



**DEADLY**

*Protectors*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JORDAN MARIE**



**deadly protector**

**jordan marie**

**Deadly Protector**

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

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## **BLURB**

**She was my wounded angel.**

**My obsession.**

**Now, she is the reason my heart beats.**

I took one look at the golden-haired goddess with pain in her eyes and knew I had to have her.

I let myself become the man she needed.

I know she thinks I'm harmless—a friend offering to help a damsel in distress.

She has no idea how wrong she is.

I may look like safety to her, but it's all a lie.

On the inside, I'm the man who will tear men apart piece by piece to keep them away from her.

I'm the man who will avenge every wrong she has ever endured.

***Because she belongs to me.***

If she knew the man I truly was, my sweet, innocent Angel would be terrified.

There's so much blood on my hands that they will never be clean.

So, I do what I must to hide who I am.

I'll do whatever it takes to protect her.

I will even teach her to stand proudly by my side and demand her own revenge.

The one thing I can't do?

Is let her go.

***Deadly Protector is book 4 of the Kingdom of Sin Series. It is a mafia romance that contains dark undertones and triggers. It can be read as a standalone.***

# prologue

...

Angelia

## *Six Years Earlier*

I can hear him breathing. I'm face down on my living room floor. My wrists are raw from pulling on the zip ties the man secured them with. My shoulders and forearms are filled with pain because they are twisted unnaturally. My legs are starting to go numb. I'm so dizzy. At first, I can't figure out why, then I realize he must have kept beating me even after the attack. My face is swollen, and I can't focus, my vision is very blurry and dimmed—almost like a gray haze.

Pain is shooting through me. Each of my hands are somehow tied to one of my ankles which has forced my legs to bend at the knee, making my thighs cramp. My lower extremities are securely tied, too. I'm not sure what with. The texture feels like a rough rope, but I can't be sure. I just know that I can't move. It's impossible.

I've been in this position for hours. It feels like years, but I know it's not. Still, after the man beat me and I blacked out, time stopped having meaning. I came home from the gym, only to have someone hit me from behind at the base of my skull. I don't know what with, but I do know it was something extremely heavy. Whoever did it had been waiting for me just inside my front door. I tried to turn and see who hit me, but I went down almost immediately, losing consciousness. I did see a figure standing over me. He said something, but I couldn't make it out. As the darkness closed in, I couldn't find the strength to raise my head. All I could see were his shoes,

black shiny, dress shoes. I succumbed to the pain and let the darkness claim me.

When I woke up, I was in this position. I began screaming only to have the man grip my hair, forcing my head back. I couldn't see his face, just a distorted mishmash of images as his hot, putrid breath fanned against my face. My ears were ringing so loudly that I couldn't hear his words. Then, all at once it broke through and I was terrified. His rough, hoarse voice purred. "If you want to scream, I'll give you something to scream about." With that, the blade of his knife roughly cut through my cheek in a sawing action. The weapon was so dull that it made each cut even more painful.

Blood oozes from my face and the pain is debilitatingly intense. I wonder for a second if I might black out again and I kind wanted to. I'm afraid of what might come next. Until this moment, I was sure my mother was the queen of evil. *I clearly had no idea just how dark this world truly was.*

The man hasn't raped me, but he did touch me in ways that makes fear constantly course through my body. He shoves a gag into my mouth and I'm pretty sure it's a pair of my underwear—which means the man has been going through my stuff. That would normally terrify me, but I'm more worried about what he's going to do to me.

I've gone from praying for someone to rescue me, to praying for death. I'm helpless. I can't scream for help. I can't even see who is doing this to me. I can't do anything but wait for everything to end. *Wait for my end.*

He had left me completely alone for at least a couple of hours. I don't have a clock in front of me, but I've been counting in my mind and the numbers add up to around two or two and a half hours. I've discovered that counting somehow puts my brain on autopilot, making me numb to what is around me. It doesn't completely save me, but it has kept me from getting completely lost in my terror.

I think I'm just waiting for him to kill me. He's standing over me, doing nothing, but the sound of his breathing is really beginning to get to me. I've tried not to show him that I can



hear him. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing all of the effects of the horror he's inflicting on me.

"When are we killing her?" I hear another male voice question.

I can't breathe. It hits me all at once. *I'm going to die.* My surprise makes me mad. I'm being weak. I was just praying for death. Why do I give my captor—or captors—the satisfaction of seeing how it affects me now? No matter how much I try to rein myself in, I can't. The devastation I feel is too indescribable. My eyes sting with the force of my tears. It's painful because my eyes are so swollen. There's also pain as they run down my face and into the jagged knife cuts. The salty evidence of my pain burns, amplifying the pain I'm already feeling.

Maybe if I didn't have the gag in my mouth, I would become even more pathetic and beg for my life. I can't do that, however. I can do nothing but wait. If there is a second man, he doesn't respond. Hell, maybe it is just one person and he's talking to himself. That's possible. It's clear he's insane.

I hear chairs shuffling around. Again, it could be either one or two people. The sad truth of it is that the room could have a hundred people in it, and I wouldn't even know. Some part of me tells me that I should listen. Yet, another—*larger*—part says it doesn't matter anymore. *Nothing does.* I think I hear talking again. It's out in the hall. I give up trying to figure out what they're saying. It's too exhausting. Besides, I realize that I've already given up. I let go of everything. It's not like there's much to live for anyway. For the first time since I woke up in hell, I am at peace.

*It's almost over.*

I hear the back door open and close, and then there is silence.

*Did they leave?* Relief floods through me for a second and then I hear the sound of shoes against my tiled floor.

"It's been great, bitch," the dark voice says. "But before I kill you, I'm going to have my fun. I have a message to send."

His words make no sense, but I give up thinking about them when his knife slides down my back, the tip grazing my skin as he cuts my clothes from my body. I try to fight him, but it just makes his cuts go deeper. I literally can't move. I can't do anything. There's no way I can stop this.

*I'm helpless.*

As I feel his cruel hands move over my ass, I cry harder. I may have thought I was in hell before, but clearly, I was just fooling myself.

*My hell has just begun.*

# angelina

...

“That’s it for today, Angelina, and I need you to keep practicing those positive mantras. You need to truly believe them.”

I smile up at Deanna. She’s been a lifesaver. I didn’t want to go to therapy. It made me feel even weaker than I already felt. I did it anyway, and it turned out to be one of the smartest things I’ve ever done. Okay, it *is* the smartest thing I’ve ever done. I doubt I’d still be here if I hadn’t found her.

“I’ll try,” I promise, knowing that I will. Still, no matter how much I tell myself that I am worthy and that I’m more than just a reflection in the mirror, I can’t seem to make myself believe it. It doesn’t matter how often Victor tries to convince me that it is the truth, I know I’ll never truly believe it. The thought of him, however, makes me smile—it always does.

Victor has stood by me since the night I discovered just how truly depraved my mother and Dante truly were. From the moment I moved out of my mom’s house, he’s been a constant in my life. We go places together. We have dinner together

almost every night and he usually sleeps at my house. It has become comfortable and—at least for me—life altering. Despite being scared to death to trust anyone, Victor has slipped through my defenses—so much so that I have secretly fallen in love with him. That’s something I will never tell him because of two reasons. First, he hasn’t really shown interest in something romantic with me. I mean, we hold hands. He kisses my forehead and my cheeks, but that’s it. He does hold me in bed at night. Yes, we sleep in the same bed, but both of us are fully clothed. Sometimes I wonder about what he would do if I came to bed naked, but I never will and that’s because of my second reason. The day I was attacked and raped left scars that changed who I am as a person. The attack itself leaves me terrified of any physical contact with a man. I’m not sure I can ever allow myself to be vulnerable again. Still, despite everything, Victor and I are extremely close, and our lives have become intertwined.

Victorio Davide Conroy has been my savior. He’s the bodyguard to my cousin Emmie and somehow, he’s taken to looking after me since I moved to Miami. I’m pretty sure Emmie is paying him to look after me. I don’t ask, because I guess if I knew for sure, then I’d put an end to it. I can’t imagine facing a day without him in it. I just can’t.

He wasn’t the reason I moved to Miami—not at all. I just needed far away from my mother and the entire state of Arizona. Not to mention, I wanted a new life after my ex-fiancé turned out to be a murdering liar.

*Murdering liar.*

Only I, the girl with the horrible luck, cursed life, and overall black cloud of an existence, would be engaged to a murderer. To be fair, I never truly liked Dante. Sure, he was good looking, and it was flattering that someone like him would even look twice at me. However, there was no way I would have gone out with him if my mother hadn’t made me. I sure as hell would have never become engaged to him. Honestly, I’m still not sure I did. I don’t remember him asking me. I never told him I would. I just remember him and mother discussing our wedding as if it was a forgone conclusion and I

didn't have a say in it. When I questioned her, mother backhanded me, busting my lip with her diamond ring in the process. Dante laughed, telling me that speaking back wasn't allowed. He took joy in reminding me that I was weak and needed someone strong to make sure I didn't act stupid again—like getting raped was all my fault. I was so shocked that I didn't know what to say. It didn't matter anyway because he and mother went back to talking like I didn't even exist. After a while, it was just easier to go along with everything. My mother had spent years making me believe I was too weak to stand on my own. If someone beats you down long enough, you eventually believe it. I figured Dante was what I deserved.

“Did you hear me?”

I look back at Deanna, all too aware that I spaced out. *Shit.*

“Sorry. I was lost in my thoughts.”

“And from the look on your face, they weren't good ones.”

I shrug. I've learned a long time ago that I can't lie to this woman. She has this sixth sense, voodoo therapist stuff. I'm convinced of it.

Her hand reaches out to rest on my shoulder. “You need to get back out there, Angelina. You need to see that all people aren't evil. You have had too much of that in your life.”

“That's not exactly true. I know that not everyone is evil. I have my cousin Emmie and Victor. They're good people.”

“Okay, well, then I'll amend my statement to say that you need to find more good people to fill your life. What about that guy that volunteers at the shelter?”

“Caleb? What about him?” I ask, my face scrunching up because I have no idea why she's bringing him up.

“You said he asked you out for coffee and yet you never agreed to go out with him. Maybe you should take a chance. Learn to spread your wings a little.”

“I don't think I'm ready for that,” I confess.

“Angelina, if you don't try, you're never going to be ready. You've been living life in a shell, afraid to peek your head out,



and you've been doing it for way too long. It's become safe for you."

"You make me sound like a turtle, Deanna," I mutter.

She laughs and then slowly shakes her head. "Just promise me you'll think about it."

"What do you expect me to do? Dating apps?" I mutter, feeling disgusted with myself. I refuse to acknowledge the fear that is trying to push to the forefront. I will *not* become that person again.

"How about you start with meeting Caleb for coffee—an event that would actually make you leave your house?"

"I leave the house. I had a girl's night with Emmie, Zoe, and Melina Saturday night," I huff, trying to defend myself.

"You've been doing that for months. That's progress and I'm very proud of you. Still, you need to keep pushing forward."

"I'm not ready. I thought the basis of our therapy was to move slowly. The last thing I need is to become a walking panic attack."

"You're not the same person. You're so much stronger. Surely you can see that?"

I stare at her for a moment and want to confess that I don't feel stronger at all. I talk to Deanna about everything. She has helped me, but she has no idea what a mess I am. I may tell her about it, but she hasn't seen the way I break out in sweat or feel how my heart speeds up into hyperspace if I get in a crowd. It can't be normal that I see and hear my attacker everywhere. How do I explain that? I never laid eyes on the man—or hell, maybe men—yet, I somehow see him in the face of every stranger I meet.

"I don't..."

"Just think about it. No decisions have to be made today. You just need to be open to trying."

I nod. I will think about it—which means I'll probably have nightmares. I'm so tired of not being whole. It's to the

point that now I don't know what being whole felt like.

*I've been broken too long.*

“We'll plan to meet at the same time next Thursday. Does that work for you?”

“I'll be here.”

“Good. It's kind of late. Do you want me to walk you to your car?”

“No. Thanks for the offer, but Victor drove me here. He's outside.”

“Victorio?” Deanna asks, sitting up straighter and reaching to the back of her head to make sure her hair is still secure and in place. It's pulled back in a classic bun. Her hair is blonde, sleek, and perfectly straight. She could be a model. She looks that way despite the black pinstriped suit dress that she's wearing.

I ignore the minor flare of jealousy that lights up inside of me. I also don't like how his full name rolls off her lips. It always annoys me, but for some reason it is worse right now. All women love to look at him. They practically throw themselves at him. I think that's the reason I call him Victor. I want to differentiate myself from all the other women. Which is stupid because he can have any woman he wants. A broken woman with an ugly scar and even uglier ones on the inside isn't his type. I doubt I'd be anyone's type.

“Yes,” I murmur, standing up, looking down at my frumpy jeans and the weird Christmas sweater that I'm wearing. It's fuzzy green and it looks like a kindergartner slapped red stockings and kitten heads on it. I thought it'd make Victor laugh because he always calls me *Kitten*. Now, I really wish I'd worn something else. “Would you like to go with me to the car and see him?” I offer with a laugh. I do my best to keep it from sounding bitter. Deanna is beautiful and Victor might like her. He deserves to be happy...

“I guess I could,” she practically giggles. Before she can say anything else, however, her office phone rings. She

frowns. “Or not. Looks like I’m not done for the day. Maybe next time,” she says.

“Okay,” I reply, thankfully. It’s getting old watching women drool over the man who has become my best friend—and the star in my nightly fantasies.

I sigh. Wishing for the millionth time that I could be normal and just a little pretty.

*Just a little...*

# victorio

...

I lean against the SUV, watching as my Kitten walks out of the stone and glass building. God, she takes my breath away. I smile as her hair bounces against her shoulders as she walks. It is a riot of waves and curls, and it never fails to make my breath catch. Her hair is back to its natural red, too. She was blonde when we first met. I much prefer her natural color. She's come so far in such a short time. I know Gia doesn't think so, but I know better. Most of the time, she barely resembles the quiet woman that I walked out of the staged funeral for Maxwell. There's still a lot of healing that needs to be done, but she's getting better. I'm so proud of her.

My gaze drops down to that crazy Christmas sweater she's wearing. Christmas is long past, but that didn't matter to her. I have to admit, I love that, and I love her silly sweater. It has fuzzy stockings on it with cats sticking out of them. My lips jerk with the need to laugh. I can't do that. I think she's adorable, but my girl has no self-esteem. She'd think I was making fun of her and that's the last thing I want.

I've been handling her gently. That's getting harder and harder to do. I want her. However, I've learned enough about her past through Emilia to know I can't claim her. It would terrify her. Gia's getting stronger, though. She's been on her own for a while, too. I see signs of her healing even if she doesn't. I also catch the way she looks at me when she thinks I'm not paying attention. Antonio and Niko are both giving me hell, telling me to make my move. I want to, but the last fucking thing I need is to send my woman back into hiding. She's too spectacular to watch as she stretches her wings. So, I'm biding my time and chasing other men away. It's something that is getting exhausting and would make me go off the deep end, except for the fact that she doesn't even notice. She has no idea of her effect on men.

*Shit, she has no idea how she affects me.*

The woman in question smiles at me before she gets close. Her cheeks heat in a blush that makes my dick ache. I keep my eyes trained on her, taking in the way her hips sway when she walks and her breasts bouncing with each step. God, she's phenomenal. As she gets closer, the scent of the salty sea and sweet vanilla collide. I don't know if it's a lotion or perfume she wears, but it never fails to hit me and make my fucking knees weak.

"What's that big smile for?" I ask as she gets closer.

"I was just thinking you're the only man in the world who doesn't look like he's melting while standing out in the Miami heat wearing a suit. It's like you're a superhero and don't know how to look anything less than perfect."

"That's me, Kitten. I can withstand the heat and I can leap over tall buildings."

"What happens now that I know your secret?"

"I'm not sure. No one has ever figured it out before."

"Superman wiped Lois Lane's memory."

"I don't remember that in the movie," I respond with a smirk.



“They changed everything in the new stuff. You need to watch the old movies. I stream them all the time.”

“I’m free tonight.”

I smile as her eyes go wide with my response. “Is there a reason you’re staying at the house so often, Victor?”

God, I love it when she calls me Victor. Gia has no way of knowing, but that’s the name my grandmother used. The fact that she uses it feels right. To me, it’s just another sign that this woman is meant to be mine.

“Maybe I just love the company.”

Her cheeks deepen in color and her eyes drop down. “Are you sure Emilia hasn’t asked you to keep an eye on me?”

I slide my hand against her cheek and tilt her head, so she’s forced to bring her eyes back to me. Her eyes are a sparkling green that reminds me of sea glass. I am very careful, always touching the scarred cheek, needing her to see that it doesn’t matter to me. “Trust me, Kitten. Emilia isn’t involved. I love spending time with you.”

“I’ll fix dinner.”

“Now, I’m definitely free. Your cooking is addictive.”

She laughs. “I think that just earned your favorite dinner.”

Before she can realize what I’m doing, I lean in and kiss her forehead. I want her lips, but I hold myself back. If this woman knew how many cold showers I’ve had to take because of her, she’d probably run for the hills and hide away from me forever.

When I pull back, her gaze is unfocused, and it makes me smile. She has no idea, but soon, she’s going to be mine. We can’t keep going like this. If we do, I’ll be locked in a padded cell because the woman is definitely driving me crazy.

I open the passenger door of my SUV and let her in. Once she gets settled in the seat, I grab the seatbelt and latch her in.

“Victor, seriously, I can do this myself. I could even drive myself, or heck, take an Uber.”

“If you ever get in a car with someone you don’t know, I’ll turn your ass pink, Kitten,” I grumble close to her ear, while I adjust her belt.

Her gasp caresses my ears as I close the door. I’m starting to think Antonio is right. It’s time I step up my game and make sure Gia knows I want her. *Fuck*. I’m not a man who gets scared, but I don’t want her to run away from me.

*I need to make sure she’s ready before I make my move.*

# angelina

...

It takes the entire ride home to calm my heartbeat. Victor has no idea how potent he is—at least not to me. I know he sees me as his kid sister. That’s the only possible explanation. He’s doing his best to take care of me. It’s sweet. I hate that he saw the mess I was when I found out just how twisted Dante truly was. I haven’t said a word about it to anyone, but I’m pretty sure my mother was involved in everything he did. I haven’t talked to her since the day I moved out and I don’t want to. She’s never been a mother to me. I kept thinking things would change and she would be the mother I always wanted one day. If anything, things just got worse and worse.

As we pull into the drive of my small one-bedroom rental, I sigh.

“Everything okay?”

“I’m just in a funky mood. I like to call it therapy lag,” I laugh.

Victor shuts his car off and turns to look at me. His head tilts to the side as he studies me.

“Was it a rough session today?” he asks, and the concern on his face makes butterflies take flight in my stomach. I feel my face grow warm. I fight the urge to touch my scar. I don’t want to draw attention to it. I know it’s like a shining beacon that I’m a failure. I’ve never been beautiful, even before my attack. Right now, I’d like nothing more than to be beautiful so that when Victor looked at me, he might see someone he could love. I shake my head, knowing that will never happen.

“Deanna is pushing me to get out more. She thinks I should start dating. She brought up Caleb.”

“Absolutely not,” Victor barks.

“Huh?” I squeak, blinking at the vehemence behind his words. I mean, I don’t really want to date, but why is Victor so against it? Does he see me as weak—so weak that dating will make me fall apart?

“You are not going out with Caleb Southwood,” he practically growls.

I blink slowly as I look at him.

“Um... I don’t remember telling you Caleb’s last name,” I whisper, my throat feeling constricted.

“You didn’t. I saw him flag you down outside when I picked you up at work a few weeks ago. So, I looked into him.”

“You looked *into* him?” I repeat, feeling—and probably looking—like my eyes are going to pop out of my head.

Victor gives me a cocky smile. It was the type of grin that I’m sure made the panties of all the women within a five-mile radius of him melt. I can say that because mine definitely did. He’s the only man I’ve ever wanted as a woman. Since my attack, that part of me died except when it comes to him.

It’s just another reason I didn’t fight my engagement to Dante more. He had no interest in me physically. The few times he held my hand or put his arm around me happened in

public. In private, we barely spoke. I didn't feel as if I was in danger with him—which is ironic since he turned out to be a murderer. Victor, however, makes me feel like no one else ever has. I'm almost a whole person when I'm around him—at least when it comes to feeling alive. When Victor touches me, I forget that I'm broken. I breathe easier and I even feel... *happy*.

*It's all very confusing.*

He surprises me further by capturing some of my hair and pulling it back behind my ear. His hand grazes over my scar, but his face doesn't even change. That's something else that is different with Victor. It's like he doesn't even see my scar when he looks at me. I don't get the looks of pity or revulsion that I do from so many. He almost makes me forget it's even there.

“If you think I'm letting anyone get close to you that I haven't vetted, you're wrong, Kitten. It's my job to protect you.”

His words begin to make me feel warm all over. That is, until that one-word registers in my brain. *Job*.

