival of our daughter who was in no hurry to leave her mother’s womb.

“He’s just like his uncle,” I grumbled. “My daughter better have our personality.”

“I badass,” Reon announced proudly, and a groan left my wife’s mouth.

“I never say that word.” I glared at Dante who was still messing around with his sidekick. “Your brother on the other hand—”

“Oh, he’s my brother now, huh?” Reina thought it funny how I picked and chose when he was my brother and when he was hers. “Besides, my boy *is* a badass.” She leaned closer, smiling wide. “Come and give Mamma a smooch, baby.”

Reon slid off me and insisted I hold him as he swam to his mamma, giving her the biggest kiss. Once he was done with that, he demanded to exit the pool, then bolted away from Phoenix, who’d started chasing him.

Reon was a spitting image of me, but he had his mother’s eyes. He was perfect, but I hoped our daughter would be the spitting image of my wife.

“Oh my gosh,” Isla gushed from the side of the pool where her husband peered over her shoulders at Reina’s newest designs. “These are magnificent. When can I buy one?”

Their children filled the backyard, some in the pool and others running around. Enzo and Amadeo were here too, now standing over the grill.

They weren’t American but they seemed to know their way around it a hell of a lot better than Dante.

“Actually, I set one aside for you and the girls.” Reina gave her a wink. The girls—being her sister, Isla, Athena, and Raven—were the biggest troublemakers known to mankind. They still managed to get in trouble no matter where they went, even on a trip to the grocery store. “It’s in the guest bedroom. Maybe your hubby can help you put it on?”

Isla’s laugh chimed over the rippling water. “That’s how I got knocked up with this baby number four.” She rubbed her belly affectionately.

“Well, at least you don’t have to worry about that now.”

“Back at ya.” Isla grinned, jutting her chin toward Reina’s belly.

I wrapped my arms around Reina’s waist, her blue eyes twinkling as she slid down my body, submerging herself partly in the water.

“Our baby girl still might share her birthday with her mamma,” I whispered into her ear as I rubbed her belly, feeling our daughter kick with all her might.

She chuckled. “I hope not. I want her to have her own special day.”

It was Reina’s birthday today. Her only birthday wish was having our family and friends around. Her grandmother and grandpa were coming later today. After all, Diana was notorious for making a grand entrance.

They promised their papà on his deathbed that they’d be good to her and take care of her in her old age. After all, she’d taken care of them. It was what family did for each other.

Reina’s fingers roamed over my chest, always lingering over my tattoos, over my scars. I had the Omertà ink on my back, but she wasn’t as fascinated with that one. Yin and yang was our life’s story.

She rubbed her belly against me, watching me through her lids with a lustful gaze. I smirked. Reina was insatiable during both her pregnancies. It was how we knew she was pregnant the second time.

During my trip to Japan, she finished a fashion show for Marchetti, then packed up Reon and flew out to surprise me. She intercepted me when I was coming out of a meeting with the Yakuza, and the moment we were back at the compound in Kyoto with our son sleeping soundly, she tackled me onto the bed. She then proceeded to straddle me and bounce up and down on my cock until the sun came up.

Not that I minded it. Not. At. All.

“Who do you belong to?” I asked her reverently. Possessively. Obsessively.

Her blues shone with so much love. “You. Always you.”

I kissed her hard, tasting the strawberries, whipped cream, and peanut butter she had been eating all afternoon.

“God, I love you. There are still days when it seems surreal that you’re finally here with me. You’re a dream I never dared to have, yet I wished for it like the sun wishes for the moon,” I murmured, loving the feel of her soft body against mine. “You’re my beautiful beginning.” She lifted her head, her blue eyes meeting mine and trapping me in their beauty. I kissed her forehead, skimming my lips over her skin, golden from the sun. “So thank you for surviving, for staying with me.”

Her smile was blinding. “You’re mine. I’ve always loved you and I always will. You and me against the world. Together. Remember?”

“I’ll never forget. Thank you for giving me our family, cinnamon girl.”