“Yeah,” I mumble, pulling away. I unbuckle my seatbelt and get out of the car before Victor has a chance to move. In fact, I'm on my doorstep, searching for my keys, by the time he makes it to me.

“Hey,” he murmurs, putting his hand on my hip and using his hold to pull me around to face him. “What's going on, Gia?”

My heart squeezes when he uses the name he made for me—a name no one used before him. I love it. It makes me feel beautiful. I get Ang, Angie, Angel, all the time, but until Victor, no one has called me Gia. I don't think I've ever heard it before, period. I don't know why he calls me that, but it makes me feel like someone else. *Someone less broken*. “Nothing,” I respond quietly, avoiding his eyes. I turn back to the door and finally figure out the right key to unlock the dang door.



“Why don’t I believe you?” Victor asks the question while closing the door and leaning against it.

After sparing him a glance, I turn away, kick off my shoes, and walk toward the kitchen. “Do you still want chicken alfredo?”

“Whatever you want to fix, sweetheart. If you don’t feel like cooking, we can order takeout.”

“That’s a waste of money. It doesn’t take me long to fix food.”

“I don’t think a to go order of Chinese or a pizza will break me.”

“Fine, order a pizza. I’m going to take a shower,” I grumble, still unable to look at him.

I move to exit the room, giving him a wide berth while simultaneously trying to ignore how good he smells. I almost make my escape—knowing the time to collect myself is definitely needed. I’m near the hall that leads to my bathroom when Victor catches me and wraps his hand around my wrist.

“Talk to me, Kitten. Why are you upset with me?”

“I’m not.”

“You’re lying. Don’t lie to me.”

I force myself to look into his eyes. It’s not easy, because they are deep, dark pools of liquid that make me thirsty for more of him. I try to keep my cool around Victor because I know I’m not in his league—I’ve *never* been in his league. What’s worse, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am a responsibility to him. I don’t know why he thinks he needs to be responsible for me. Maybe it is because of Emmie, I don’t know. What I do know is that right now, I’m on the verge of a panic attack and I need to get into a room by myself. What’s worse is, I don’t even have a reason for being like this. I *know* down to my soul that Victor would die before he’d hurt me. It’s just that he is hurting me by just being his amazing self—a man I can never have.

I moisten my lips and find the courage to speak. “I’m not mad at you, Victor. I’m just tired from work and over emotional.”

All of that was truthful. I’m not mad—could never be mad—at Victor. It’s just I think I could be in love with him and that can’t happen. I can’t allow myself to feel that way because it will destroy me when he finds someone he wants in his life. I know that will happen. A man like Victor is not meant to be alone. Some lucky woman will win his heart and when she does, I’ll be forced to watch her live out every fantasy I ever had.

“You have me worried, Kitten.”

My eyes close. God, why does he have to be so sweet?

“I don’t mean to,” I whisper. “I think I’m just really tired. You should go home tonight. You’ve been practically staying with me as it is. The break will do us both good, and I’m sure you have stuff at home that needs your attention.”

He studies me and I don’t know what he’s thinking, but I can almost feel his brain working as he tries to figure out what’s wrong with me. I can tell he’s unhappy. That’s the thing about Victor, he never hides his emotions from me.

*Sometimes I wish he would.*

“Go shower, sweetheart. I’ll order us some food and we’ll watch your Superman movie. If you still want me to leave, I’ll go after that.”

I close my eyes. I never really want him to leave. I can’t tell him that. So instead, I nod my acceptance and continue on to the bathroom. I do it all while pretending that my heart isn’t breaking.

*What is wrong with me?*

He’s done nothing wrong. Maybe, Deanna is right. I do need to date. If I do that, maybe I’ll get over this fascination I have for Victor. The last thing I want to do is ruin our friendship. I close the bathroom door when I get there and breathe easier. I don’t really want to date, but Deanna is right.

I need to start pushing myself—before I ruin the best relationship I've ever had in my life.

# victorio

...

I fucked up somewhere. I'd like to say that I have no idea where, but I'm pretty sure she got pissed because I looked into that motherfucker who has been asking her out. I worked like hell to try and find something wrong with the guy and it kills me that so far, I've found nothing. It seems impossible. Everyone has skeletons to hide but so far, I'm not finding anything on this Caleb asshole.

Gia was quiet through dinner and through this horrible Superman movie. She loves it though, I could see how her eyes lit up during certain scenes and sometimes, she would even mouth the dialogue along with the characters on the screen. It was adorable, and it took everything in me not to grab her and pull her into my arms. There's a voice inside my head, telling me to do that even now. I want to, so bad that I can taste it. The problem is, if I scare her away, I'll never forgive myself.

*Jesus!* This woman has me tied in knots and she has no idea. Antonio and Niko might be right. I should man up. In the

time we've been together, I've tried to spend my time letting her heal. I've made it a point to make sure she knows when I see her, I don't see her scars. I've made it a priority to let her know how special she is to me. I have been biding my time until I see that she's wanting more, and then I have always planned to make my move. I haven't yet because I still see fear in her eyes. I've been there when she has her panic attacks. I don't want to add to her panic and push her to the point she runs from me. I'm pretty sure that would kill me.

Maybe it's time I talk to Emilia. I smirk because I know Niko is going to have a fit over that. That just makes the idea more appealing. I turn my attention back to Gia and find she's fallen asleep. She's leaning against the arm of the sofa, and she looks so beautiful and innocent that my damn chest aches.

"What am I going to do with you, Kitten?" I whisper.

I stand and lift her up easily, cradling her against my chest. Her hair is down and dry from her shower. Her beautiful burnt auburn hair is falling over my arm in waves that remind me of liquid fire sparkling in the moonlight. Her face is relaxed for a change, something that rarely happens. It usually takes me all evening to get her to come out of her shell and past her walls. She changed into a set of Christmas pajamas that have little reindeers all over the green, furry bottoms. Her top is the same matching green fur, dark in color and long sleeves. There is nothing sexy about any of it, and yet, I'd never seen another woman look hotter in my life.

Gia is it for me. I knew that the moment I first saw her standing next to Dante. I had to fight down the urge to yank her away from him even then. I was the first person to get her out of the funeral home that night. Since then—with a few work exceptions—I've been pretty close to her side every evening. I know she doesn't understand why, but truthfully, she's the only one that doesn't realize that I'm completely and utterly gone for her. Time has done nothing to change that. If anything, it has made my need for her worse. I've been twiddling my thumbs like a damn moron just waiting.

In the meantime, I've watched Niko, Antonio, and now even Marco claim their women and get them pregnant. I want



that with Gia. It's not going to happen unless things change, and I have to admit that I'm tired of waiting. It's time. Hell, it's past time. I take her in as I lay her down on the bed.

With a heavy sigh I go to her bathroom and find my overnight bag that I brought over ages ago. I just replenish my clothes here and there. Gia does my laundry, so every new piece I bring just adds to what I already have here. I even have suits in her closet. *Does she even realize that we're practically living together?*

Of course, she doesn't.

I can't even blame her completely. A lot of this is on me. I haven't made my intentions clear. I have to start getting my angel to see me as her man. With that thought, I take my clothes off and slip on my joggers. Then, I slide into the bed and pull my woman into me, spooning her. When her sexy, curvy ass rubs against my groin, teasing my already hard cock I quietly groan. Closing my eyes, I tap down the urge to take her up on the offer she has no idea she's making. I wrap one hand around her stomach and hold her tightly. As I close my eyes, enveloped in her scent, I can only acknowledge the fact that nothing has ever felt this right in my life.

I would move heaven and hell for this woman.

*I just hope she doesn't require that before she gives in to me.*

# angelina

...

I stretch, feeling all warm and tingly. The only time I sleep this well is when Victor is in bed with me. It may seem weird to some that I don't freak out with a man in bed with me. The first night it happened, Victor came in when I was having a panic attack. He held me and talked me through it. Now, I just feel safe and cared for in his arms. On the nights when he sleeps on the couch, I wake up often. I didn't wake up once last night. *Not once.*

I burrow into my covers, loving the heat they provided. I breathe in deeply, loving the scent. I don't remember buying a different brand of detergent, but whatever I bought, I should keep getting it. It kind of reminds me of... *Victor.*

I freeze and drag my tired brain away from sleep. It's then I notice that I'm snuggled into warmth, but that warmth is not a big pile of covers. That warmth is the muscled body of the man who haunts my dreams nightly. His arms are around me, my leg is over his thigh, and my head is tucked under his chin.

My breath lodges in my chest and I can't seem to function. He's usually long gone when I wake up in the morning.

I carefully lean back so I can look up at him. He's asleep. His face is just as beautiful as it is when he's awake, but more relaxed and therefore, even more appealing. His long dark lashes fan out beautifully, making my breath stall once more. It should be against the law for a man to be as gorgeous as he is.

"Victor?" I whisper, my voice sounding breathless even to my own ears.

In response, he tightens his hold on me, mumbles slightly and then let's sleep drag him back under. I take a moment to enjoy the way his lips move and wonder how they would feel against mine.

I close my eyes as feelings and emotions I refuse to give a name to assail me. What would it feel like to give into what I want just once and press my lips against Victor's. Would he kiss me back? God, what I wouldn't give for him to kiss me just once.

*Just. Once.*

I stretch, thinking of doing just that, but right before I can kiss him, his eyes open.

"Kitten," he groans, his eyes studying me. Even full of sleep, I'm almost positive he's aware of what I was about to do. *God, I'm so stupid.*

"Victor—"

His name ends on a squeak as he tightens his hold on my hip and pulls me into him even deeper than I already was. He curls his head down and his nose grazes against mine. His hot breath fans against me and then I feel his lips against my ear.

"What do you want, sweetheart? Just ask and I'll give it to you."

I close my eyes, because I wanted him, and I already knew that I couldn't have him. There's no way that Victor could ever be mine. I'm too damaged both outside and... *in*. Besides,

there's no way a man like him would want me—at least not the way I need. He's my best friend. If I push for more, I'll lose him. I've never had much in my life. The future I wanted was erased the night I was violated and something in me died. I can't survive losing Victor. I never meant to let myself love him, but I do.

*I can't push him away.*

I want to look at him and tell him that I wanted something that was unattainable. That I wanted him. I couldn't find the courage to say that. My heart squeezed in my chest, filling me with pain.

“Something you can't give me,” I confess.

“Tell me what it is. I'll give it to you. You deserve everything good, Kitten.” My heart contracts again with his words as I force myself to keep my eyes open as he slides his hand against my neck. “Tell me,” he urges once more. His eyes sparkle as he looks at me and for a moment, I get lost in them.

“The stars in the sky,” I finally respond, knowing that he'd laugh, and I could let go of this hunger to tell him what I'm feeling.

For a second, I think he might be disappointed. Yet, he smiles as he brings his index finger across my eyebrow and down my nose, tapping the end of it. “Then I will find a way to bring them down from the sky and surround you with them, sweetheart.”

“If anyone could do it, you could, Victor.”

He leans in and my lungs seize. Is he going to kiss me? *Am I going insane?* My heart thumps wildly against my chest and my eyes close as he gets so close his lips are hovering just over mine. I don't know what alternate universe I've crossed into where Victor wants to kiss me, but I hope to God I never have to leave it.

A moment later a tsunami of arctic chilled reality drowns out the fantasy I've somehow managed to fall into. Victor does kiss me...*on my forehead*. I swallow, but make sure I don't

show him I'm upset. He has no idea how disappointed I am. Logically, I doubt he even realizes I thought he meant to kiss me. Maybe I'm being a big baby wanting to cry right now, but it hurts that Victor doesn't react to me like I want him too.

It's not his fault. It's mine. I doubt Emilia ever had one moment of trouble with Niko wanting her. I know Melina didn't with Antonio. I'm the one that is damaged goods.

"I better go shower. I can't be late this morning," I murmur, making sure my bright smile is still plastered on my face.

"I'll go scrounge us some breakfast," he says with a gentle smile.

"I don't have much of a stomach right now. I'll probably just grab me a banana."

"That's not a nutritious breakfast," he complains.

I shake my head as I get up, unable to look at his beautiful face any longer. "It's okay. I'll make sure to have a good lunch. I never have much of an appetite in the mornings."

I don't wait for a reply. I go to the bathroom and close the door. I close my eyes when I'm finally alone and then slowly sink to the floor. I definitely have to make some changes before I chase Victor away.

*Starting today.*

# victorio

...

I pull up outside of the shelter, waiting for my woman. Something was wrong again this morning. I have no idea what is going on in that gorgeous head of hers because she stays locked up tight. That's one reason I'm not really happy that Antonio is sending me to Greece. I want to stay here with Gia. I need to make her see how I feel about her—without scaring her off. It's important, though. I can't refuse him. She comes out and instantly it feels as if I'm sucker punched in the gut. She's so effortlessly beautiful, but it is more than that. There's a sweetness, a kindness that shines from her, along with an aura of innocence that despite the hell she's lived through, is still there. My smile disappears when I see that asshole Caleb walking out with her. That needs to stop. I don't want him anywhere near my woman. I sure as hell refuse to go to Greece until she's clear on that. I get out before I even realize what I'm doing and walk straight to her. My gaze never leaves Caleb, however. I stare the little prick down—especially as I wrap my arm around Gia's waist and pull her close.

“What are you doing here?” I frown down at him. He’s about the same height as my woman. It’s cute and sexy on her. On him it plays to my advantage. Gia wouldn’t like her man being the same size as her. There’s no way she can be attracted to him.

*Is there?*

“Uh...” the man falters.

“Victor,” my woman chastises.

“Well?” I prompt him, ignoring her, but giving her a squeeze by pressing my fingers into her hip. *God she’s soft.*

“J-just walking Angel out to her car t-t-to make sure she’s safe.”

“She’s safe. I’m here. I’m the one who takes care of her.”

“Uh, okay...”

“And don’t shorten her name. Her name is Angelina. Understand?” I grumble, not liking him being so familiar with her.

“Victor,” she gasps.

“What, Kitten?” I practically purr.

“Caleb is a friend. He’s not here to hurt me.”

“I don’t like him being close to you. I think I’m being nice. I’d prefer your name not even cross his lips.”

She blinks. Stares at me and then, blinks again.

“What?”

“Or that you ever cross his mind for that matter,” I grumble.

“Are you okay? Did you hit your head?”

“I’m golden, sweetheart. I’m getting ready to take you out for dinner and then we’re going to watch those weird-ass vampire movies you like.”

“You’re going to watch Twilight?” she breathes, looking at me like I’ve grown a third eye in my forehead.

“We’ll watch all of them. You don’t have to be at the shelter in the morning and I feel the need to spoil you. So, tonight is your favorite restaurant, and later your favorite movies.”

“What are you up to Victor?” she whispers.

I lean in to whisper against the shell of her ear. “I want to spoil my best girl. Give me this, Kitten.”

“Caleb—” she says as she turns around. I do too and I have to keep myself from laughing out loud because he’s gone. “Where did he go?” she asks, sounding confused.

“Who cares? I don’t like him hanging around you.”

“Victor—”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s head to the restaurant. Let me feed you.”

“You’re being very confusing today,” she mutters, making me smile.

Gia has been through so much and yet is naïve to anything normal when it comes to relationships. She’s more innocent than someone five years younger than her. Hell, maybe even more than that. Eventually, my Kitten will see the truth. It just fucking sucks I have to leave right now.

I’ve planned tonight with her so I could tell her I was leaving. I want her to know I’m going to miss her, and I’ll be back. The last thing I want is for Gia to think I’m abandoning her. She hasn’t had anyone in her life that cares about her. Her pariah of a mother is nothing but a bloodthirsty bitch. My woman was never cherished as a child, never treated with care or love. I don’t know how she came out so sweet and caring, but somehow, she did and I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure I give it to her now. She deserves that and more.

With that thought in mind, I press my fingers against the small of her back and guide her to my vehicle. Once she slides inside, I lean over and secure her seatbelt. She smiles, shaking her head at me, but I just lean down and let my lips graze her forehead. “Have to keep my best girl safe,” I whisper.



I pull back, even though it's the last thing I want to do. I close the door, reassuring myself that soon I'll be able to lay my claim on her.

*Too damn bad it can't be tonight.*

# angelina

...

“Okay, you’re going to have to tell me what’s going on here, Victor.” I tell him, squinting up at him—as if that would make me appear more intimidating.

He walks from my kitchen carrying a huge purple Tupperware bowl that is overflowing with popcorn. It’s also popcorn that he popped the old-fashioned way because he knows I like it better than microwaved popcorn. He puts the popcorn on the coffee table in front of us and gracefully sits down on the sofa with me, instantly curling me into his side.

I close my eyes for a minute as warmth spreads through my body and that buzz of electricity that enters my system every single time that Victor hugs me. I swallow down the hunger I always feel for his touch and his love and force myself to pull away slightly.

“Gia—”

“There is no way you’d show up without warning to pick me up, take me to the most expensive restaurant here, and then

come home to willingly watch ten hours of vampire romance on television. For one, you don't like chick flicks."

"Well, obviously we can't watch every movie tonight. I—" I hold up my hand interrupting him again.

"You would rather have your toenails pulled off one by one than watch over six hours of chick flicks. So just tell me what's going on now and you can skip the next two movies."

"I don't want to skip them. I want to be here with you."

"Yeah right," I scoff.

"I'm serious, Kitten, and if you ever mock me like that again, I'll show you how serious I am."

"And how would you do that?" I laugh.

"Try me, sweetheart. I dare you," he warns. The tone of his voice drops down and it's enough to make my heart run away with me. *Shit*. I don't know what's going on, but right now I get the feeling that Victor is a sleeping bear and the last thing I want to do is poke him.

"Tell me what is really going on," I respond quietly.

He sighs and then, before I even realize what he's doing, his arm goes around my back and his other slides under my legs. He lifts me up as if I weigh next to nothing and deposits me in his lap—ignoring my screeching of surprise.

"Sweetheart, I truly want to watch your movies with you tonight."

"You said they were lame, remember?" I huff.

"They are," he laughs.

"See—"

He leans down and kisses my cheek. My mouth slams shut. I don't know what to say to him. He just kissed me. Sure, it was on my cheek, but it's the first time he's kissed me there. I don't know why, but it feels more personal than when he presses his lips to my forehead. I mean, I love when he does that. It makes me feel cherished and it's sweet. This feels different, though.

“I have to go out of the country for work, Kitten.”

“I...uh, what?”

“I have to leave in the morning. I’m going with Antonio and a few men for a problem that Marco is having.”

“Oh,” I whisper, ignoring the pain I feel. It’s silly, but I’ve gotten so used to having Victor here that the thought of him not being around settles a weight on me that I don’t like. It’s a weight filled with despair because I don’t want him to leave me. *I want him to stay with me.*

“I wanted tonight with you so that we could have as much time together as we could get, before I was forced to leave.”

“I see.”

I can feel his eyes on me. They’re boring into me, flushing my whole body with heat. Victor is always intense, but right now it feels even more potent. I have to force myself to lift my gaze and look at him.

“Don’t you have anything you want to say to me, Gia?”

“Will it be dangerous where you’re going?” I ask him, instead of blabbering on about how much I miss him already and don’t want him to go.

“Gia, we don’t talk about my job, I know that.”

“Victor—”

“I also know that you are Emilia’s cousin. You’re not blind to what I do and the people I do it for.”

“You’re a bodyguard,” I murmur.

“For the most part,” he hedges.

I sigh. “Will you at least *try* to be safe and not to...” I let out a breath before finishing, “get hurt?”

“Worried about me, Kitten?”

“You’re my best friend, Victor. Of course, I am.”

His lips thin out with my answer. I think maybe I’ve upset him. It makes me nervous, so I try to backtrack. “I mean, you don’t have to feel that way. I’m sure you have a lot of friends.

I don't though. I have trouble trusting people. Really, I only have a handful of people in my life. I'm not complaining, I like it like that. Of everyone, though. I'm closest to you. That makes you my best friend, but you don't have to feel bad. I am not expecting to be that to you. I mean, I doubt I'm anything much to you. I'd like to think—"

His lips push against mine. My eyes squeeze shut as I close my mouth to stop from thrusting my tongue into his mouth. *Oh my God, what in the hell is happening right now?* This is more than any woman should have to endure. I know I'm stiff in his arms. Right now, I'm afraid to breathe. The temptation to deepen the kiss and beg him to let me love him is so strong that it could bring me to my knees.

When I don't open my mouth, he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and runs his tongue along the inside. I feel desire pooling at my core. I can feel my panties grow damp as juices begin to trickle against the lips of my pussy. I try to squeeze my inner thigh muscles, to fight against the desire that's growing inside of me. When he finally pulls back, I'm scared I may be having a heart attack because of the way it is pounding against my chest.

I bring my hand up to my lips, trying to ignore the way they tingle—or the hunger inside me wanting more. It takes a minute to get my breathing under control. I feel as if I'm going to cry if he doesn't bring his lips back to mine. God, what is wrong with me.

"Wh-Why did you do that?" I finally get out. I can't even recognize my own voice. Never have I sounded smokey and full of need. I know Victor can recognize my desire, but I choose to ignore that.

"Because you kept talking and spouting bullshit. I needed to shut you up."

My head jerks back in shock. Okay, I can admit it. Somewhere deep inside of me, I was hoping he'd look at me and tell me he kissed me because he always wanted to. I wanted him to confess that he's been imagining what my lips tasted like for the last year and he couldn't hold himself back

any longer. I sigh. Telling me he did it to shut me up hurts enough that it is almost painful. I push that away. I'll deal with it later.

"I'm sorry..." I whisper lamely, wishing I could just kick him instead.

"Kitten, look at me." I force myself to look him in the eyes. It's not easy, but I already feel like an idiot. I don't want to appear any weaker. His hand slides against my neck, while his thumb brushes against my cheek. "We're not friends, Gia."

I flinch with his words. I don't think it would have hurt this much if he had just stabbed me in the heart. "You're my friend," I insist stubbornly like an idiot.

"I'm not."

"But—"

"What is between us is more than friendship, Gia. Friends fade over time. I'm not fading from your life, Kitten. I'm here to stay."

"Not all friends leave you," I mutter, but even as I say it, I realize that most do. I have one friend that's been in my life for as long as I can remember, but even I have to admit my friendship with Ree isn't what it used to be. We still care about each other but if we go a month without talking, it's fine. We text, but again we can go days without doing that. Even when I lived close to her, we would only do girl's night once a month. We were both just busy.

"I'm here to stay, sweetheart. The sooner you get used to that the easier things will be."

"What things? You're being very confusing Victor."

"Then stop overthinking it. When you think of me, just remember I'm here to stay, right by your side."

I blink. If Victor had ever treated me like he saw me as a woman, I'd be tempted to try and kiss him and beg him to care for me, just a little. I don't do that, because I'm all too aware that my relationship with Victor has been very G rated. On the few brave nights where I tried to doll myself up and wear sexy

—at least sexy for me—pajamas, nothing happened. Nothing as in nada, zilch, zero, *nada!*

Deanna is right. I do need to start dating. It is the only way I'm going to survive this friendship-non-friendship with Victor. It's for that reason alone, I hide the turmoil I'm feeling and smile at him like I don't have a care in the world.

“We're not friends,” I respond. “We're like—”

“We're much deeper than that. It's you and me above everyone else. Do you understand what I'm telling you, Gia?”

*No. No I do not.*

“I think so,” I lie. “But before you get any deeper, can we just not? Let's enjoy the rest of the night and any heavier conversations can wait until you come back.” I don't really want to hear Victor tell me how we're family. I'm sure he'll use the word brother in this scenario. I think that might kill me.

He frowns, while staring at me and then finally sighs. “You'll wait for me to come back? You're not going to try running away and disappearing on me are you, sweetheart?”

I blink. “Why would I do that? This is my home now. I'm not leaving.”

“Gia—”

“Now *you're* being silly. It's not like anything has changed between us. I am an adult here you know.”

“Trust me, Kitten, I know,” he says with a sigh. For a moment, it looks like he's thinking of kissing me again. He leans in, his lips get closer and closer. Butterflies in my stomach flutter harder and harder. My eyes slowly drift shut while my heart runs away with me. I try to prepare for his kiss. It never comes, instead his lips graze my cheeks where his thumb was petting me just moments earlier.

I don't say anything. I'm too crushed in disappointment to utter actual words. Victor shifts on the couch, keeping me in his lap and depositing the bowl of popcorn on my lap. “Eat up

and let's see if that chick gets smarter and chooses the wolf this time.”

“Look at you! You did pay attention when we watched these before,” I laugh, hoping I don't giveaway the fact that my heart is breaking. My voice sounds almost shrill to my own ears.

“At least to certain parts,” he compromises.

“You're full of surprises,” I joke, and worry he'll notice that I am avoiding looking in his eyes. I play it off like I'm engrossed in the television as he clicks play on the remote. Victor laughs and I somehow manage to get through the second movie before I beg out for the night and tell him I need to go to bed. I thought that would be my escape, but it's not. Victor carries me to the bed and decides to sleep with me just like he did the night before. I want to scream at him that I have needs and just because he's not attracted to me, doesn't mean that I feel the same. I don't because although I might have needs, the truth is, even if Victor liked me, I'm not sure I could be that way with him. I'm not sure I could with any man. Although, if I could it would be with Victor. God, I'm a mess—a mess that is in trouble.

I take a deep breath, letting Victor's scent move around me, calming me. I can't lose him, I just can't. If all we can have is what we have right now, I need to somehow stop thinking of him like he's supposed to be my man physically. Deanna was definitely right. I need to start dating. If I can find someone to see me as a woman, maybe that will be enough to dim this attraction to Victor so that I can be what he wants. I'll always want him, but I need to bury my need for him. I have to, because the thought of trying to be physical with him and failing—losing him because I'm not whole—is out of the question. I need Victor in my life.

With my decision made, I decide that I'll start while he is out of town. With any luck, it will help me to somehow be normal around the man when he gets back. That's my final thought as I drift off to sleep with Victor's arm wrapped around my stomach and his fingers laced with mine—wishing he loved me the way I love him.



Did I mention I'm in trouble?

# angelina

...

*“Did you have a hard day?”*

I stare at Victor’s text and sigh. He’s been gone for weeks. I miss him more than I thought was possible. The first week I thought I would die if I didn’t see him soon. I lived for his texts and even more when he would call me. Now, the second week is over and tomorrow will be three weeks. I’ve gotten used to being alone. I didn’t even call Victor back when I missed his call last night. I had my cellphone turned off and enjoyed girl’s night. It was a tame night with Emilia, who is pregnant and didn’t want to go out. Zoe was with Callan, and Melina was apparently unable to come, too. I missed them both, but I have to say that I was glad to have time with just Emilia. I really needed it. I even vented a little about Victor. She suggested that he might like me and that was the issue. I suggested she was insane. When I explained to her what he said about us not being friends, she got the strangest look on her face, but she finally let me change the subject.

It hurt not to call him back, but I know I needed to create some distance between us. I need to get stronger. My last session with Deanna was all about being more self-reliant and learning to stand on my own. Well, that and going out on dates. She's insistent that I need to start healing, and for some reason, dating is supposed to help in that. I think she's the crazy one here, not me. Still, I do think being around other men might keep me from doing something stupid and ruining my friendship with Victor. He plans on keeping us in one another's lives. I can't see him as family and yet, he made it clear we're not just friends—or rather *not* friends.

*"It was fine."*

I grimace as I type in my response and send it. God, that sounds lame when I read it out loud. I sigh. Everyone knows that it's not good when a woman uses the term fine. Whatever, it doesn't matter. I have to quit being so touchy. I need to learn to be more casual and natural when it's about Victor. That's the only way I'm going to survive whatever relationship he sees us having. I honestly have no idea what he was trying to explain and the more time that goes by, the more it hurts.

I literally jump on the bed and squeal, throwing my phone up in the air when it rings. *Damn it.* I fumble around and catch it after it rolls around against my fingers as I try to steady it. It doesn't surprise me when I see it's Victor. I close my eyes, squeezing them against the tension I suddenly feel in my body. The phone continues to ring and I let out a sigh.

"Hi, Victor."

"What's going on with you?" he asks. I can't tell if he's pissed or if he's worried. It could be a mixture of the two. For some reason, that just depresses me more.

"Nothing. I'm just tired."

"So, you did have a bad day," he responds, his voice relaxing a bit.

"Not really. I told you I'm fine. Just a little cranky I guess."

“Gia, you don’t get cranky. I haven’t seen that from you in all the time we’ve known one another.”

“Hmm...” I murmur, not really knowing what else to say.

“I miss you, Kitten.”

His words feel as if they crack my heart open. I clear my throat. “I...I miss you, too, Victor. Are you enjoying Greece?”

“Not even a little. I want to get home to you. What are you making for dinner tonight?”

*Shit.* That’s a question I didn’t really want him to ask. I am not sure how to answer it. I mean, it’s not like Victor should care what I’m doing tonight. I know that logically, but for some reason, I’m still worried about telling him. God, I’m crazy.

“I haven’t had dinner yet. I’m going out to eat,” I tell him. “I’m uh... I’m not sure where I’m going yet. I guess I’ll order something wherever I finally end up.”

*I guess I’ll order something, geez. God, I’m an idiot.*

“You should stay in. Zane is back in town. I can have him pick a pizza up for you.”

“That’s not necessary. I’m going to meet some friends. I’ll be fine.”

“Ladies night?” he says, and I can almost hear the smile in his voice. If I close my eyes—which I’m avoiding doing right now—I could see his smile and the way his dark eyes would light up.

“That was last night,” I murmur. “Everyone was busy except Emilia, so we just hung at her house and watched movies.”

“Oh, that’s why I didn’t hear from you.”

*Not really, but sure let’s go with that.* “Hey, I better go or I’m going to be late. Take care, Victor.”

“Gia, wait. I’ve missed you. Give me a couple of minutes here. Who are you going out with?”

“No one you know really. I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be late.”

“Gia—”

“Victor, I have to go. If I don’t get off here, I’m going to be late for my first date in forever. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Have fun in Greece.”

“Date? Gia—”

“I have to go, Victor. Have a good night.”

I hang up and I’ve barely taken two steps before it begins ringing. I send it to voicemail. I get a notification and it rings again not one minute later. I roll my eyes. I send it to voicemail and then before I can think twice about it, I turn my phone off. I know he’s switching into some kind of protective brother mode. I don’t want that. I need to push forward with my plan.

I toss my cell inside my clutch purse and snap it shut. I look into the full-length mirror and frown. I have my hair combed down in waves and I’ve pulled it forward so that it covers most of the side of my face. It doesn’t hide my scar, but it lessens its effect. I’m wearing a soft lavender silk blouse that has long sleeves and hits me about mid-thigh. I have on my best jeans. They stretch and show off my ample curves, but not in an obvious way. I look decent. I wasn’t pretty before the attack. Since it, I’ve felt nothing but ugly. My mother refused to have plastic surgery done. She said I needed to learn from my mistakes—as if it was my fault. It’s the only thing I ever begged her for in my entire life. It’s too late now. If I tried to have anything done, it would be like telling the world I haven’t put the past behind me. It would make me feel weaker than I already am. I’m not willing to do that. Perhaps it is a stupid reason, but it is who I am.

I’m not sure how long I stand, staring at myself. Time kind of stops for me. I think I might be on the verge of a panic attack. My heart is going crazy and that only gets worse when my doorbell rings. I feel sick to my stomach, and it would probably be embarrassing to barf on my date.

I frown when I think of my date. Victor specifically asked me not to go out with Caleb and to stay away from him. I probably would have listened to him, but it was clear that holding out for Victor to think of me as a woman would never be an option. That means, he doesn't get a say so in who I date. Besides, I made sure to check Caleb out. I'm good at internet searches, plus I have connections thanks to Emilia. A background check was easy to achieve. It sounds like a lot. I know it does, but with my history, I couldn't help it. I don't want to say I'm scared because I'm not.

*I'm petrified.*

When the doorbell rings again, I make a fist and try to calm the trembling I feel. I can do this. I'm still not positive Deanna is right, but I think she might be. I definitely need to make changes. It's more than that, though. I want to live. I don't want my attackers to win and right now, they are.

I take a breath and exhale, the sound shakier than it should be. Then, I force myself to walk to the door. In my mind, I'm singing an old remembered song from a Christmas cartoon that I used to watch as a child. "*Put one foot in front of the other and soon you'll be walking out the door.*" I even hum it out loud as I walk to the door. I run my hand down my pants leg to try and hide the way I've suddenly started sweating.

I unlock it and plaster a fake smile on my face, ready to greet Caleb. "Hey Cal—" I stop talking when it's not Caleb's face staring back at me. My forehead furls in confusion and my eyes narrow as I stare at Zane, one of Antonio's men, in front of the door.

"Zane?"

"Hey, Angel. I'm supposed to escort you out tonight. Victorio said you were going out for dinner."

"Um... I don't need you to escort me, Zane. I have a date coming—"

"I'm afraid that Mr. Southwood had to cancel for the night."

“Mr. Southwood? Wait, how did you know I was going out with Caleb?”

“I told you, he had to cancel.”

“How do you know he was canceling? What is going on here, Zane?” I huff, my hands on my hips.

“That’s probably something you should take up with Victorio.”

I shake my head, not understanding what is going on. “Why would I take up anything with Victor? What does he have to do with this?”

“I think you should ask him,” he insists.

“Did you send Caleb away and ruin my date, Zane?” I ask, barely believing what I’m asking. I know Victor didn’t want me going out with Caleb, but surely, he’s not so unhinged that he would pull something like this. *Is he?*

“I did as I was ordered and I can see it has pissed you off, but I’d just like to ask you to not shoot the messenger.”

“Give me your phone,” I grumble, holding out my hand.

“What?”

“I said, give me your phone. Mine is turned off and it’d take too long to boot up. So, give me yours.”

He looks at me, his expression dubious to say the least. He does, however, put his phone in my hand.

“Thanks,” I mutter sarcastically. I angle myself so I can hold up the phone to his face and swipe up as it unlocks. Then, I go to recent calls and what I see doesn’t surprise me in the least. I quickly click hit redial and wait for Victor to answer. It just takes a couple rings.

“Did you catch that little asshole?”

“The only asshole I can think of that needs caught is you. I can’t believe you deliberately sabotaged my date with Caleb!”

“I don’t know why it should surprise you. We already talked about him and came to an understanding. You weren’t

to see that prick. I don't want him near you."

"Jesus. Who do you think you are Victorio Davide Conroy?"

"Davide?" Zane snickers in the background.

"You know who I am, Kitten."

"Oh, I remember. You're not my friend. You're more special than that. You're family."

"I never said we were family," he huffs.

"Wow. So, you're not my family and you're not my friend because you're more special than that."

"Exactly," he snaps. "Did you fucking forget that in the time I've been away? I told you I'm not fading out of your life, Gia. I'm here to stay. I won't allow you to replace me, especially with a stupid idiot like Caleb Southwood."

I blink. I think at this point my head is about to explode. "I'm not replacing you, you asshole. Caleb is my friend—you *know* that thing you don't want to be. Since, I don't know *who* you are to me thanks to your big speech about us not being friends, I don't know *what* we are. So, I couldn't replace you if I wanted to, and right now I really would like to!"

"Damn it, Angelina," he growls and my entire body jerks because he uses my full name. It feels like something dies inside of me with his curse. "I told you that it's you and me against the world. What the fuck do you think that means?"

"It's a line from a movie, *Victorio*. I don't know what it means. You were about as clear as mud. What I do know is I'm done with this conversation. I'm going to go in my apartment, call Caleb and apologize, and you better call off your watchdog. Whatever this game is you're playing, I don't want to play it."

"You do not call me Victorio. That is not who I am to you."

"It's your name," I breathe out, suddenly feeling very tired.



“To you I am Victor. That’s your name for me, and only yours.”

“I have to go, *Victorio*.”

“I’ll be home in two days. I won’t be able to stay. I know I’ll have to head out again, but I’ll be home, and you and I are going to hash this out, Kitten.”

“There’s nothing to hash out.”

“There is and you know it.”

“You’re right. You need to get it in your brain that just because you don’t see me as someone you want to be close to and have a friendship with, it doesn’t mean other people won’t. You can’t ruin that for me. I’ve cut myself off enough. I’m going to do what Deanna says and start living. I want to make a life for myself.”

The words hurt to say. I didn’t mean to cause more issues with Victor. I am only trying to do what I need to do so that I don’t go crazy and confess to him how much I love him. Victor is making that impossible and I’m starting to feel desperate. I was already on the precipice of telling him I’m trying to find someone I can spend time with, so I don’t make a fool of myself and kiss him.

“You can, but it will fucking be me in that life with you, Gia. Not some dumb fuck who wouldn’t even know what to do with a woman as special as you are.”

“I... What *exactly* are you saying?” I’m trying to ignore that small hope that begins to bloom inside of me.

“You’re mine, Gia. You’ve been mine from the first moment I laid eyes on you. When I said it was you and me, that’s exactly what I meant.”

“But—”

“Two days, sweetheart. I’ll be home in two days and then we will have this out. Understand?”

“Not really,” I tell him truthfully.

“You will,” he warns me and then he hangs up. I stare down at the phone and go over the entire conversation—trying to make sense of it. It doesn’t help. I’m still confused as hell.

“Do I get my phone back now?” Zane asks.

I force myself to look up at him and sigh, handing it to him. “Here.”

“Thanks, Angel. Do you want me to take you to get something to eat?”

“Victor is supposed to call you and tell you that you’re released from duty. It’s not like I’ll be going out with Caleb tonight anyway.” I sigh and I don’t bother calling him Victorio. I only did that to piss him off anyway.

Zane laughs. “Angel, we’ve been watching you since Victorio left for Greece. He called and asked Antonio to put some guards at your door. I volunteered. I’m just back from Greece and worn out. I’d much rather spend the evening with you than get a harder job handed to me. Jet lag is a real thing.”

“I... he...”

“I can tell you’re upset,” Zane mutters.

“Well, yeah. This is crazy.”

“Victorio cares about you, Angel. Everyone knows it. We’ve known it for a long time. He’s not going to leave you unprotected—especially while he’s in another country.”

“I don’t think I’m equipped enough to deal with this tonight,” I tell him truthfully. My head is all over the place and I can’t tell if I’m happy, scared, or pissed off. I think I’m a mixture of all three.

“What do you want to do?”

“Do you want to risk Victor’s wrath and take me out for a burger?”

“I’m not scared of him, but you look too pretty for a burger. How about a streak?”

“I’m more of a pasta kind of girl,” I murmur.

“That’s okay, Casino Steakhouse has the best choice of steak and pastas around.”

“Now you’re speaking my language,” I respond. Somehow, I find a way to smile. I really do need to get out. I need a break.

“Then let’s do this,” he says, holding his arm out to me. I wrap mine around it and let him lead me out to the black SUV that is in my driveway. I know I need to call Caleb, but I really just don’t want to deal with anything right now.

Maybe later I will get somewhere, but for right now, I just want to enjoy a night out. I’ll worry about Victor and everything else when he gets home. Maybe I can find a way to disappear off the face of the Earth in the next two days.

*A girl can hope.*

# victorio

...

“I need to go home for a couple of days. I can come back. I just need some personal time to straighten out a few issues,” I explain to Antonio.

I’m video chatting him and Melina. If I had known that Angelina was going to pull her shit, I would have flown back with him yesterday. He couldn’t make himself stay away from his woman any longer. Some of the men accused him of being pussy whipped and he just laughed like he didn’t have a care in the world. The change Melina has made in him is really remarkable. Then again, if I had been able to claim Angelina completely when I first wanted to, I’d have no problem being pussy whipped by her. Hell, I am already if the truth was known. I don’t even care, either. I just want her.

“Thank God. While you’re back here, I need you to go to the doctor, Victorio,” Melina speaks up.

“Huh?”

“To get your freaking head examined. Emilia said you told Angelina that you weren’t friends.”

“I—”

“Did you actually tell her that you weren’t going anywhere, that you’d always be there with her, but you weren’t friends.”

“So? We’re not friends,” I mutter, hating that I sound defensive.

“Jesus, Victorio, you seem so smart. You can’t be that stupid,” Melina mutters.

“Lina,” Antonio argues, trying to take up for me. I like Melina, but she can be annoying as fuck at times. I mean, not in a bad way. She’s perfect for the boss. I just prefer my women... Fuck, I prefer my *woman* to be sweet, quiet, shy, sexy without knowing it, gentle, tender, and... exactly how she is. God, I care for Angelina more and more every day.

*I love her.*

“What? Do you know how heartbroken Angelina was? Emilia spent all night letting her cry on her shoulder. I don’t know what you were *trying* to do, Victorio, I really don’t.

“Damn it—”

“What you did, though, is convince her you don’t care about her at all. That you see her as a duty—someone weak that you have to take care of.”

“All I said was that we weren’t friends. I didn’t mean—”

“That’s bullshit. If you don’t look at Angelina and see her as a friend, then you need to let her go now.”

“Hold up. I hate to tell you this, baby, but being your friend is the last thing I think when I see you,” Antonio laughs, and I grunt in agreement.

“Really?” Melina huffs.

“Absolutely,” he confirms.

“So, does that mean you don’t share your problems with me at night?”

“Of course. You know I do.”

“And I share mine with you, right?” she asks.

He nods.

“Do we talk every night about our days in general?”

He nods again.

“When my brothers piss me off or I get tired of Helen’s whining about Marco. Who do I vent to?”

“Emilia,” I interject.

“Me,” Antonio responds, ignoring me. He pulls his wife into his arms. She gives him a smile that holds secrets that I don’t want to know, but I’m envious of the two of them all the same.

“That’s right. I love Emilia, Zoe, and Angelina but you are my rock. You *are* my best friend because I know no matter what, I’m safe to let my guard down and just be me.”

“Always,” he breathes and now he’s kissing on her neck.