She lifted her chin, kissing me softly. “Thank *you* for not giving up on me. For loving me.”

Life wasn’t perfect, but this felt pretty damn close.

EPILOGUE

REINA

Three Months Later

“I don’t know,” Dante grunted. “Reon came out with the chubbiest cheeks, his arms so chunky he could barely roll himself over that first year. He was perfect, no matter how loudly he demanded to be fed, but Sonomi...” He shook his head. “Yeah, I don’t know. She looks too angelic. That can’t be good.”

I rolled my eyes. “Would you prefer she screamed her lungs off like your godson did?”

Dante’s expression told me he would. He worried that Sonomi, our three-month-old daughter, was too quiet. Much like her namesake, she loved to sleep. Or maybe it was that our son was such a handful as an infant.

Amon claimed our son would be a hellion, and I agreed with him, although I’d never admit it. He had his uncle’s temper, his father’s smarts and protectiveness, and... well, I was still unsure which qualities of mine he got, aside from blue eyes that seemed to fascinate everyone around him.

Reon had been over the moon once Sonomi came into the world. He petted her head and face and whispered words in Japanese to her. He said it was to keep all bad spirits away. Our boy was so protective, I feared he’d surpass his father and uncle in that department.

And that was saying something.

“Okay, I’m off to bed. Where is my sister?” The mischievous grin he gave me told me I didn’t want to know. Jesus Christ.

“Don’t do anything in my home that I wouldn’t do,” I muttered, closing the door of my daughter’s bedroom with a soft click. “And don’t wake up my kids,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes. “Good night.”

“Night, baby sister.”

Holding a baby monitor in my hand, I twisted my pendants back and forth along my necklace as I made my way to our bedroom. Amon was right, our home was large but we filled it easily with family and friends who frequently visited.

My girlfriends and sister were never too far away. Sometimes they even visited us in Japan when business took Amon there for extended periods of time.

All my life, I had read many fairy tales and dreamed about happily ever afters, but none of them came even close to this life with Amon.

Our family. The one Amon and I would protect with our lives.

My bare feet were silent against the cool marble floors and my heart thundered with anticipation.

The moment I was in the bedroom, a gasp tore from my lips. Dozens of little lanterns floated from the ceiling of our bedroom and Lana Del Rey’s soft notes drifted through the air.

I set the monitor on the nearby table and returned my attention to my husband as I stripped my tank top and pants off. God, he was beautiful. His scars, his ink. Every piece of him.

“I hope those are safe for our babies,” I murmured, my eyes locked on the yin and yang ink over his bullet scars. The two of us, always trying to find a way back to each other and fuse together. Light and dark. Night and day.

“They’re safe. Battery-operated.” I turned my attention to my husband.

Then he was on me, his mouth trailing down my neck and his hands roaming my body.

“Our son is sound asleep.”

“So is our daughter,” I murmured, feeling his hard cock pushing against my lower belly. He was in nothing but pajama pants, looking like a god.

“No panties, wife?”

“Easier access that way,” I breathed, soaking in the view of his magnificent body.

The throbbing between my legs pulsed as I slumped against the wall. My body hummed with the anticipation of pleasure. It didn't matter how many times he fucked me or kissed me. It always felt as good or better than it had that first time on his yacht.

My skin seared everywhere he touched me, the familiar sensation building inside me.

“I miss having you all to myself,” I complained as I tilted my head to the side. “And your brother's doing some freaky shit again.”

He let out a laugh. “He's always doing some freaky shit.” He peppered kisses all over my neck, drawing a moan from my throat. “I lined up nannies so I can take you on our second honeymoon. First few days just the two of us, then Reon and Sonomi will join us. It'll be the four of us against the world now.”

It wasn't unusual for both of us to be on the same wavelength. He often knew what I needed before I even realized it myself. The same was true the other way around.

My hands reached for his head, cupping it and tugging him away. “No more than two days.” Amon's eyes drank me in, heat burning in them. “Right? I worry about leaving our babies alone.” My voice was breathy.