I’m about to disconnect the call. I’m pretty sure I know where this is leading, and I don’t need to see that. It’s well-known that before she got pregnant that Melina and Antonio were big into sex wherever and whenever—often with others watching. I don’t judge. To each their own, I think. Still, I never want anyone seeing my angel’s body but me. That’s a precious gift for me and me alone. Before I can disconnect the call, Milena turns to me—although she does it while tilting her head to give her husband more access to her neck.

“The point is, Victorio, if you are in a relationship of mutual love and respect that person is your best friend. They’re your lover, your joy, your reason for pushing through the bullshit this world sends your way. They’re everything to you. You can’t have one without the other. If you can’t look at Angelina and see her as your best friend, then let her go. She’s been hurt enough. She only needs a man who is willing to give her everything.”

By the end of her speech, she's sounding more than a little breathless—which is my cue to say goodbye.

“Got it. Talk soon,” I mutter but as I click the chat off, Antonio is already taking off her clothes. *Yikes.*

I toss my phone on the mattress and lean back on my bed. I'm worn out. The time difference between Greece and the US sucks ass. I've not been sleeping just so I can talk to Gia. Today, I'll sleep on the plane. I'm taking a commercial flight since the other jets are in use. I did buy first-class tickets just so I can sleep.

I think over everything Melina said. I can't say she's wrong. I still can't look at Gia and see her as my friend. To me a friend is someone you have a beer with, shoot the shit and discuss work and life. The last thing I want to do is discuss work with my woman. However, Melina did say they become your everything and that I can absolutely see. Gia is already my everything. So, I can get behind that.

I'm not letting her go. Gia may deserve better than me, but I'm who she's getting. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not stupid. I'm not giving her up.

There's no way in hell. *She's mine.*

# angelina

...

I frown. I came back from eating out with Zane two hours ago. I'm now looking at the window and he's leaning on my front porch post.

*What the hell?*

I open the door and frown. "Zane?"

"Hey, Angel. What's up?"

"What are you still doing here?"

"I told you, Victorio asked me to watch you while he was in Greece. Now, I was supposed to make sure you didn't see me, but since you have, I'm not bothering to hide," he responds with a shrug. "Your porch is more comfortable than the ground over there in the trees."

I gasp, "You've been hiding in the trees since Victor left?"

"Nah, I mean, someone has but not me. I've been in Greece myself until recently."

"Oh. Still, you can't stay out here. It's cold."



“Babe, we’re in Miami. Miami doesn’t get cold,” he laughs.

I don’t think another man has ever called me babe before. It’s weird to hear, but I can’t deny there’s a little thrill that moves through me when Zane says it. It’s nothing like when Victor calls me sweetheart or shortens my name to Gia, but it’s nice just the same.

I stand back from the door opening it wider. “Come inside,” I tell him.

“Huh?”

“It may not be really cold, but it is cold. Plus, you’re standing up and the only chair out here is one of those cheap foldable ones. Come inside you can have the sofa and at least get some sleep.”

“I’m supposed to be watching you, not sleeping,” he chuckles.

“Then, you can stay awake on the sofa. Although, I will point out that you will be inside with me. If anyone breaks in, even if you’re asleep, you’d wake up. Besides, this is a gated community. Only select people have permission to get inside to begin with. I’m also regretting giving Antonio, and therefore his employees, clearance,” I mumble.

Zane laughs.

“Seriously, I doubt very seriously anyone is going to break in. I hardly know anyone in Miami.”

“Most criminals don’t break in on people they know, Angel.”

“Yeah, but if they manage to break into this community, I’m pretty sure a smart thief will go for the nicer houses.”

I smirk at him and slowly watch as his smile spreads. He shakes his head. “Fine, I’ll stay inside. I should warn you, though. This probably won’t make Victorio happy.”

“Victor will just have to suck it up,” I mutter.

Once Zane walks in, he closes the door and follows me into the living room. “He still in the doghouse?” he wonders.

“He acted like an idiot,” I complain. “I’m going to go get you a pillow and some sheets and a blanket.” I frown as I turn to leave the room.

“Just a blanket and pillow are fine. Really, just a pillow is all I need.”

“You need a pair of sweats,” I mumble. “You can’t sleep in a suit.”

“Babe, I don’t think I can fit in your pants. Besides, it’s hard to chase after someone trying to break in a house when I’m not dressed.”

“I have some of Victor’s sweatpants. You can wear those. You can chase after whoever in those and you know it.”

“Victorio didn’t tell me you were so bossy,” he says as he follows me down the hall.

I open the small hall closet and take out a spare pillow, a fresh pillowcase, and a pale beige velour blanket. The pillowcase has little pink flowers interconnected by vines in the design. Zane isn’t exactly a pink flowers kind of guy, but he’s out of luck. All my sheets are kind of dainty and pretty. It’s something that Victor balked about and made me laugh. I didn’t realize men could have such an overdose of testosterone that they are offended by flowers.

“I’m not bossy,” I puff out as he takes the blanket and things from me. I follow him back into the living area. He puts everything in a chair and then picks up the blanket and spreads it out on the couch. I watch him and then walk into my bedroom. I open the top dresser drawer and find some of Victor’s things. I grab a pair of gray sweats and head back to my guest.

I gave Victor a drawer to keep him from searching forever out of his overnight bag. If I was honest, I did it because I liked the way it felt to have his clothes next to mine. Of course, that was before he told me that we weren’t friends. It bothers me, I’d be lying if I said it didn’t. Emilia didn’t want

me to overreact. She said men are stupid sometimes and I needed to talk to him about everything. I plan on it, but I know the real problem is that no matter what Victor says, he will never care about me like I do him. I mean, I've always realized that, but the distance between us now is just physical proof. Deanna's words come back to haunt me. Victor is safe. I'm comfortable—happy even.

*I need to push myself.*

“Keep telling yourself that,” he replies to my earlier statement, obviously not agreeing. I force my mind to go back to our conversation and put thoughts of Victor away for a bit.

I throw the sweats at him. He catches them grinning at me. “Go change. I'm going to bed. If you're nice, I'll cook you breakfast before I go to the shelter in the morning.”

“Victorio mentioned that you worked in town at the Hope Shelter for Women.”

I nod. “Yeah, I've worked there since I moved here. I'm the office manager. I've been sitting in on some of the counseling sessions and helping the staff where I can. I'm thinking of going back to school for a degree in social work. I mean, I'd be doing more to help the women and kids there. Plus, I'd make more money. Right now, it doesn't pay a lot, but I keep the lights on,” I joke.

“It's an admirable job and I think you'd be a great social worker. What made you want to work there?”

“I like making a difference. My therapist pulled some strings and helped get me the position.” I turn away, needing to stop talking about myself. It makes me uncomfortable. “Now, if you want breakfast, go change. I know it's only nine, but I'm tired and I really need to go to bed.”

I start walking to the bedroom and he follows, but he stops by the bathroom door and calls my name. “Angel?”

I turn so I can see him. “Yeah?”

“What are you fixing for breakfast?”

I laugh, shaking my head, a smile still on my face as I look at him. “What’s your favorite thing to eat?”

“I don’t really do breakfast.”

“Then, what’s your favorite food in general?”

“Lemon meringue pie,” he says with a devilish smile.

“Then, lemon pancakes it is.”

“Lemon pancakes?” he asks, sounding intrigued. “Is that a thing?”

“It is now. I figure I owe you for the bullshit that Victor pulled. Talk to you in the morning, Zane.”

“Sweet dreams, Angel.”

I sigh and don’t respond. I can’t ever remember having sweet dreams. *Ever*. I doubt tonight will be any different. Deanna’s words come back at me. I need to change things. I do want a normal life one day. I do. *I’m just not sure it’s possible.*

# angelina

...

I could feel the knife pressing against my throat. There must be a rag or blindfold over my eyes. I can't see anything. No, that's not right. My head is pushed into the mattress. There's pressure on the back of my head. I try to fight it and lift up, but I can't. I feel fingers pressing into my skin. Bile rises up in my throat. I can't breathe. This can't be happening again. It can't. I won't survive a second time. I'm not strong enough.

*I just can't do it.*

I start sobbing uncontrollably. My cries are so harsh that they rock my body. I can't stop trembling. I'm going into shock. *How did he get in?* I feel his hand wrap around my hair as he pulls my head back, pain erupts in my scalp. I scream out, the sound loud now that he's forced my face away from the mattress.

"Angel! Angel!" I hear someone yelling. It's not Victor, though. I try to figure out who it is, but I can feel the knife cutting into my cheek, reopening an old wound that will never fade. *Will never go away.*

“Stop!” I scream. I reach up, surprised my hands are free. I claw at my face, trying to grasp the knife to pull it away from me. “Not again! I won’t let you do this to me again!”

“Angel! Wake up. It’s okay. You’re okay!”

I hear the man’s voice in the distance, trying to tell me I’m okay, but I know I’m not. I’m not okay—not at all. I won’t be able to survive this. I just won’t. “Please don’t do this,” I whimper and God, I hate that I’m begging.

“Angel, follow my voice. You’re okay. You’re okay. Open those eyes, baby. Open those pretty eyes.”

“Don’t...” I whisper. I’m not sure what I want to say, I just know I want him to leave me alone. I’m struggling. I try to fight my attacker, but everything starts to spin like I’m being thrown around in some horrible carnival ride and the guy forgot to secure my safety belt. I can’t breathe. My nose is burning. Tears are stinging my eyes, and everything becomes even blurrier.

“Follow my voice, sweetheart. Pull yourself out.”

I feel arms go around me. My body grows even more tense.

“It’s Zane. You’re safe. You’re safe, Angel.”

Zane...

I finally manage to shake the remnants of the nightmare I was stuck in.

I pull back and look at the man that is now sitting on the side of my bed holding me in his arms. His dark hair is ruffled. His eyes are worried and sleepy at the same time. He’s not wearing a shirt but does have on the sweats I gave him last night. His hand is under my hair as he holds my face, his thumb making a circular motion on the apple of my cheek.

“Are you okay now?” he asks, sincerely worried.

I want to say yes, but I can’t. I look at his face, instantly embarrassed and wishing it was Victor’s. I drop my gaze down to my lap and I burst into tears. The sobs overtake me. They’re loud and forceful, tearing through my body to the point of

pain. I'm so tired of the attack ruling my life. I don't want it to, and yet, it just never goes away. It's like an abscess that is inside of me that continually eats away at me—no matter how hard I try to heal.

“Kitten!” I hear over my cries, but I can't stop crying long enough to figure out if Victor's voice is real or just a figment of my imagination. Zane wraps his arms around me, stroking my back gently and whispering that everything is going to be okay.

He's wrong, though. Nothing will ever be okay. Nothing ever changes.

“Gia...”

I look up to see Victor bracing his arms on my door as his body blocks the entire opening. I can't really see his face. It's all blurry, so I can't really see his features. I'd like to say that I stop crying, but I don't. I cry harder—to the point my sobs sound like wails now.

“What the fuck is going on here,” he growls as he grabs Zane. Zane barely has time to slide me off his lap before Victor yanks him up. He brings his arm back. I wipe at my eyes, trying to understand what is happening just as Victor's fist plows into Zane's face. I hiccup, trying to dry my eyes as I watch Zane's head jerk back viciously with the force of the blow. Blood immediately spews from his nose.

“Motherfucker,” he hisses, putting his hand up to his face to try and staunch the flow, his hand turning red almost immediately. “What the hell is your problem?” he mumbles.

“What did you do to Gia?” Victor growls and his voice sounds deadly. I've never heard him sound anything like he does right now. Anger is rolling off of him. He's like a stranger to me right now. *What is going on?*

I take the back of my hand and mop the tears from my face. They have mostly stopped. I'm too worried about what's going on here to allow myself to live in my nightmare.

“Nothing! I was consoling her,” Zane barks back, his voice muffled.

“It didn’t appear like she was being consoled. It looked to me like you were hurting her.”

His words wake me up from my shock. I jump up, grabbing my discarded pajama top off the floor, then take it over to Zane to hold on his nose. He lets me, but never takes his eyes off Victor. I try to ignore the fact that I’m in nothing but pajama shorts and a sports bra.

“Zane wouldn’t hurt me,” I snap, my voice sounding weaker and hoarser than I’d like, probably because of my crying—well, that and my nightmare. “Let’s get to the bathroom so I can clean your face,” I murmur. My gaze moves over to the clock. “Shit, I slept late,” I panic. “I’ll need to call in.”

“Sorry, babe. I did too. I was coming to wake you up when I heard you yelling.” Zane adds, shooting a hateful look to Victor.

In retaliation, Victor wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me back against his body. I bend my head back to look at him, holding the bloody pajama top and wondering if Victor has gone insane. “What are you doing?” I squeak, ignoring the way my stomach heats where his hand and arm press against my bare flesh.

“You need to stay away from him.”

I open my mouth to tell him he’s nuts, but in the end, I just take my elbow and nail him in the gut. I suppose it’s abs really. Victor doesn’t have a gut. If anything, the blow probably hurt me more than it did him. Still, it surprises him enough that I break free.

“Are you drunk?” I puff out, letting him hear my annoyance. “Come to the bathroom with me and I’ll clean you up Zane,” I repeat as I step close to him.

“Damn it, Gia. I told you to stay away from him,” Victor responds, clearly pissed.

“Did I miss something? Where was it written that I had to obey your every command Victor?” I reply, full of snark as we go to the bathroom.



Zane flips the lid down on the toilet and sits. He's holding my bloody top now and while he's doing that, I grab a clean cloth and wet it under the sink faucet with some warm water. I squeeze it out.

"You need to put some clothes on, Kitten. Zane doesn't get to see you naked," Victor huffs.

I frown as he stands in the hall looking at me. I shake my head. "Oh my God. I have clothes on. What is wrong with you?" I'm pretty sure I've asked him that before, but I have no idea what is happening here.

"I don't want him looking at your tits and your ass!"

I hear Zane laugh and I give him a dirty look. He hides his amusement in a cough and stops. I take the cloth and begin cleaning the blood on his face. "You *have* lost your mind." I let out an annoyed breath. "It doesn't look broken, Zane. Just the same, we should probably put some ice on it."

"If you don't want me to do worse to him, you will put some clothes on," Victor barks.

"Victor!" I bring the cloth to the sink and run some more water trying to squeeze it out. Before I can say anything else, Victor takes the cloth from me and spins me around. My eyes go wide when I look at him. His shirt is gone and in his hand is his favorite T-shirt. I know because I bought it for him last year for his birthday. It's a vintage tee of the band The Black Crowes. The band's name is written in bright, chunky yellow, making it stand out against the dark fabric. It was kind of a lame gift. Still, he liked it, which made me happy.

He steps into me. I start to move away from him but before I can, he's putting the shirt over my head and assisting in pushing my arms through the sleeves. Instantly, the scent of Victor's cologne curls around me and I have to fight to keep from closing my eyes in pleasure. The shirt is whisper soft, and once it drops down, it hits below my thighs.

"If you're going to clean his ass up, you're doing it in my shirt."

"Why on Earth for?"

“Because your tits are enough to make a man cry with the need to suck on them and you are not letting anyone but me see them.”

I blink. I open my mouth to say something, but I have no idea what, so I snap it shut again. Zane is laughing behind us. I can't force myself to turn around and berate him for it. I think I'm too afraid to take my gaze away from the man in front of me. I feel like I've fallen through a hole into the Twilight Zone.

“What happened to you in Greece? Did you bang your head on something?”

“Kitten—”

“Oh God, did you contract some kind of infection that made you lose your mind? I read about some kind of brain worm virus,” I mutter, and without thought I go to Victor and touch his face, frowning. “You don't have a fever.”

“Brain worm virus? Really, sweetheart?”

“It's a real thing. I read it on the internet,” I argue.

“Well, it has to be true then. It can't be on the internet if it's not true,” Zane laughs.

“Shut it, Zane,” Victor mutters.

“You need to see a doctor.”

“The only thing wrong with me is I don't want another man seeing your body. If you want to save his life, keep my shirt on.”

“Now you're just being crazy.”

“Keep my damn shirt on and hurry up and do what you're going to do to his face so he can leave,” Victor mutters.

“He's not leaving, I'm making him pancakes.”

“No, you're not.”

“Yes, *I am*. I promised him lemon pancakes for breakfast and he's getting them.”

“Lemon pancakes? You never make me lemon pancakes,” he mumbles. I can’t believe what he’s saying. *Is he pouting?*”

“You never asked for lemon. You like apples and caramel sauce on your pancakes, Victor.” I’m telling him something that he already knows, but I wasn’t kidding earlier. I’m pretty sure he’s hit his head or something.

“Then, we should have pancakes with your homemade apples and caramel sauce,” he proposes, but I quickly shake my head and shut him down.

“I owe Zane for taking me to dinner last night and calming me down, so I didn’t go to Greece and kill you. That means, we’re getting his favorite. Also, how did you get here so fast?”

“I took a flight straight through. It took twelve hours, but it was worth it to see you. What do you mean Zane took you to dinner?” Victor rumbles, trying to go around me to get to Zane.

“He took me out. It was a great evening.”

“I’m the only man who can take you to dinner, Kitten.”

“Oh my God, you really are crazy. You told me that we weren’t even friends anymore! You ruined my date with Caleb and *now* you’re trying to tell me I can’t go out with anyone? I don’t know what has happened to you, but you need to snap out of it. You can’t tell me who I can see and who I can’t, Victor Davide!”

“Don’t use my middle name, damn it. You know I don’t like it.”

“I can’t deal with you. I need to go get dressed and fix Zane breakfast so he can take me to work.”

“I’m taking you to work!”

“You aren’t!” I argue.

“I am!”

“No way!”

He stares at me. I try to prepare myself for more of his arguing. Then, he ruins it all when he grabs my shoulders,

pulling me closer and his lips are on mine. I do my best to remain stiff in his arms and not respond to his kiss. This is only the third kiss I've had since my attack. I've never responded to anyone other than Victor. I should be able to hold myself still now, however—especially since I'm mad at him. Maybe I could have until he sucks on my bottom lip and pulls it between his teeth to nibble on it. My knees go instantly weak. I feel the strange heat move through my body. I whimper as he sucks on the tender flesh. The next moment, his tongue slides in against mine. There's nothing slow and sweet about Victor now. He immediately searches and takes over my mouth, leaving me holding onto him just so I can remain standing. I moan as his hands move to my ass and he pulls me up. My legs and arms wrap around him. I hold on for dear life, prepared to go wherever Victor takes me. I give myself completely but we both stiffen, freezing when Zane coughs.

I force myself to pull back. I slowly open my eyes to see Victor's intense, dark gaze boring into me. My insides clinch when he licks his lips, sending waves of heat and electricity through me. That simple action hits me in the most feminine part of me, awakening areas of my body that have either been dead for years or were never operational to begin with.

"Fuck off, Zane," Victor says with a heated look, never taking his gaze away from me.

I let my legs drop, holding onto his shoulders as I slide down to stand beside him.

"Hey, I'm just wondering if breakfast is still on or if I need to head out and find my own while you take Angel to work," Zane quips.

"I hear the Biscuit House down the street has good food," Victor replies, his fingers, sliding against my ribs in a sweet caress.

A small quiver moves through me before I shake my head, forcing myself out of the lust-filled haze I've tumbled into. "No," I respond, my voice gruff and filled with a hunger that I can't possibly hide. "I'm going to make breakfast. Why don't you shower, Zane? You can clean up and by the time you get

out, I'll be prepared to send you into a lemon coma," I joke, forcing myself to look over my shoulder at him. I can feel my face heat, but I still force myself to smile.

"Looking forward to it, Angel."

"Her name is Angelina," Victor growls.

"She looks like an angel," Zane counters. "Well, at least one with a penchant to cause trouble," he adds with a wink.

"Hey!" I laugh.

"It's the red hair, babe. Men are like bulls. You wave red at us, and we can't resist, even if we already know you're going to be our ruin."

"Don't make me kill you, Zane," Victor growls.

I gasp, giving Victor a dirty look before I kick his shin. "Shut up. For a man who doesn't even want to be my friend, you sure are getting annoying."

"Gia—"

I ignore him and make sure to cut him off. "Zane, maybe I should go back to dying my hair blonde so I could live up to the angel you see," I laugh, trying to joke. That's what another woman would do right? One who was whole? *One who is not me.*

"God, no," Zane laughs.

"What?" I laugh. "That way you wouldn't see the trouble I cause until I'd already trapped you in my web." Trapped you in my web? *God, I'm so lame.*

"Angel, if this," Zane motions toward me, "is your natural hair, why would you ever dye it blonde?"

"It's a long, sad story, but sometimes a girl needs to be somebody completely different just so they don't have to remember who they were."

Zane stares at me for a minute and I get the feeling that he sees more than I want him to see. "Well, for what it's worth, if this is the real you, then, I really like who I see."

I smile and the heat creeps back into my face for another reason now.

Victor lets out some kind of noise that sounds close to a pissed off bear. I squeal as he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder.

“And that’s enough. Zane. If you want to have teeth in your head so you can eat *my woman’s* pancakes, you need to back the fuck off.”

“Victor!”

“Shut it, Gia. You and I are going to have this out, not as much as I want because you have work, but this evening you and I are going to come to an understanding.”

“Let me down!” I bark.

“I will, as soon as we get to your bedroom.”

“What—”

“When we get there, I’m going to turn you over my knee and spank your ass red for flirting with another man,” he all but snarls. My mouth shuts quickly and I stop slapping him on his back. He thinks I was flirting. Crap. *Was I?* Then, I remember what else he said.

*Oh shit.*

Victor wouldn’t really spank me. He’s just trying to scare me. There’s no way he would do that, right? It’s not like I’m a child and he’s my dad or something. Dang it, he’s driving me crazy. Of course, he wouldn’t spank me.

When we get to my bedroom and he all but tosses me on my bed. I quickly sit up and stare at him, feeling breathless, my heart stutters in my chest. He’s standing in front of me without a shirt with his perfect abs and broad chest on display—causing me to salivate. *God, he’s utter perfection.* His jeans cling to him in all the right places and although I thought I loved him in suits more, at this moment I’m thinking it’s a shame he doesn’t wear jeans more often. All thoughts cease however when he sits down beside me with a cocky look on his face, his eyes still showing that he’s upset with me.

I'm starting to wonder if I'm wrong. Right now, I'm worrying Victor really is going to spank me. I'm pretty sure he's even going to enjoy it.

*I think I'm in trouble.*

# angelina

...

“Victor, I don’t know if you’ve been drinking or if jet lag has a really bad effect on you, but I think maybe you need to take a minute and think about what you’re doing here.”

“I suppose it’s good you’ve gone from thinking I have brain worms to just being drunk. I can assure you, however, I am perfectly fine except for one *small* thing.”

“What is that?” I mutter, while trying my best to slide off the bed giving Victor a wide berth, and desperately trying to maintain my dignity. I manage to do one of those. Luckily, I don’t touch Victor as I stand, but my legs feel like rubber. They don’t seem to want to hold me up. I also get tangled in the pale-yellow coverlet that hangs low and is flared out along the side of the bed. I would have tumbled to the floor face first if Victor hadn’t reached out and grabbed my arm. He does all of that without taking a single step. I inhale sharply as I look at him. His eyes drill into me with a heat that tries to spread through my body just from our connection. I try to tap it down



and remind myself of all the reasons that would be a very *bad* thing.

“The fact that the woman who I have claimed as my own agreed she wouldn’t go out with that sniveling co-worker of hers and tried to do it anyway.”

“Claimed as your own?” I squeak, not quite believing his words.

“Exactly.”

I frown. I jerk my arm trying to get him to drop it. He doesn’t. He just keeps staring at me. “Let me go, Victor.”

“Not happening. First, you are going to get your punishment for going back on our agreement. Then, you are going to get your punishment for going out with Zane and almost getting him killed.”

His voice is stoic, almost as unmoving as his gaze. Like this, he should terrify me because he’s almost a stranger. The truth is much more confusing. *I think I’m excited*. I can’t even begin to understand what is wrong with me. This can’t be normal. I take a breath and it rattles through me as I try to get control of myself. It doesn’t exactly work, but I attempt to focus just the same.

“Zane was forced to be my bodyguard. I was hungry. We had dinner since both our nights were ruined. Thanks for that by the way.”

“I didn’t ruin your night. You fucked up. You weren’t to go out with that idiot. We agreed on that, Gia.”

“That was before,” I snap. I panic when I realize what I was about to say and go back to trying to jerk my arm away.

“Before what?” he demands, tugging on my arm hard enough that I almost fall against him. He spreads his legs apart and, somehow, I find myself standing between them. He lets go of my arm, but before I can celebrate both his hands are braced on my hips and this is even more worrisome.

I brace myself on his shoulders. “Let me go, Victor.”

“Never, Gia. Now, answer the question, *before what*.”

I swallow, trying to figure out how to get out of this. “It was before you left the country,” I invent, hoping he will leave it alone, but knowing he won’t.

“Going out of town made you believe you could go back on your word to me?” he asks incredulously.

“No,” I huff, remembering I’m pissed at him. “Having you tell me that we weren’t friends made me realize you don’t get a say in what I do. Deanna is right. I need to start pushing myself. I want a normal life. I want to be happy. I want a man in my life who doesn’t view me as a weak family member—ashamed of me to the point that he doesn’t even want to be my friend.”

“That’s it,” he growls. He pulls me down, forcing me to straddle his thighs, and sit in his lap, so that I’m facing him.

“Victor—”

“You’re the only woman in the world I get tongue tied around and I’m not proud of how I handled things in our last conversation, I can admit that.”

“I think—”

“Shut up, Gia.”

My head snaps back with his words. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t want to be your friend, Gia. What I feel for you isn’t something you can sum up in friendship.”

“What you feel for me?” I murmur, my heart flip-flopping as I try to understand. “Do... do you feel something for me, Victor?”

“No,” he says, and I didn’t think that one simple word could crush you, but this one does. I feel tears stinging my eyes. My body stiffens from the verbal blow he just delivered. I want to scream at him, slap his face, punch him, or even kick him. Yet, I do nothing except to force my head sideways as I get control of my emotions. I can’t pull away. He’s not allowing me that. If anything, his grip on me intensifies. “Kitten,” he adds softly, one hand leaving my hip to slide

under my chin and force me to turn my head and look at him. “I feel *everything* for you.”

I blink. I’m not sure what he means by that. I’m afraid to think it’s significant. I don’t want to feel my heart get crushed again. “I don’t think I understand,” I finally respond quietly.

“You’re not ready for all I want from you. You’re still healing and I’m not going to pressure you into something you’re not ready for. That doesn’t mean I’m going to sit by and let another man snake his way into your life and your heart. You belong to me, Angelina. You have from the first moment I saw you. When you’re ready, I’m here. *Just me.*”

My breath quickens. I look into his eyes. I know I heard the words, but I’m more than a little afraid to believe them. He said a lot, but I can’t leave room for doubt. I can’t risk the chance that Victor and I are on different pages again. “Do you...*love* me?” I struggle to get the words out. I’m terrified of his answer. Shit, I’m petrified of even breathing at this point. I can feel heat bloom across my cheeks as I resist the urge to bolt from the room. I don’t know if I could get away, but he’s only holding me with one hand now, so there’s a chance. It’s slim, but it is still there. With each second that ticks by, the option is more appealing.

“I don’t want to scare you.”

“Too late,” I quip without thought, my mouth suddenly feeling dry.

“I don’t think I’ve ever used the word love in my life,” he adds and that hope that was beginning to blossom inside of me begins to wither.

“I see,” I breathe, trying to contain my reaction.

“I don’t want to go through the day without hearing your voice or seeing you smile. I live for the sound of your laughter.”

“Victor,” I mouth, unsure if actual sound comes out, I’m too lost in what he’s saying.

“I’ve all but moved into your house, Kitten. I didn’t do that because your place is better than mine. I did it because where

you are is where I need to be.”

“Because you want to make sure I’m safe?” I ask, confused again.

“That’s part of it. That’s nowhere near the full reason why,” he answers.

“I really wish you’d quit talking in circles,” I complain, rubbing my forehead as I try to lessen the tension gathering inside me.

“I think I’m making it pretty fucking clear,” he gripes, clearly as frustrated as I am.

“As clear as mud.” I sigh and he looks at me with a frown.

“I told you that I can’t go without you. You’re all I want. You belong to me, Gia. I’m pretty sure that says it all.”

“It sounds like you’re talking about a car.”

“I have never had a vehicle where I could say I couldn’t go without it, woman.”

“Dream home, or family dog then.”

“I’m more of a cat person,” he says, his lips lifting up slightly in a half-smile. “My *Kitten* in particular.” He brings his hand back to my hip, squeezes it and then caresses my back.

“You know what I mean,” I counter, trying to ignore how good it feels when he touches me.

“The only way I know to make this any clearer is to tell you that I want to be your man and I’m not talking for a night, Angelina. I want us to build something together that...”

“That?” I question and I feel breathless. *Am I dreaming?*

“That leads to something lasting, sweetheart. I don’t want other men near you because you’re mine and I want to be yours. Fuck, I dream of you claiming me as yours one day.”

“Victor—”

“I know you have scars that you’re dealing with. It’s the reason I’ve tried hard not to say anything, not to put pressure

on you. That's the last thing I want, Kitten, you have to know that."

"Victor," I repeat, trying again but he shakes his head, not letting me speak. It doesn't help that I can feel tears stinging my eyes and I'm trying really hard not to sob. A few tears slide from my eyes, but I manage to rein in the rest.

"I've spent the last year trying to be nothing but your friend. I let you keep me in that dreaded friend-zone because I knew that was all you had to offer. I can't sit by and watch you go out with other men, though. You ask too much of me. To you, I may be just a friend, but you have to give me a chance to prove to you that you could want me, Gia. You could want me as much as I want you."

"Victor, you should have just told me how you felt," I tell him, shaking my head.

"I am now. I need you to listen to me, Gia. I can be the man you need. I can make you love me, sweetheart. I know I can."

I open my mouth to tell him that I already love him. I can't make the words form. Fear pummels me and I just can't say it. I'm not ready yet. I moisten my lips by rubbing them together and licking them. Finally, I lift my gaze to look at the beautiful man in front of me.

"How would you make me f-fall in love with you?" I ask him, the question taking all the courage I have to just get it out.

I see surprise on his face and then, there's no mistaking the joy I see. *He really does care about me.* It's all there on his face to see. I'm scared. I don't want to confess that. I love him, but there is a huge chance that I will never be a whole person. I'll never be able to be the woman he needs—that any man needs—to make him happy. Still, I can't turn him away. I have to try. I may not be able to tell him, but I do love him. Somehow, I need to get out of my head and make this work. Instinctively, I know if anyone can help me heal, it will be Victor.

“That sounds like a yes, Kitten.”

“I want to try,” I whisper. “I’m kind of broken. I’m not sure it’s fair to you...”

“You’re not broken. You’re strong. You’ve survived so much. You’re a fighter, baby. I’m just asking you to stop fighting alone. Let me help give you strength when you need it. Let me be there to take over the fight when you think you can’t anymore.”

“What do you get out of all this?” I ask him, not understanding why he wants to deal with me and all my baggage.

“That’s easy. I get the chance to have the only thing I want in this whole fucked up world.”

“You do?” I ask, confused.

“You, sweetheart. All I want—all I’ll ever want—is you.”

Whoa. He didn’t admit to loving me, but whatever he feels, it has to be powerful. It’s not like I can turn him down, because honestly, when it comes to Victor, he’s all I want.

*All I’ll ever want.*

“Kiss me, Victor. Make me believe,” I whisper.

My body trembles with my plea. I feel like I’m cut open and bleeding, letting Victor see what I want, as well as my fear.

Victor brings his hand up to cup my cheek. His nose brushes against mine and his mouth is so close that I can practically taste his kiss. I bite down against my bottom lip to keep from moaning with the hunger that he awakens.

“I got you, baby. I got you,” he vows.

Butterflies go crazy in my stomach. I’ve always loved it when he calls me sweetheart, but I think I like baby more. Then, I stop thinking when Victor’s lips connect with mine. I forget everything, but the man kissing me.

# victorio

...

I was lost to her before we kissed but as our kiss deepens, I know there is no going back. I'm in my thirties. I've had more than my fair share of women. Never, not once in all this time has a woman ever grabbed my attention like Angelina. Never have I been so drawn to a woman that the world fades away when I'm with her. That happens every single time. I wasn't lying when I told her I wanted everything with her. This is our first real fucking kiss and even before that I never wanted another woman. I was lost before this. Now that I know the way it feels when her tongue slides against mine and the sound of her breath stuttering into a sensual gasp when I touch her, there's no going back.

Angelina is mine. I will make her love me.

Failure is not an option. I will find a way to heal her from her past. I will make this work because there is no alternative. The simple truth is, I can't live without her.

I let my fingers slide under her shirt, caressing her skin and swallowing down the moan that leaves her lips. I glide upward

along her ribcage, teasing her, but never going as far as I want. I long to cup her breasts in my hands, but the last thing I want is to scare her away. Eventually we're forced to break apart and as she gasps, bringing air into her lungs, I bury my head in the crook of her neck and kiss her neck. I revel in the way her pulse jumps against my lips. She wants me. She's scared, but that's not keeping her from being in my arms.

I nibble her sweet flesh, nibbling on the exposed skin, before lapping at it with my tongue. God, she's perfect. Every single thing about her is perfect. I capture her earlobe between my teeth, nipping at it gently. When her hand shyly flattens against my chest, as she rocks on my lap, I almost lose control. My tongue dances along the shell of her ear as I groan. "I want you, Gia. I want you so fucking much."

I'm not truly aware of what I just confessed. I've been doing my best to hide how much I need her. I really have but kissing her has ignited the fire that I can no longer keep under control. I know I've made a mistake the minute I feel her body tighten and go rigid. It kills me, but I pull back.

"Baby—"

"I think I like you calling me baby more than sweetheart, but I do love both. I just like the purr in your voice when you use the first one."

"I like the way you get nervous and talk about anything other than what has you upset," I tell her with an absent smile. I know she can hear the tenderness in my voice though. "I'm sorry, Gia. I promise you that I'm not putting pressure on you. We will do this at your speed. I've wanted you from the first moment I put eyes on you. That's not changing. I'm not going anywhere."

"I really lo—*like* you a lot, Victor. I do. It's just this feels sudden. I think I'm afraid to trust it."

I grab a small portion of her hair and twirl it around my finger. "It may feel sudden to you, but trust me, it's not. From that night at that horrible fake funeral for Maxwell, I knew I wanted you. Hell, it took all I had not to kiss the hell out of you that night and make Dante and that witch of a mother of



yours watch. When I say I'm not going anywhere, Gia, I mean I'm *really* not. I'm here to stay, baby."

"I don't know when or if—"

"Here. To. Stay."

"You say that now, but..." she argues, trailing off and not finishing her thought. I know what she's thinking, though. I take a minute to find the words to try and calm her fears.

"Do you trust me, Gia?"

"You know I do, Victor. Well, except when you're an asshole and try to tell me you don't want to be my friend," she mutters.

"Before me, when is the last time you trusted any man in your life?" I ask, after giving a small laugh, because I love when she gives me lip. I was ready to spank her tonight, but I'm glad I didn't. I need to take things slow here. Unlike Angelina, I'm not concerned. She's already given me part of her heart. I'll claim the rest soon.

"Uncle Max, I guess," she mutters nervously, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Maxwell was a good man," I admit.

"Yeah, he was." She sounds sad and I can hear her grief. She really does miss her uncle.

"The thing is, I owe Maxwell everything. I do. He's the father I never had. Yet, as great as he was, he should have rescued you. He *knew* how his sister was. He had to know she would be an even bigger bitch to her own daughter than she was to him. He failed you. I won't. If I had known you back then, that bitch would have never gotten her claws into you. I sure as fuck would have brought you to my home and kept you safe. I would have done that the very minute I discovered you had been attacked."

"Victor," she laughs, "you are a lot of things, but we're not that different in ages. I doubt even you could have convinced a court to give you guardianship of me over my mother."

"Fuck, guardianship. I would have married you."

“I—You—*What?*”

“I would have married you. You were old enough to say I do without your mom being able to say shit. I would have gotten you out of there in a heartbeat, Gia. I hate like fuck I wasn’t in your life back then.”

“You’re kind of freaking me out right now.”

I grin at her. “Then stop. We don’t have time for you to panic right now. I need you to fix Zane some lemon pancakes and tell him to leave so I can take you to work.”

“No. Zane can take me. You have work. You know you should do that—or maybe even sleep.”

“I do have work and I am tired, but I want the morning with you. I want to take you to work and I’m not going to let another man steal that opportunity from me. I will probably have to leave you again soon and I want every minute I can have with you in the meantime.”

“Where are you going?” I respond, vaguely remembering he mentioned something about it before, but my mind was all messed up.

“I will have to go back to Greece, maybe. After that, I will need to be gone for a bit.”

“Where?” she asks, and I frown. I don’t want to lie to her. I also don’t want to let her know what I’m doing. That means this entire conversation makes me uneasy.

“I will have to go do some business for the family. I’m not exactly sure where that will lead me.”

“I see,” she says, and I can tell she doesn’t really.

“I don’t mean to be vague. I promise to tell you more when I can,” I compromise.

“Okay, Victor,” she says, getting up. I don’t want her to leave, but we do need to get the day started.

Once she’s standing, I raise up and take her back into my arms. “One more taste of your lips, sweetheart.”

She leans in and tilts her head back. I hold her neck and take the kiss I want. My grip is firm. I won't hide how much I need her. She needs to know. I kiss her deeply and I try—with everything in me—to show her just how much I care about her.

# angelina

...

The rest of the morning was kind of quiet. I made the pancakes and both Zane and Victor seemed to like them. Victor was also a lot calmer since our talk in the bedroom. I'm glad, but I can't feel the same. I'm a mess of confusion and fear. I don't have time to think about it right now, I will later. I'm actually looking forward to escaping to work. I need the time in my office alone to think about everything.

Having a quiet breakfast with the guys is helping me to feel better, though. It helps that whatever animosity that started between them seems to be gone now. The only uncomfortable moment came when I started to sit down with them, and Victor pulled me into his lap and decided to feed me from his plate. I was a little embarrassed but, Zane just looked at me and winked. I mustered up a smile and just shook my head.

“Angel, those were the best pancakes I believe I've ever had in my life.”

I look up at Zane while slipping my shoes on. “Glad you enjoyed them. If Victor ever makes you stand watch here again, I’ll make you dinner. You’ll have to let me know what you like.”

“After tasting your pancakes, I’m pretty sure anything you fix will be my favorite,” He says, and I laugh.

“Don’t make me kill you, Zane. Gia is spoken for. Find your own woman,” Victor growls. The vibration of his words seems to roll through me, lighting tiny fires inside of me.

“Angel might be the only single woman around that’s worth dying for,” he jokes, causing me to blush even more than I already was.

Victor lets out a rumbling noise and my gaze jerks up to him. I try to give him a smile and that seems to lighten the air around him—at least a little.

“See you later, Vic,” Zane says, and with a jerk of his head, he leaves. The door closes and Victor’s arms tighten around me.

“You ready to leave, Kitten?”

“Not really, but I better. I like my job and I already have taken half a day off. I don’t want to upset them. I can’t afford to get fired. I have to keep a roof over my head,” I laugh.

“You could move under my roof.”

“Victor—”

“Shit. I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to go there. I promise. Sometimes, when it comes to you, it’s hard to hold back.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you, Victor. It’s just, I’m kind of a mess.”

He kisses my forehead, then my cheek, my nose, my eyelids, my chin, my neck and just before I growl, he finally kisses my lips. It’s a brief kiss, but it is sweet and intense. When I open my eyes, it is to see his desire filled ones staring back at me. “You’re perfect. Stop worrying. Now, let’s get you to work.”

“Okay,” I agree.

He takes my hand into his and we head outside. He takes a minute to lock my door and then escorts me to his vehicle. Once there, Victor opens the door for me, and gingerly puts his hand on my lower back as I step on the running boards of the black SUV. When I’m settled, he leans over and clicks me into my seatbelt. He gives me another quick peck on my lips and then closes the door. I take the small amount of time it takes for him to come around to the driver’s side to get control of my raging hormones. Once he hops in and starts the car, my breathing returns to normal.

“Do you want to go out tonight or stay in?” Victor asks.

I shake off the hunger he awakened—at least as best as I can. I look at him and smile. “It doesn’t matter, Victor. I will be working late tonight though. The center is having a group therapy meeting and I’d like to be there. I understand these girls and who knows, maybe it will be good for me too.”

“Are you sure? I know you don’t like to relive that time in your life. It’s not fair. You should be able to look back on going to the University of Arizona as a great memory,” he growls, as he backs out of my drive.

“What happened to me sadly happens to a lot of women who move out on their own. Just because the college is well respected doesn’t mean bad things don’t happen.” These are the same words that Deanna has worked hard to get in my head. I repeat them without thought, but I can’t say I truly believe them, even though every word is truth. There’s always this piece inside of me that says it happened to me because I deserved it. My mother was right all along. I tighten my hand into a fist, keeping it so tight that I can feel my fingernails dig into my palm. I fight to hold down all the shame and negative emotions that I keep bottled up tight. Today is not the day. Victor professed to care for me. He wants to spend time with me. For some reason, he doesn’t see what everyone else does when he looks at me. That’s important, and I need to hold on to it and try to make sure he never regrets that.

“Hey.”

I pull myself out of my thoughts and look at Victor.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t know where your head went just now, but pull it back.” He looks back at the road and holds out his hand to me at the same time. “I made such a mess when I tried to tell you how special you were to me that I think you missed what I did say that was good,” he murmurs, sparing me a glance and giving me a smile, his hand still held out to me.

“What was that?” I ask, wiggling my fingers. I know he wants me to hold his hand and I want to. For some reason, however, I’m nervous.