“Two days. Dante and Phoenix will keep them safe. And we'll FaceTime with them as much as you want.” A choked laugh escaped me. We both knew they'd likely ignore our

calls, but there was also no doubt that they'd lay their lives down for their godchildren. "Then they'll meet us at the destination."

"Which is?"

He smiled. "A surprise."

I brought my hands down his muscular, bare chest, his heartbeat strong under my palm. I slid them lower, over his hard muscles, my touch hungry and desperate. He was my vice, everything right and perfect.

Like yin and yang, we complemented each other.

His lips crashed down on mine, tongue domineering my mouth, hands rough against my ass. He jerked me up and against him so his erection pressed against my center. I gasped, which he swallowed with his lips. My fingers hooked in his waistband, Amon's gaze on me full of hunger.

He ripped his mouth away, backing me into the wall.

Amon bent his head, his tongue brushing my ear. "Mine."

"Yours." I turned my face, bringing my lips to his ear.

I kissed his ear, then trailed my tongue over the rim. He exhaled and pulled back so he could look at my face, and the look in his eyes almost made my knees buckle.

His erection sprang free when I tugged his pants down, and Amon braced himself with his hands on either side of my head. I stared down at his length and sank back against the wall. He was long, thick, and impossibly hard.

I tore my gaze away only to find Amon's burning, penetrating stare. My cheeks blazed with heat, and Amon smiled as he leaned forward, trailing his tongue over my bottom lip.

Curling my fingers around his neck, I wrapped my legs around his waist while he walked backward. I guided his cock inside my wet heat.

My head tipped back with a moan. "God, you feel so good..."

He sat on our bed as I straddled him, lowering myself until he was fully sheathed inside me. My palm rested on his chest, finding comfort in his heartbeat that drummed just for me, and I started to move slowly, circling my hips.

My tempo sped up as I rode him, feeling him grow bigger inside me, if that were even possible. His grunts and my moans echoed in the air. The way our groins met with each up-and-down movement. My arousal dripped down my thighs, the sound of the slap of flesh against flesh filling the space.

My breasts bounced, aching for his touch. As if he read my thoughts, he reached a hand out and pinched my nipple, sending a shudder through me.

Then without a warning, he grabbed me by my hips and rolled us over. My back hit the mattress and a low squeal tumbled from me, but with the first thrust, it turned into a moan. Amon fucked me hard and fast.

He whispered filthy things, rasping promises that he always kept, words of love that I knew he meant.

“More,” I begged.

His pace turned slow and unhurried, hitting my sweet spot and raising goosebumps along my skin.

“Ohhh... yes... Amon... yes...” My cries increased as I fell apart, my orgasm exploding through me. My inner walls clenched around his length and he was right behind me, our joint pleasure becoming something magical.

Afterward, we lay sprawled over each other, my lips trailing kisses over his torso.

“You know, we need to start using protection or we’ll end up with a soccer team like Isla and her husband.”

His chest vibrated. “I wouldn’t be opposed to it. You become starved for me when you’re pregnant.”

“What?” I pouted. “Are you saying our sex life is lacking when I’m not?”

He laughed. “Not at all, but we agreed on a big family.”

I let out a choked laugh. “No, you said we need this house for our big family. You never clarified it would be through birthing a dozen babies.”

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. “Four more.”

I lifted up my head and leveled him with a glare. “I’ve already given you two.”

“So two more,” he shot back.

My lips pursed. “One more.”

“Deal.”

Our love and family were messy and flawed, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

JOIN US TO CELEBRATE THE NEWEST
ADDITIONS TO OUR FAMILY



Oh
Baby

KAI & LIA ROMERO

PLEASE RSVP BY THE 27TH
PARTY TO START AT 1PM ON SATURDAY



WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you so much for reading *Wrathful King* which concludes the Stolen Empire trilogy! If you liked it, please consider leaving a review.

Your support means the world to me.

You can read the books of the characters that appeared in this book in my Belles and Mobsters series, starting with [Luciano](#), and in my Thorns of Omertà series, starting with [Thorns of Lust](#).

Thank you for reading!

XOXO

Eva Winners