“It’s you and me against the world. Stop overthinking and worrying, Kitten. Just trust me. Better yet, trust in us. I think together we are unstoppable.”

“You’re crazy,” I laugh as he pulls into the shelter.

“Over you,” he agrees, and I laugh as I put my hand in his, and he lowers them to his hip.

“Oh my God,” I gasp in between giggles.

“What?” he asks, with a huge grin on his face.

“That was so cheesy.”

“Maybe, but it’s completely true,” he counters and leans over, bringing our joined hands up to rest against my chest. He presses in, not letting go of my hand, as his lips press against mine and I open up for him.

Kissing Victor is suddenly becoming very addicting.

# victorio

...

“I fucking hate that look on your face,” Zane grumbles.

I laugh. “Now, don’t be a poor sport.”

Zane throws up his middle finger. “Asshole.”

“Takes one to know one,” I respond with a shrug.

“What’s going on with you two?” Antonio asks, as he and Niko walk through a door on the opposite side of the room.

I’ve barely walked through the front entrance when Zane started. I keep my smirk on my face because really, I couldn’t give a fuck. *Not one*. He’s not getting anywhere around my woman.

“Nothin’, Boss,” Zane mumbles, and that just makes my grin deepen.

“Then why does pretty boy here look like the fucking cat that swallowed your pet parakeet?”

“Boss, do you even know what a parakeet is?” Zane asks, and Niko busts out laughing. We all follow them into



Antonio's office. He and Niko sit in a pair of chairs leaving the sofa for me, and unfortunately, Zane.

"If you don't shut your damn mouth, I'll send the boys out to buy every fucking one of them in the pet store, then make you eat every fucking one."

"Not sure your chef would—"

"They'd be alive," Antonio rumbles.

"Aww, damn, Boss, that's gross. You wouldn't do that."

"Keep pissing me off and we'll see."

I chuckle under my breath. I can't help it.

"Why are you smiling so big, Vic?" Niko asks.

"I took your advice. Well, Emilia's."

"My wife is damn smart. You finally lock Angelina down?"

"Yep."

"Asshole only did it because I was winning her over," Zane argues.

"In your dreams, dickhead. She's mine and off limits."

"Story of my life. You guys make it impossible to find a good woman. You snap them all up and this one isn't only gorgeous, she cooks like an angel."

"Angels cook?" Niko mocks.

"You laugh, but you've never had her homemade lemon pancakes."

"Are lemon pancakes a thing?" Antonio asks.

"That's what I said. Everyone knows pancakes are best with apples and caramel," I mutter.

"I prefer blueberry," Antonio responds.

"I bet she could make those too. You don't understand how good her food is. I want to marry her and make an honest woman of her," Zane grumbles.

“An honest woman? Jesus. Remind me why I hired you again?”

“Because of my sparkling personality?”

I want to kick the asshole in his dick for even thinking of marrying my woman, but I let it slide—*for now*.

Antonio shakes his head but the mood around us changes, and I know that the conversation is turning to weightier subjects. “Niko will be getting a team together. Vic, you will be leading them. For now, I want everything you can find out on the Levkin brothers.”

“The Russians?”

“We need to know everything about their dealings with Zervas.”

I nod. I knew this was coming. Zervas is Helena’s new boss in the states and Marco is intent on bringing him down. The man is also slimy as hell.

“But, I mean, they’re in Arizona, right?” Zane interrupts.

“So?” Niko asks.

“I’m just wondering, it’s not like we have dealings in Arizona.”

I can’t hold back anymore. I head slap him on the back of the head just like Maxwell used to do to me when I was young and stupid. “We have dealings everywhere, but specifically a huge operation now in Greece. Zervas is from Greece. His father is said to be a high roller. That’s a good enough reason to check them out. He’s also making moves on Marco’s woman and drawing her into things that could get her hurt.”

“Oh,” Zane mumbles.

“Exactly. See, Vic? This is why we want you to move up to Capo.”

I shrug with Niko’s words. I’m not sure I’m the best person for the job. It’s a big move. I also want Angelina to be comfortable with me. I don’t think she’d approve of what I do for a living. It’d be harder to keep her clueless. I can’t risk

losing her, not even for the men in front of me that I owe everything to.

“Angelina is not Emilia. I’m not sure she’d like me working that position,” I answer under my breath. I need to handle Angelina gently.

“Bull. She’s got the same blood Maxwell had in him. She’d be fine. You do a disservice to her.”

“Speaking of women,” I respond, changing the subject. “Where’s Melina?”

“Morning sickness,” Antonio gripes, clearly not happy.

“Yikes,” I mumble. “Isn’t she kind of far along for that?”

A child is something I never wanted. My childhood was fucked up and my parents weren’t exactly the warm and fuzzy type. I swore I’d never bring a child into this world. It was mainly because I didn’t know what to do with a baby. I sure as hell don’t know how to be a parent to a kid. Angelina is slowly changing my mind on that. I wasn’t lying when I told her I wanted everything with her.

“The doctor said some women have it their entire pregnancy. I swear the longer this goes on, the more I’m worried my wife will sprout horns, or her head will start spinning around while she vomits pea soup.”

“Pea soup?” Zane asks.

“You’ve never watched the original Exorcist?” Niko asks.

“Um... no?”

“You should watch it. You’ll love it.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re lying?” Zane huffs.

I bite down a laugh and shake my head. I like Zane—even if I wish I didn’t. I might request him as part of my new staff. Damn. I’m going to accept Capo position. Well, if Angelina is on board.

“Did you warn Angelina that you’ll probably be called away again?” Antonio asks, staring at me.

“I did.”

“Good. You go in three days.”

“Fuck,” I hiss. That’s not what I wanted—not even close.

“With everything going down, we’re running short on men. I need the ones I can trust to have Marco’s back. EZ has been keeping an eye on Helena, but I swear that girl is a magnet for trouble,” Antonio mumbles. “And if any of you tell my wife I said that, I’ll cut off your balls.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of your wife, Boss. She’s such a petite little thing,” Zane croons. I swear, I’m starting to think the boy has a death wish.

“You haven’t been around her since the pregnancy hormones have kicked into overdrive,” Antonio mutters, after shooting Zane a dirty look.

“Emilia is calmer if I keep plenty of bananas and whip cream close by, but she’s overdue. She wants to deliver naturally, but we can’t risk it much longer and apparently my son is just like his father—he wants to stay inside Emilia as long as he can.”

“Jesus Christ, Niko,” Antonio says, shaking his head.

They keep talking. I watch as their lips move, but I’ve tuned them out. All I can think about is Angelina being pregnant. She’d be an exceptional mother. I already know that. The thought of her stomach round with my child makes my cock get uncomfortably hard. I have no idea how I’ve gone from never wanting to be weighed down by a ball and chain—which is what I used to think marriage was—to changing my mind completely. I want Angelina tied to me in every way possible. *Just like I am to her.* You may not be able to see the chains shackled around me—quite willingly—but they are there. They have been since I first heard my Kitten’s voice.

“Is that okay with you, Victorio?” Antonio asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

The problem is, I have no idea what he’s asking me. The truth is, I don’t even know how long I’ve been sitting here with what I figure is a goofy look on my face, imagining

Angelina with her stomach swollen. *Fuck*. I'm going to need to adjust my dick if this keeps going on. I could ask Antonio what he said, but I'm not going to piss him off. He's the boss. If he wants something, he doesn't need me to know what it is. I trust him.

"Sure," I answer. Zane relaxes back against the sofa with that cocky look back on his face. I suddenly have a bad feeling about this.

"Then, it's settled. Zane will watch over Angelina while you're gone."

*What the ever-loving fuck?*

I turn to growl at Zane. He gives a sissy-assed wave and winks at me. Fucking motherfucker.

"Don't worry, Vic. I'll take care of Angelina while you're gone. I won't let her out of my sight."

"Don't make me kill you," I snap. He shrugs.

*Son of a bitch.*

# angelina

...

“Victor, this is too much,” I murmur looking around the dining room of Toro Toro. It’s a modern steakhouse with private dining. There’s also a DJ and the place stays packed. I’ve never been here. It’s fancy and although a night out with Victor is nice, I’d rather be home in my sweats eating Chinese.

“Do you like it?”

“Of course, this place is amazing.”

“Why do I feel like you’re lying?” he asks, staring at me.

“I don’t know. I’m telling the truth. Everyone is always talking about this place.”

“But not you?”

I sigh. “Stop doing that, Victor. It’s a beautiful place and I’m out with you. The food is great, and the music is good.”

“I should have cooked for you at home. I just thought I’d treat you to a good meal and in the process, get to dance with you,” he mutters.

“Victor, stop,” I plead, afraid I’m hurting his feelings. No one else could pick up on my thoughts but this man. He knows me too well. I reach over and put my hand over his. “I’m having a great time. I promise. I’m just tired because work was extra busy today. That’s all. I also love the idea of dancing with you.” I don’t bother to hide my smile at the thought of swaying to the music while I’m in his arms.

“We could have danced at the house,” he mumbles.

“Then, I would be in my pajamas and not this beautiful dress you bought me.” I look down at the dress that is soft and sleek, form fitting, and the most beautiful pale green color that appears almost silver with just a tint of another color. I feel sexy in this dress. It dips down to show just enough cleavage and the thin straps look delicate and show off my shoulders. There’s a slit up the side. It’s a little higher than any I’ve worn, but it isn’t so high that I’m afraid of flashing someone when I sit down. Victor is wearing a black suit, and the shirt matches the color of my dress. He went to a lot of effort and I don’t want to ruin it. “You really shouldn’t have spent money on me, but I do love the dress,” I add, forcing myself to meet his gaze despite the blush rising on my face.

“You look beautiful in it, but I suddenly want to see you in your pajamas.”

His reply shocks me, especially when I see the desire that’s plainly written on his face. It feels like everything has changed overnight. Victor has only ever shown me friendship. I never saw desire on his face when he was with me. *Not once*. The change almost feels too sudden. I’m afraid to trust it. Or heck, maybe I’m just afraid in general.

“This steak is really good,” I praise, keeping my head down and trying to get control of myself. I know changing the subject to the food is lame, but I can’t help it. My mind is a mess. I’ve never really dealt with emotions when it came to guys. Mostly because I was pretty sure the rape left me broken. Victor is the only one who has broken through.

“Hey, don’t do that,” Victor says, and I look at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Kitten, I could actually see you shutting doors on me. You don’t get to do that with me. I’m your safe place, remember? I think I’ve proven that since we met. Just because you know how I feel about you now, doesn’t mean things have changed—especially not that. No matter what happens between us, I will *always* be here for you.”

My heart hammers against my chest. I know he means what he’s saying. I guess I just didn’t realize he could read me so well. I have a strange feeling that he has always had that ability—he just kept it hidden from me.

“It’s just that you’ve changed.”

“Changed?”

“In how you’re treating me. I mean, not that you’re treating me bad, it’s just that you’re acting like you have feelings for me—”

“There is no acting, Kitten. Honestly, I’ve always been like this, you just didn’t realize the feelings I have for you are more encompassing than friendship.”

“True,” I whisper. I swallow as our gazes lock and there’s no way I can look away from him. I moisten my lips and rub them together as I try to respond in a way that he will understand. “It just seems like your intentions have changed overnight. I don’t know how to trust that this is real.”

“Gia, I have never given you a reason to think you couldn’t trust me, sweetheart. Right?”

“I know. Please don’t take this the wrong way. It’s just that you’re asking for a relationship, even knowing how messed up I am at times. You’re just...”

“Just, what? Tell me,” he urges.

“You’re giving me what I’ve wanted since I first met you, Victor and I’m scared.” I don’t know why I’m confessing all of this to him. I shouldn’t. Isn’t there a rule somewhere that girls are supposed to play coy and hard to get until the guy falls in love with them? I know I shouldn’t just blab about everything I’m feeling, but this is Victor and I’ve always relied on him since the first night we met.



“You’ve wanted me since the night we first met?” he asks. Now, I’m blushing as well as being mortified for telling him how I feel.

“I think now is a good time to talk about the steak again,” I mutter.

He puts his hand under my chin and gives me no alternative but to meet his gaze. “Fuck, I’ve made mistakes with you,” he practically groans. “I have wanted you since the moment I first saw you. If I had just acted on that, maybe I wouldn’t have had both of us suffering this torture for the last year.”

“You felt like being near me was torture? I’m not sure that’s what I want to hear,” I grumble.

“It was torture because I constantly wanted to kiss you, to hold you—”

I find my smile instantly. “Well, that’s okay, then,” I practically purr, feeling warm all over.

“I wanted to do a hell of a lot more to you, but I figure if I tell you, you might blush even more than you are already.”

“I probably would,” I admit.

“The point is, it might feel sudden, but it’s not at all to me.”

“Okay, then why does this date feel like we’re jumping from being friends to hyper-drive, and that doing it has made you nervous? You’re Victor. You never get nervous about picking the wrong place to eat, or what we are doing. You don’t worry. I have a feeling that is woven into your DNA. When you act unsure, it makes everything that I’m feeling worse,” I tell him honestly.

“So, you’re saying our first real date is kind of a bust?” he jokes, sadly. His lips are turned up a little on the end and he’s beautiful, but I can see the regret in his eyes.

“Maybe it’s too late,” I finally admit, although it hurts to say it out loud. “We’ve been friends too long and maybe it’s just hard to change that. Maybe it’s impossible.”

“That’s a lot of maybes, Kitten.”

I shrug for an answer.

He stands up, coming around to scoot my chair out. I’m surprised and I can admit that I’m disappointed as well. I had hoped he’d argue with me. It’s clear he’s not going to, and I don’t even blame him. *Why couldn’t I have just kept my mouth shut?* I’m such an idiot and I can’t even blame him.

“Ready to go home?” I ask him, doing my best to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

“Not on your life. You and I are going to dance and I’m going to show you that we are anything but friends.”

I blink. “Is this a bad time to tell you that I’m not that great of a dancer?” I sigh.

He grins. “I just need you in my arms, Gia.”

“Lead the way,” I whisper putting my hand in his as a million butterflies take flight in my stomach. I’m nervous, but I know I’d follow Victor anywhere.

# victorio

...

“Lead the way,” she says softly.

Her voice is so sweet that it wraps around me, making my cock ache. She has no idea what she does to me. I’ve been keeping everything hidden from her and now I can see that was a big mistake.

When we make it to the dance floor, I’m grateful that it’s not crowded. It’s a weekday, so most of the people are here for the food, not the DJ or dancing. That means we have most of the dance area to ourselves. Thankfully, a slow R&B groove is playing while the DJ is on a break. I pull my girl close and hold her in my arms. I bury my head in the crook of her neck and breathe her in. I feel her body tremble as her arms tighten around me as she holds onto me.

“I’m sorry about tonight, sweetheart. I know I’m in a weird mood. It’s not because I don’t know what I want with you. It’s just, I know I have to head back out for Antonio later this week and it pisses me off. I don’t want to leave you.”

“You have to leave again?” she asks, and she doesn’t try to keep the disappointment out of her voice. That’s both good and bad. I love that she doesn’t want me to leave, but it hurts to hear that I’ve upset her.

“I’m sorry, Gia. I have to. Trust me, it’s the very last thing I want to do—especially since Antonio asked Zane to watch over you while I’m gone.”

“Why would he do that? I told you I don’t need a bodyguard. Did you lie? Is this why you’ve been watching over me? You told me that Emilia and Niko didn’t ask you to be my bodyguard.”

“Calm down, Kitten.”

“I don’t think I will,” she snaps, and her eyes are practically glowing with her anger. I probably shouldn’t find her so damn sexy when she’s mad, but *fuck*, I do.

I kiss her lips quickly, thrusting my tongue into her opened mouth. The kiss was meant to distract her—at least until I could explain. Instead, we both get absorbed in our desire for one another. She tries to fight me for control in the kiss, but I don’t give her that. She moans her submission. I hungrily swallow the sound down. I’m not willing to lose her mouth long enough to even drag air into my lungs. Her body goes pliant against me and only then do I let go of her mouth. I discreetly lick my lips still tasting her there. “No one has ever asked me to be your bodyguard. I’ve been *watching over* you—as you put it—because I can’t bear to be away from you for very long. I’m obsessed with you in case you haven’t noticed.”

“But—”

“And Antonio knows how I feel about you. He has from day one. Fuck, Kitten, everyone knows.”

“They do?” she breathes, her eyes going round as saucers. “God...”

“They do and *that’s* the reason Antonio asked Zane to watch over you. He knows I wouldn’t leave you unprotected. I’m set to take over Nico’s place as he moves into Max’s old

position full time. That means, you may never need protection, but in case you do, you will have it at all times.”

“Victor, no one knows me. You’re all being silly.”

“I know you don’t have anything to do with the family, but you’re not naïve either, Gia. You know what kind of work we do, and what my promotion means I will be doing more of. Humor me and please, let me make sure you’re safe.”

I see her frown and I begin to worry I’ve said too much. What if she thinks this is all too much? What if she decides she doesn’t want a man who has blood on his hands? Fuck, I meant for tonight to be a relaxing evening full of ways to show her how much I care for her. I sure as fuck didn’t mean for us to go around in circles talking about the major pitfalls of us having a relationship.

“Okay.”

I didn’t think I could be surprised anymore. In my line of work, you always expect the unexpected.

“Just like that?” I ask.

“I trust you. If having someone watch over me is important to you, then I’ll stop fighting it.”

“Does it bother you?” Her face shows confusion, and her nose scrunches up in a way that makes me chuckle. I bend down, kissing the tip of it. “My job, Kitten,” I semi-explain. There’s no way I’m going into detail of everything I do.

“No. Should it?”

“It would some people.”

She seems to think it over for a minute and then slowly brings her attention back to me. “I know you’re right. It’s just that I’ve seen evil. I’ve seen what it did to me, to my Uncle Max, to Emilia, and even Melina, though I didn’t see that up close. Still, I know what happened. I saw how evil Dante was and what he did to those I love. What you do...” she shrugs, trying to gather her thoughts.

“Tell me, sweetheart.”

“I’ve wanted revenge for a long time for what was done to me, Victor. I know I shouldn’t. I also know I can’t get it. I don’t even know who my attackers...*attacker* was. Still, I wish I could find them and make them pay. What you do? Is not done to hurt innocent people. When you do something, it’s to do what I’m not strong enough or can’t do in my own case. So, how can I judge you when I wish I could be more like you?”

There’s a lot to what she just said. It doesn’t escape my attention that she uses words that kind of describe what I do but doesn’t use words that are blunt or harsh. I mean, I kill people. She knows that. Yet she skirts around that with her wording. It’s possible that she is burying her head in the sand. That doesn’t bother me. I’m okay with it, as long as it means I get to keep her. It does shock me that she thirsts for revenge. She does, too. I could see it in her eyes as she was talking. Gia doesn’t realize that I’m going to be her avenger. I was already trying before. *Now?* Now, I will make it a mission. There is one small thing that bothers me. It sounds like there was more than one attacker. God, if that’s true how did my woman survive as well as she has? How does she still manage to keep a smile on her face, love in her heart, and a kindness that blows me away?

“I’m not letting you go, Gia. You need to know that.”

“Victor...”

“I’m keeping you. I’d marry you tomorrow if you’d agree.”

“Marry me?” she gasps. “Are you crazy? Victor, we’re on our first date,” she laughs.

“Kitten, we’ve been together for over a year. Your problem is that you’re just now catching onto that fact. Everyone else already knows.”

She moves her hands up to my chest, putting them flat. One of them rests over my heart and something feels perfect about that, although I couldn’t tell you why.

“We’ve just recently had our first kiss,” she points out.

“And if you think, after having your kiss, I’m going to let another man swoop in and steal you away from me, you’re crazy. I want my ring on your finger. Hell, I want my name tattooed on your body.”

She swallows nervously, her body trembling a little in my arms. I know I’m scaring her. I need to dial it back. The problem is I can’t. I need her to know how serious I am.

“You’re kind of freaking me out, Victor.”

“I know. It’s still better you know how deep I’m in this with you, sweetheart. I want forever with you. I want everything you have to give me. I want babies with your fucking gorgeous red hair, your sweet dusting of freckles, and your beautiful green eyes.”

Her body goes rigid. I know I’ve gone too far, but I can’t make myself feel guilty about it. In fact, I’m not sorry at all. Everything I said is the absolute truth.

“Now, I know you’re crazy,” she huffs. She tries to pull away, but I refuse to let her. I hold her tighter.

“Don’t run from this, Gia. Don’t run from us.”

“Victor, I don’t even know if I can be a whole person again. You’re the first man I’ve ever really looked at like that.”

“Like what?” I respond like a jerk, needing the words from her.

“Victor—”

“Tell me.”

“Like a...boyfriend.”

I frown. “Do I look like a boy?”

“Um... well you aren’t a girl,” she says, and I growl under my breath. I look around the restaurant and there’s not that many on the dance floor, but the dining area is full. For this discussion, I need her alone. This is just another reason I should have planned dinner at home tonight. The two of us have too much to wade through right now. This is Antonio’s

fault. If I didn't have to leave in three days, I could move this along slower.

"C'mon," I order, taking her hand and leading her away. I pull her into a small corridor that seems to lead to a door marked "*Employees Only*".

"Victor? Is something wrong?" she asks.

I can tell Gia's confused. Hell, she's looking at me like I've lost my mind and maybe I have. I've always been calm around her. Then again, I've never pushed things, never told her how I feel and most importantly, never had to stay away from her for long periods at a time. I'm so frustrated that I could punch a damn wall. I need to make her understand.

"I'm your man. *Yours*. I'm not a damn boy that you're trying on to see if I fit and we work. What's between us is going to last because I won't allow it to be any other way."

"Victor," she breathes my name. It sounds so sweet that I want to close my eyes and drink it in. Instead, I can't take my eyes off her. Just looking at her makes my heart squeeze in my chest. There are times I want to pick her up, throw her over my shoulder, and whisk her away to a world where only the two of us exist. There'd be no distractions, no jobs outside of the damn country, nothing but the two of us. "You have to know that even though my brain is completely messed up at times, you're the only man I've ever wanted."

"See? That should show you that we belong together."

"It's not that. This just seems so sudden. I think my brain is trying to catch up."

"How can you say this is happening too quickly? We've known each other for a year. We've spent almost all that time together. You're telling me I'm the only man you've ever wanted. That's not sudden, Kitten."

"I'm not going anywhere, Victor."

"I wouldn't let you," I grouch. Instead of getting mad, laughter bubbles out of her and I think even she's surprised. "Don't mistake me as someone you can walk over. I may have been a victim once. It broke something inside of me and



caused me to become my mother's puppet, but if I wanted to leave I would."

"You might try, but there's something you don't know about me, Gia."

"What's that?"

"I am going to do whatever it takes to make sure you want to be by my side. When I say that, I *do* mean whatever it takes, because being without you is not an option for me."

"See? That right there is what gets me. You know what I'm scared of. What if I can't give..."

"Say it. Give your biggest fear to me, sweetheart."

"What if—no matter how much I want to—I can't give my body to you?"

"You will."

"You can't be that positive when I don't even know for sure. It's my body."

"I am that positive and I know what I need to do."

"You do?" she squeaks out adorably.

"I have three days to prove to you that you can give me everything I need."

"You're that positive?"

"You have no idea," I groan pulling her body deeper into mine and capturing her lips. I kiss her with all the hunger I have inside of me. It's intense, voracious even. Hell, I think it's even a little desperate. I know she can feel that, probably even taste it in my kiss. Yet, she doesn't pull away. If anything, she matches my intensity.

When we pull apart, she looks at me as if she's in a haze. I'm not sure I've ever seen her look more beautiful. Her eyes are dilated and shimmering with need and happiness. Her hair is mussed from my hands being in it. Her lips are already swollen, wet and bruised. Fuck, I want to scream out for everyone to hear that she's mine. I resist the urge, albeit barely.

“Wow,” Gia exhales.

“Let’s go finish dinner and go home.”

“O—Okay.”

I pull her in one more time and kiss her forehead. Then, I lead my baby back to our table. Gia’s going to be mine completely—already is. She’s just afraid. It’s my job to get rid of that fear and replace it with happiness.

*I’m more than up for the challenge.*

# angelina

...

I've always heard people say life can turn on a dime. I never truly understood it. Yet, when I woke up yesterday, I was fighting panic and determined to find a life without Victor being in the center of it. Now, every dream I've ever had in the last year is on the verge of coming true. It seems too good to be true. I would be ridiculously happy if I wasn't terrified that my own insecurities and hang-ups will get in the way. When Victor was called to Niko's office to talk with him, I asked to go with him. I need Emilia. She can help me work through all the crap in my head. *At least I hope she can.* Luckily, Victor was all for it because he didn't have to have Zane come over to watch me. His jealousy makes me giggle. No one has ever been possessive over me before. I never thought I was the kind of girl who would get that reaction from a man to be honest. I love that Victor does.

"I won't be long. Will you be okay?" Victor asks as he escorts me to the study where my cousin is.

“No, Victorio. I’m totally going to hurt her. Niko bought me a collection of knives that I’ve been dying to try.”

I laugh when I hear Emilia’s sassy response. Victor takes me in his arms making my body flush all over. When we got back from the restaurant last night, I was more than half afraid that he’d push me beyond what I was ready for. Don’t get me wrong. We made out a lot, but nothing more than kissing and his hands roving over my body. I kept my clothes on, so he didn’t actually touch my flesh, even if it felt like his touch was vital to my very existence. We slept together—like we have before—but everything feels different from the way we were. Now, every touch means more. It could be because Victor has told me he wants to make me his future and I want that, too.

*I’m just afraid I’ll screw it all up.*

“For some reason, Emmie, I don’t really doubt that,” Victor teases.

“You shouldn’t.” She sounds serious, making me wonder if it’s the truth. *Yikes*. “Now, get out, you’re interrupting our girl time,” she orders.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he jokes. He pulls back from our embrace to look at me. His hand caresses the side of my face, as he places a kiss on my forehead. “I’ll be back soon, Kitten.” His voice is soft and tender. I feel something deep inside of me unfurl, making me flushed and happy.

“I’ll be here.”

“I’m counting on that.”

I thought we were done but instead, he leans down and presses his lips against mine. I’m sure it’s meant to be a quick touch, but there’s something I’ve learned since Victor’s return. I love his kisses and whenever possible I want more of them. I don’t even blink when he does it. Nope, not a bit. Instead, I put my hands at the back of his neck and pull him in deeper, while sliding my tongue into his mouth. Victor groans and takes over. From that point on, I follow his lead. I’m not even sure how long we kiss. It could be a minute or maybe an hour. That’s how engrossed I am in all the feelings and emotions

that Victor brings out of me. When Emilia begins fake coughing though, we both stop. My muscles tighten in my body as I force myself to pull back.

“Don’t stop on my account,” Emilia taunts.

Victor frowns down at me. I get worried he’s upset with me because I deepened the kiss. “Sorry,” I mumble.

I unknowingly drop my head down. I’m just embarrassed and I don’t want to make Victor mad at me. He doesn’t let me get away with that. His fingers grip my chin, pushing it up so I have no alternative other than to look at him. “Don’t you dare be sorry, Kitten. In fact, when we get home, I’m going to want more and you’re going to give it to me.”

I don’t know if he can tell, but to me it feels like my eyes go wide as saucers. I can feel a bit of panic slide through me, but I must be honest, there is a lot more desire. I nod, unable to form words. He studies me for a minute and then, without another word, turns and walks out.

“Whew, honey! You two are about to set the room on fire,” Emilia cries excitedly.

“Emmie,” I whisper, wondering if I could spontaneously combust.

“Get your ass over here and dish the tea woman. I’d come to you, but I can barely waddle at this point.” She laughs, patting her stomach.

I try to tap down my embarrassment and walk over to sit in the chair across from where she’s lying on the sofa. Emilia is beautiful. She has this thick, lustrous black hair that is so dark it almost looks blue in a certain light. Right now, it’s down and laying in waves around her shoulders. She’s wearing a pale blue maternity dress. She’s absolutely beautiful, but I know she has to be miserable. She is past her due date and the doctor warned her that he’s not going to give her much longer before he puts her in the hospital. It’s important to her to deliver her baby boy naturally, but so far, he’s not cooperating.

I look around Callan and Emilia’s study. It’s a beautiful room full of dark wood and soft beige, leather furniture. The

walls are painted in an almost vanilla color and the effect against the wood is as pretty as it is comfortable. Emilia used a blue-green color on the rugs and throw pillows as an accent color. It works because the floor matches the woodwork.

“Has Niko talked you into agreeing to have labor induced or to undergo a cesarean yet?”

“Almost. I promised him we’d make the decision at my appointment in two weeks. If the doctor is adamant and there’s still no sign of labor, I’ll agree. I’m still not sure on the C-section, though. I have to really think on that.”

“I understand, but you need to listen to the doctor and do what is safest for the baby, yes, but also for you, Emmie,” I caution.

“I will. I promise. Niko swears we’re never having another child, but I told him he’s crazy. I love being pregnant. If my mind doesn’t change, I’m going to get pregnant again as soon as the doctor gives me the okay.”

“Will Niko agree to that?” I laugh.

“Oh please, all I have to do is kiss along his neck and whisper in his ear I need him. My man never fails to turn into a beast and never thinks of birth control. He’ll pout but he loves me pregnant.”

I can’t help but giggle again. “Is he the one that turns into a beast or is it you Emmie?”

“I’m addicted to the man. I can admit it. That’s not what is important right now, though.”

“It’s not?”

“Nope. I need to know what finally got Victorio’s head out of his ass.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t hand me that, Angelina. You guys were going so hot and heavy. I was afraid he was going to nail you up against the wall. I mean don’t get me wrong, the man has been slowly dying for a year, wanting you. I’m just unsure what made him finally man up.”

I think I'm in shock. I know Victor said I had been his since the moment we first met, but there was a part of me that didn't believe him. Clearly, he was telling the truth. "You knew he liked me?" I gasp.

"Like you?" she waves her hand like I'm insane. "Girl, that man is intensely fixated on you. No one else exists for him but you."

"You're exaggerating," I laugh, feeling my face heat.

"I am not. It's the complete truth."

"Do you think so?" I ask, needing to hear her say it, even if it does scare me.

"I can't tell you the number of times he'd come here and ask for advice on how to make you feel safe with him. He told me that he knew you were the woman for him from the moment he first saw you. He just wanted to wait until you were ready for him."

I take a breath and even I can tell how it trembles inside of me. He really does want me. He has for a long time. All this time, I thought we were just friends. My hand goes up to touch my cheek. When Victor touches me or looks at me, I forget about it. I can do that because he never acts like he notices it. He makes me feel beautiful. Still, I have a hard time believing out of all the women he could have, he'd pick me.

"Emmie—"

"Stop that, Angelina."

"Huh?" I ask her, looking up to notice her face is stern.

"You're trying to hide in yourself again. I know you've been hurt, baby. I do. But you, my sweet cousin, are not defined by what some scum did to you. Your spirit is not diminished one bit by that scar on your face and neither is your beauty. Victorio told me personally that you are the most beautiful woman he has ever met, but his favorite thing is that you're just as special on the inside too."

"He said that?"

“How can you doubt it? Have you ever seen Victorio even look at another woman since the two of you have been spending time together?”

I think about it for a bit, but I already know the answer. If I had caught Victor flirting with another woman, it would have hurt me so deeply that I wouldn't be able to forget it. In the past year, there have been a bunch of women flirting with him, but he always ignored them and concentrated on me. *On me.* Wow. Suddenly my heart pounds against my chest.

“I guess not,” I admit.

“Exactly. He's completely and utterly wrapped up in you. He doesn't look at you and see that scar. He doesn't see anything other than the woman he wants to claim.”

“Claim?” *Eek.*

“Why do you sound panicked? Don't tell me you don't want him, Angelina! I will *not* believe you.”

“No, I want him,” I confess.

“Then, what's the problem?”

I bite my bottom lip and try to figure out how to explain. I love Emilia. I really do. Yet, I've never shared with anyone about my rape. I've never confessed that I've never had sex—at least consensual.

“I'm scared, Emmie.”

“What of, honey?” she asks gently, slowly sitting up so she can reach her hand out to me. I take it and she pulls me over to her sofa and I sit down beside her.

“I want him. I really do. It's just...”

“Just what?” she prompts when I can't get it out.

“I think I'm broken. I want Victor, but there's a good chance I'll freeze if I try to go there with him.”

“You haven't had sex since the um...since...well—”

“Since my attack,” I respond, rescuing her. I don't want to tell her that I've never had sex other than the rape. She's



having enough trouble talking about my rape. Everyone does. Heck, I don't want to talk about it either. It's easier to pretend it was all a horrible nightmare.

“You'll be safe with him, Angelina. He'll take care of you. He'd do anything to make it good for you. I would go as far to say that no other man would be as gentle with you as Victorio would. You just need to trust him.”

“That's the problem. I trust him. It's me I'm worried about.”

“What are you afraid will happen?” she questions.

“I could have a panic attack. Hell, crying and screaming are possible. My memories might overtake me. I'm terrified of making a fool of myself and completely turning Victor off. I mean, nothing ruins the perfect moment like a full-blown panic attack and the woman screaming like a banshee.”

She tightens her hold on my hand and cups the side of my face.

“Angelina, I need you to listen to me. You just need to trust Victorio to handle whatever happens. I promise you he won't let you down.”

“How do you know?” I'm desperate to believe her. I'm hoping she has magic words that will make me calm down—even if I know realistically it's not possible.

“Because that man is in love with you, honey. He'd cut off his own hand to keep from hurting you. He wouldn't even try to go there with you unless he was positive. You need to believe in him like he believes in you.”

“I wish I was as positive about this as you are,” I laugh, unable to keep the worry out of my voice.

“Let me ask you a question.”

“Okay.”

“When he was kissing you a bit ago, was panic anywhere in your head?”

“Well, no. I was kind of lost in the moment.”

She grins. “Just take a chance. I know in my heart that Victorio will make things okay. If you let him love you, honey, he’ll help you to erase the memories of that day with much, much better ones.”

I nod. I’m still scared, but Emilia has reminded me that Victor has always watched out for me. He won’t hurt me, and if I fail epically, he’ll get me through it. I’m still kind of sick to my stomach. It’s not because I doubt Victor—not at all. It’s because if I can’t be the woman he deserves, I have to let him go.

*And I’m afraid that might kill me.*

# victorio

...

“Did you have a nice visit with Emilia?” I look at her as I ask the question. She’s been quiet since we came home. We cooked dinner together and she spoke here and there, but she’s been uncharacteristically quiet. I don’t know if it’s nerves because of everything we did last night and today, or if something else is bothering her. Is she having regrets? We kissed and made out, but I didn’t let it go too far. Is she worried? I need to figure out what is going on in that head of hers and fix it because I’m not letting her go.

“It was good. I don’t see how she can go much longer. If it was me, I’d be begging the doctor to induce my labor. She’s adamant that the baby will come out when he’s ready.”

“I know. We have a pool going on.”

“A pool?”

“Yeah, we’re betting on when she has the baby.”

“You are?”

“Yep. If she delivers on March twenty-third, I win the pot.”

“How much money is in the pot? Wait! March twenty-third?”

“Yeah,” I respond, grinning.

“That’s my birthday.”

“I know, Kitten. It happens to be my favorite day of the year.”

“It does? But why?”

“Because it’s the birthday of the woman who owns me.”

“Owns you?” she laughs. “Be serious, Victor.”

“I am, Gia. Did you think I was lying when I told you how I feel about you?”

“I don’t think you would lie to me.”

“Good.” We had been doing the dishes, cleaning up from dinner. I take the dish towel out of her hand. Her eyes follow me, but she doesn’t say anything or move. She’s waiting to see what I’ll do. That makes me smile. Once I put the towel on the counter, I pick her up, holding her against my chest, cradling her gently.

“What are you doing?” she questions me, but I notice she’s curling her body into me.

“You and I need to talk.”

“We’ve talked a lot today,” she points out.

“Okay, so now it’s time to explore our new boundaries.”

“We have boundaries?”

“Not really, but you probably have some. They’re boundaries we will keep until you’re comfortable to go beyond them.”

I feel her body tense with my words. When we make it to her bedroom, I walk us over to the bed and lay her down gently. Her beautiful auburn-copper hair spills over the pillow. The blonde she used to dye it to is now nothing but a memory

and I'm glad. This is my Kitten. Her beauty is beyond compare and the dusting of freckles over her body calls to me like a prayer in the middle of the night. I love everything about this woman.

"I don't mean to have boundaries." Her words are but a mere breath, so quiet that it is hard to grasp them over the beating of my heart. "It's just—"

"You don't need to explain anything to me, sweetheart. I don't mind. I would think something was wrong if you didn't have limits we needed to explore. What you need to realize is that I'm here because there's nowhere else that I would choose to be. You're all I want. I'm not going to get mad at you because we need to go slow. I'm not going to change my mind or even disappear. I'm here with you and I will always be here."

I sit down on the bed beside her, rolling to my side so that I'm facing her, and propping my head up on my arm. I know she's going over my words, weighing them and thinking about her response. That's who she is. She's not spontaneous at all. Life has taught her she can't be, and I accept it. Hell, I even respect it. However, I can't not touch her while she's processing things. I put a hand on her stomach, letting my fingers splay out against her soft body. One day my child will rest here. I'm more sure of that than the next breath I take. I won't allow any other future.

For me, women have always come easily. It's not because of me the person, though. There's a reason Antonio and the others call me "pretty boy". It's not an exaggeration. I know the reflection in the mirror is pleasing to the eye. Women do flirt and throw themselves at me. That sounds cocky as hell, but it's the truth. They see the way I look, they take in my designer suits, and that's all it takes. Money and looks get you almost anything you could imagine. The problem with that is that it is never real. I'd learned that early on. There are days I hate the way I look. That sounds crazy, I know it does, but it's true, nonetheless. My looks have caused me trouble with Niko, Antonio, and several others. I usually laugh off their jealousy when I'm around their wives. They're assholes at times, but

they know I'd never go there. Hell, their women wouldn't either. Yet, I get the feeling the way I look gives Angelina an excuse not to give into me. Because of her scars, she feels that she's less. Most of that has to do with the way her mother treated her. She bases too much value on how someone looks because her mother has beat it into her. That's getting frustrating as hell. I know her self-confidence has never been much because of that woman. Since Gia's attack and the scars that the bastard gave her, she has no clue to her value. She can't see what everyone around her sees. She's lost in her pain. In her eyes, she's worthless.

I'm not stupid. It's going to be a hard climb to get my woman to see what I see when I look at her. I may never achieve it completely, but I'm sure going to try like hell. All I need from her is to get her to let her defenses down—at least a little. I need her to let me in. Yesterday was our first step in the right direction. I hope that she can see I've been here for a year and never wavered. There's no way I'm going to now, not when I finally have the taste of her on my lips.

“You can't say that, Victor.” Her face shows her pain as she finally responds, and I can't resist leaning over and kissing her forehead.

“I can. Do you doubt I'm a man of my word?”

“Of course not, don't be silly. It's just, we both know my head is a mess. I'm trying to work through it and have for years, but nothing has really changed. The thought of being intimate with a man terrifies me,” she confesses, her face turning blood red.

“Then we'll tackle that first. It may take a while, but together we'll knock down that hurdle and move to the next one, Gia.”

“I think this is more than just a hurdle, honey.”

“Fuck, that feels good,” I exhale, my lips stretching into a huge smile as satisfaction fills me.

“Huh?” she asks, clearly having no idea why I'm grinning like an idiot.

“You called me honey,” I explain. I reach up to grasp her hand, pulling it over to press it against my chest. My heart is beating under her palm, and it feels so good that it’s pretty much indescribable. “Do you feel that, Kitten? You are the reason my heart beats. You own me.”

“Victor...”

“Look in my eyes, Gia. The truth is there. It has been there from the beginning. You’ve just been blind to it. I need you to see it now.”

“I don’t know what...”

I squeeze her hand on my chest. “Look, sweetheart,” I urge, willing her to look into my eyes and see everything I feel for her.

She moistens her lips and I beat down the urge to capture the tip of her tongue that is rubbing against her lips. “I don’t want to lose you,” she finally admits.

“That’s never going to happen. If anything, you may get tired of the way I want to keep you within touching distance every single minute of every single hour of the day.”

“I could be completely broken to the point that this won’t work, Victor.”

“You’re not,” I argue. “We will get there together.”

“Why do you even want to bother?” she whimpers, and I can see the unshed tears shining in her eyes.

“What kind of question is that? I want to spend my life with you, Gia. No, it goes beyond want. It’s *need*. You are all I want. I’ve not made a secret of that to anyone.”

“Except me,” she mumbles, closing her eyes.

“Not even to you, baby. It’s just you saw it all as coming from a friend, not your future husband.”

That makes her eyes open and when she looks at me, I’m smiling.

“You might be insane.”

“If I am, I don’t give a fuck. All I want is you.”

“Boy, are you in for a big disappointment.”

I sigh and let go of her hand. It does make me feel a little better when she doesn’t take her hand off my heart. Still, there’s something I need to address and it’s clear that I can’t wait any longer. “You and I need to have a serious talk,” I warn.

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“Okay, smartass,” I chuckle. “We need to have a serious conversation about something else for a second.”

“What about?”

“You need to understand that I won’t allow anyone to insult you, and that includes yourself.”

“I’m sorry?” she huffs. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The next time you talk bad about yourself, I’m going to spank your ass until it’s red. I won’t allow you to say that shit. I won’t let anyone hurt the woman I love and that includes you.”

“Victor.”

As she says my name, there are tears in her eyes. Alarm hits me when I see them slowly move down her face. I’ve seen Angelina cry over the past year. Although, it was mostly after we first met. She admitted to me that she never cared for Dante, that she caved because of pressure from her witch of a mother. Still, it was all hard on her, especially the shit her mother pulled afterwards. I held her and was just there for her. I did my best to never let Gia be alone and dried her tears as often as I could. I didn’t mind. It was a privilege. Seeing her tears now, hit me harder. Did I scare her by threatening to spank her? Is she upset because I’m finally being completely honest with her? *Shit.*

I clear my throat, trying to figure out how to fix the problem that I unwittingly started. “Don’t cry, Gia. I didn’t mean to scare you,” I explain as I roll to my back and pull her in closer to me so her head can rest on my arm.



“You didn’t scare me,” she snuffles.

“Then, you’re going to have to tell me what is going on, because I can’t stand to see you cry. It kills me, Kitten.”

“You said you love me,” she confesses.

I almost can’t understand her because she’s talking and sniffling at the same time. Her voice is so quiet that it isn’t easy to make out. “That upsets you?” I ask, still not understanding.

“Before, when we talked about it,” she stops to try and catch her breath and wipe her tears away. She’s rolled onto her side so that I can see her better and I’m grateful. She uses the back of her hand to wipe away the tears.

“Gia?” I prompt her when she stops talking and just stares at me like she’s looking for an answer to something. I just have no idea what it is.

“Before you made it sound like you didn’t believe in love.”

“I also told you I was trying not to scare you. Everything I told you I felt after that, though, should have made it clear where I stand.”

“Every woman wants to know that she’s loved and valued, Victor.”

“In that case, Angelina Ione Conroy, I love you endlessly. I will love you until the day I die and whatever comes after that. Does that make it clear?”

“My last name is not Conroy and I hate the name Ione. Honestly, I hate my entire name,” she grumbles.

“Your name is beautiful, or at least it will be when we legally add Conroy to it.”

“Are you proposing to me, Victor?”

“I am. Are you going to say yes?” I ask, knowing I will absolutely fucking marry her right this minute.

“Don’t you think we better see if I can ever be a normal person before we jump into talking about marriage? You’re a

great guy, but I don't think any man—even you—wants to be married to a woman who is terrified of physical intimacy.”

“I don't think you're terrified of me, Gia.”

“I'm terrified of having sex in general, Victor,” she counters.

“That's because you're putting too much pressure on yourself. I think we need to go slow.”

“Well, we've known each other a year. I don't think you can get much slower than that,” she half-heartedly jokes.

“Will you let me touch you, Kitten?”

“Uh...*what?*”

“Let me touch you. We can quit at any time, but I think we both need to see how you react to my touch.”

“I...”

“We need to try, Gia. You know you're safe with me. If it gets to be too much, all you have to do is tell me to quit.”

“Does it have to be tonight?” she asks, sounding panicked.

“It doesn't have to be, but I think it should. Tomorrow is my last day here. I leave early the following day. I think if I can prove to you that you'll feel safe with me when we're physical, some of your doubts will recede.”

“And if it makes things worse?”

“Then, we'll continue every day like we did last night until I win you over.”

“I don't think you understand, Victor. You don't have to win me over. I already lo—*care* for you. It's my mind and my body that makes this impossible.”

“Trust me, Gia. I'll win your mind and body over, too.”

“What if this doesn't work?”

“What if it does?” I grin at her as she just shakes her head. “Go take a shower and get ready for bed. I need to call Zane and Lodi and make sure things are in motion for when we head out. We'll talk more about it later, okay?” I wonder if she

picks up on the fact that I've made sure Zane is going with me. The thought of leaving him alone with her was just too much for me.

“Okay,” she agrees. I lean down and kiss her lips softly. She's worked herself up too much. I can tell her entire body is filled with tension. I'm hoping a shower will help her unwind. If not, then hopefully what I have planned will help with that. I jump off the bed and leave the room whistling. She might be scared I won't break through, but I don't have the same doubts.

*Whether it's tonight or a year from now, Gia will be mine completely.*

# angelina

...

The shower did make me feel better. I'm still keyed up, but I try to ignore it. I'm being silly. I love Victor, even if I am scared to tell him that. He wouldn't hurt me and he's right. I have to try. If I can be normal with anyone, it would be with him. I should have more faith, but honestly, it's not like I've been very lucky over the years. Victor is the one lone bright spot in all of it.

I don't have to ask. I know he's planning on us sharing a bed tonight. I realize that we've been doing that almost every night that he's been here and have for a long time. It never truly registered until just now. It just felt...*natural*. Victor will be happy with just sleeping beside me. I want to kiss him. I want to be closer to him. I just don't know if I'm strong enough to block out my memories. I haven't in over six years.

I start to worry about what I should wear to bed. I don't have anything sexy and I'm pretty sure if I wore something like that I would go into a panic. I settle on a T-shirt that Victor gave me a long time ago. It falls mid-thigh and is big

enough that you couldn't call it sexy at all. It has the band name Wallflowers written on it. I smile because Victor took me to watch their lead singer a couple of months after we met. That's when he bought us matching shirts. Unfortunately, I left mine in the hotel room when we left the following morning. Victor gave me his as a replacement. The memory makes me smile. That's just one of the reasons this shirt makes me happy.

I take a breath and as I look at myself in the bathroom mirror, I panic. It's probably lame, but I feel naked, so I decide to put on my pajama shorts and a thin sports bra.

After I finish, I walk into the bedroom to find that Victor isn't here. I take a breath, thankful to be honest. I know that's not good news. I'm terrified that I will never be able to unwind with him. I also know that if I can't be with Victor, I won't be with anyone.

I stare at the bed. If I get in, is that being weird? Should I wait in a chair? *What the hell would I be waiting for?* Jesus, what is wrong with me? I finally grab the remote and get in on my side of the bed. I flip the television on and turn to the channel that plays those true-life crime shows twenty-four hours a day. I'm addicted to them, and I can't even tell you why. I curl on my side and soon get engrossed in a story about a missing pregnant wife. I could tell right away it was the husband. It seems to always be the husband. My heart broke for the dark-haired woman on the screen with a joyful, kind face. It hurt so much that tears gathered in my eyes.

"Now, this was not the mood that I had hoped for when I came in," Victor murmurs, and I force my gaze over to look at him. He's standing in the doorway with gray sweats and no shirt. His smooth chest is highlighted by the hall light behind him. He's broad and tall so he blocks the entire door frame with his body. *Beautiful*. He's magnificent and takes my breath away. Then again, he does that every single time I look at him.

"Her husband killed her and their baby she was carrying so he could have her life insurance. Then the bastard escaped out of the country with his mistress. Who would do such a horrible thing?" I ask. I'm not really asking him. The man was evil. There's no explanation for it other than that. Victor knows

that, but he reaches down and takes the remote from my hands and turns the television off. He puts it on his nightstand and then slides into bed with me.

“Why do you watch this horrible stuff?” he grumbles. I’d like to explain it to him, but I don’t think I can—even I ask myself that sometimes. He gathers me up in his arms and I curl into him, letting the heat of his body warm me. “Tell me they at least caught the guy,” he mutters, kissing the top of my head.

“He’s in jail but he will have a chance at parole. It doesn’t seem fair,” I confess with a sigh.

“Where is he?”

“Texas, I think.”

“What can I do to get him out of your mind?”

“He’s not in my mind specifically,” I defend. “It’s more like the whole of the world being evil and unfair.”

“There’s good in the world, too, Kitten.”

“Like what?” I huff, because I really want him to tell me something that will stop me from feeling so defeated.

“You. You’re my good, Gia. You’re my reason.”

“Reason for what?” I prod, trying to fight the smile on my lips. Who knew Victor could be so sappy. It sounds like a cheesy line. Maybe it is, but I find I don’t care either way. It makes me feel good.

“Every fucking thing,” he groans, and he pulls back while simultaneously lifting my chin, so I look up at him. Then, before I can respond, he’s kissing me. He plunders my mouth like a savage, robbing my breath and stealing my senses. It’s a kiss unlike any of the others that he has given me. This one is urgent, but there’s a stamp of ownership inside of it that should terrify me, but instead I just moan, the sound is swallowed down by him. I can feel his voracious need for me in every cell of my body. It sends an answering electric charge through me that centers between my legs. When we break apart, I can barely catch my breath.

“Have I ever told you how much I love you in that shirt, sweetheart?” he purrs.

“I don’t think so,” I manage to get out jerkily, unable to control my reaction to him.

“Other than you being naked, I can’t imagine anything looking better on you.”

I can feel my blush from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. He leans in and kisses my forehead and when he pulls back, our gazes lock. For a second, it feels like I can’t breathe.

“Victor—”

“You love me, Gia. I feel it with everything in me. We’re going to make this work,” he vows.

I do love him, but I haven’t told him. I don’t think I can right now. I feel vulnerable enough as it is. I want this to work, so I’ve given up trying to fight it. Victor is offering me something I’ve wanted since the first moment I saw him. That said, I’m petrified that I may be too broken for it to work, so I’m not going to tell him I love him. That way if this blows up in my face, I won’t look so pathetic. God, that’s lame reasoning. I’m such a coward. It’s a wonder the stink of fear that is deep within me doesn’t choke me to death.

“Kiss me,” I tell him, and I admit to myself that I’m asking him to kiss me, just so I don’t blab how much I do love him—how I’ve *always* loved him.

He does, but this kiss is different. He starts at my forehead, kissing me there. His lips glide along my skin and he kisses my cheekbone, my chin, and then moves back to my cheek. From there his lips continue a previously unidentified heated path to my ear. He sucks the lobe into his mouth. I hear this sexy little growl, and my entire body shivers in reaction as goosebumps rise on my flesh. His tongue slides along the shell of my ear and I whimper from all of the feelings that hit me.

“So fucking sweet,” he groans.

“Victor...”

His name is but a breath of air that trembles out of my lips as his head drops down and he kisses along my neck, his teeth grazing the soft flesh. He sucks at my skin and my hips lift from the bed as my fingers tangle in the sheet beneath me. Until this moment, I didn't realize that I had laid on my back.

The muscles tighten in my abdomen as his hand pulls up my shirt. His touch is filled with heat. It brands my skin. My teeth sink into my lower lip as I try to breathe through all the sensations bombarding me.

“Look at me, Gia,” he orders, and I realize I've closed my eyes. I force them to open. My entire body feels as if it's on fire. I look at him, his gaze is trained on me. His eyes are bottomless, inky pools of darkness and I lose myself in them. “You don't have to, I swear I won't be upset, but I want you to lift your shirt so I can see your breasts.”

My heart stutters.

“I...”

“It's up to you, sweetheart. I just want to make you feel good. That's it. You're the one in control, I promise. You tell me to quit, and I quit. We can always try this another way.”

God, I want to tell him yes. I trust Victor. Everything he's doing feels good. Why in the hell can't I say yes? Why is this so hard? I feel tears stinging my eyes. I don't mean to, but I shake my head frantically, denying both of us what we want. I shut my eyes tight. The last thing I want to see is Victor's disappointment.

“I'm sorry,” I cry. “I'm so sorry.” I can't quit trembling, the tears come faster now. I feel like I'm falling apart. “Please don't be mad, Victor. Please. I knew this wouldn't work. I knew it. You need someone who is normal...”

My cries turn into sobs. I lose myself in my misery. I've ruined everything. I knew I would. I'm so stupid for even trying...



# victorio

...

She's killing me. The pain in her voice is delivering death blow after death blow. I put my hands on each side of her face, applying just enough pressure to make sure she's forced to look at me. "Look at me, Kitten," I demand.

Her hands come up to hold my wrists. She's gasping for breath. Each exhale sounds painful and rocks her body. "Vi-Vi-Victor, I—"

"Shh. Stop worrying. Sweetheart, look at me. This isn't all or nothing. We have all the time in the world. I'm here with you Angelina. I'm right here and I promise you that I don't want to be anywhere else."

"You d-d-des-deserve more," she stumbles out, trying to get control of her tears.

"You don't get it," I tell her, praying that she hears me, finally understands. "I don't want anyone but you, Gia. I'm not a young kid. I've not been a saint. I know without a

shadow of a doubt when I look at you, it's you or no one for me.”

“Y-You can't say that.”

“I most certainly can, and I do. You're all I want.”

“I want you t-too. I pr-promise. It's just that the thought of you seeing my...my...” She stops talking, shaking her head. “I have s-sc-scars. The thought of you seeing them terrifies me,” she says, finally getting control of her crying for the most part.

Her confession breaks my heart. I don't even know how to respond. “Your scars don't matter to me, Gia,” I stress as I kiss her salty, tear-stained cheek.

“You can't say that, you haven't seen them. They're a reminder. They'll always be a reminder that I'm damaged.”

“Gia, look at me. Look me in the face, into my eyes and really see me. Do I look like I find you damaged in any way, shape, or form?”

“Victor, we don't—”

I reach out and take her hand, pulling it down to my crotch. It's easy to see how hard I am for her. I press her hand against my cock. She goes stiff almost at once and there's a gasp that leaves her lips. Her tears have mostly stopped now. I find myself extending down to kiss her face in gentle pecks, doing my best to erase all signs of her tears. I don't like them. Angelina has had enough sadness. I don't want them to get anything more from her.

Eventually, she relaxes. Her fingers lightly curl around the outline of my dick, and I move my kisses to her lips and take her mouth with a groan of hunger that's hard to explain. Gia isn't stroking me and honestly, she's holding my cock very gently. Yet, this feels like a win, and I take it as such.

“You're perfect. Your scars are just reminders that you went through hell and somehow made it through to the other side. They don't detract from who you are as a person, your worth, or what you are to me. I don't know if you can trust that, but I need you to trust me. I'm not going to hurt you, Kitten. I never want to hurt you. I want to be your...” I

struggle for the right word. Lover? That is a given but doesn't quite say what I feel. Husband? Again, that doesn't exactly say what I want either. *Everything?* That's completely truthful. It almost might scare the hell out of my woman. Right now—when it comes to me—it's clear that she's scared of her shadow. I need to make her feel safe and secure. That's a tall order, but I know the first step is to go gently. I may be rushing some things, but I need to be careful about how I handle her and navigate through this. “I want to be your protector,” I finally settle on. I almost wince. Fuck, maybe Emilia is right, and I do need my head examined.

“My protector?” she says, sounding confused as hell. Who can blame her? I really need to just stop speaking and kiss Gia constantly. I screw things up a lot less when all I do is touch and kiss her.

“I want to take your burdens and make them my own. I want to slay your demons and protect you from anyone who would ever think to bring you harm. I want to be the one not only in your heart, but the first person you think to call when you need something, *want* something, or even just needing to vent and tell me about whatever shitty thing ruined your day, or maybe whatever *great* thing makes you feel like celebrating. I want it all, sweetheart—*every single damn thing.*”

“You can still say all that, even after the melt down I had just because my maybe boyfriend wanted to see my breasts?” Gia takes a shuddering breath while looking at me like I really am nuts. What she doesn't do, I notice, is take her hand away from my dick. If anything, her hand has gotten tighter.

“I have an idea,” I begin, worried that I might freak her out. Still, I need to see if she's willing to work with me. If she's not, well, I'll try again tomorrow.

“An idea?” she asks. I can tell she's not sure what's coming next, but to her credit she doesn't panic or run away.

“What if I touch your breasts under your shirt? Would you allow me to do that?”

I think I hear a whimper come from her lips, but she bites down on them, trapping the muffled sound. I can feel her body tense and a slight shiver running through her. She's scared, probably even on the verge of saying no. I prepare myself. I knew the suggestion was a gamble. For me, it was worth a shot. I need her to see that I'm not giving up. I will keep pressing and pressing until, eventually, I win her over.

That's my game plan. It's the only one I have.

"What if I freeze up or panic again?" she probes.

"Then, we go back to the beginning and try again when you're ready. I told you, no matter what, sweetheart, I'm here."

"You won't get upset with me?"

"Not on your life."

"I'm nervous," she volunteers. I want to smile, because that's kind of an understatement, but I don't. I just nod. "I hate that I'm like this, Victor. I hate that I can't be just a woman who wants her man's touch. I hate that being vulnerable makes me feel as if I can't breathe."

In response this time, I lean over and kiss her exposed neck. She lets out a soft breath. She likes this... *a lot*. Deciding to press my luck, I slip my tongue out to lick against the column of her neck, taking her sweet scent and taste into me. *Perfection*. She doesn't stop me. If anything, she wants more. Encouraged, I add my teeth, nibbling along her neck, scraping against the exposed skin. Trying to show her how much I need her.

My hand moves of its own accord, going back to her stomach. I let my fingers dance over her, keeping my mouth focused on her neck. I want her lost in passion. I need her to be that way if I'm going to break through her fear. I slide my lips back to hers, taking over her mouth again, kissing her deeply. Gia surprises me, her tongue becoming every bit as forceful as mine. At times, she tries to dominate and take over the kiss. I don't allow it, but I sure as fuck encourage her. When my hand palms her breast she pulls back to look at me.

Our gazes lock as I squeeze the rounded mound, making sure she's okay if I continue. She seems to sense my unspoken question because she nods her head slightly.

*She wants more.*

I take a breath of relief and return to kissing her, silently giving her my thanks. I'm hoping my woman can feel how proud I am of her. I know giving into me can't be easy for her. I know she couldn't give this freedom to any other man. The weight of that and the knowledge sinks inside of me with a rightness I can't explain.

Even through the fabric of her bra, I can feel her nipples press against my palm. They both are hard, hungry buttons that my mouth waters to suck on. That will come, but for now, I satisfy myself by pressing on them, rubbing across them with my thumb, trapping them between my fingers and pressing harder.

Gia's moans become hungrier. She's louder, her body trembling beneath me. Her hips begin rocking, letting me know that she's loving everything I'm doing and still wants more. I feel as if I've won a war.

She tears her mouth away from me, gasping for breath. "Victor," she cries, her voice hoarse with hunger.

"I'm here, sweetheart," I croon, moving my hand under her bra and taking her full tit into my hand—skin against much softer skin.

I feel the way my body quakes from the sensation, answering Gia's need. She may not realize this, but her hand is now tightly gripping my cock and fuck I wish my pants were out of the way. I don't want to press my luck, though. So, I don't push them down. If she doesn't let go of my cock soon, however, I'm going to cum in my pants like a fucking teenager. I push that thought away as I begin kissing down her neck, carefully sliding my hand back to her stomach. I hear Gia's tiny whimper of disappointment and I grin.

God, she's perfect.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” I assure her. “I’m going to give you more pleasure. I’m nowhere near ready to stop,” I promise. Then without warning my lips latch onto one of her nipples that is pushing against her shirt and begging for affection. I hate having her clothes in the way, but once I push her sports bra out of the way, the thin fabric of her worn T-shirt still lets me tease her properly.

“Oh, God,” she moans.

In reward for how needy she sounds, I capture the nipple between my teeth and nip at it, suckling afterwards. I continue my onslaught, but all the while my hand is inching into her pajama shorts. The heat of her sweet pussy calls to me, leaving me powerless. I’m completely under her spell. I was made to be hers. I am here to give her pleasure. She is my world.

I use my fingers to create space against the lace fabric of her panties and dive even deeper. I growl in response to her whimper when my hand is finally cupping her pussy. Her lips are soaked with evidence of her desire for me. I can feel her cream pressed against my palm. Fuck, I wish I could see her. I won’t push it, though. This isn’t a race. I have to win Gia over by perseverance. There’s a neatly trimmed thatch of hair against her creamy lips. It sends pleasure through me. I can tell it’s something she does herself. Most women go to a spa and get waxed. Gia’s not let anyone else see her beauty willingly. I’m the only person she’s giving that right too. It’s a gift. I need to make sure she always feels beautiful and comfortable with me. I want to make sure she knows I cherish her.

God, she’s so wet that her juices are everywhere I touch. It’s addicting. I let my fingers lightly move against her lips, grazing the neatly trimmed hair I find. It’s hard to tell if it’s just a small landing strip or something different, and I mourn that I can’t just uncover her and see. I know it will happen. The mere fact that she’s letting me touch her like this is all the proof I need. Finally, I slide my fingers into the folds of her pussy, petting her slowly and methodically. Gia’s body goes still. Our gazes lock as the gravity of this moment surrounds us, changing the very air we’re breathing. The moment feels charged, electrical currents sparking between us. While

looking into her beautiful green eyes, I let two of my fingers search out her clit. Her teeth come down to press against her bottom lip. Their pearly white color is in direct contrast to the soft pink of her lush lips. This little sliver of noise escapes as I press against her clit. Her hand tightens even more on my cock.

“Are you okay?” I feel the need to ask. I want her to know she is in control here. She nods once. I run my tongue against her lip and immediately she opens to me. I can feel where her teeth were a second ago and after running my tongue along the tender area, I push into her mouth, my tongue heatedly tangling with hers. Gia takes part in our kiss, matching my need and that’s the sign I needed the most. I begin to make tiny circles around her swollen, sopping wet clit. She needs me. I want nothing more than to bury my face in her sweet cunt and drown myself in her sweet juices. The very thought alone is enough to make my dick weep. I can feel a small drop of cum slide over the head and down my shaft. I press my fingers harder against her clit, grinding against it and working her with an intensity that I’ve never felt before.

“That feels so good,” she pants. Her voice is soft, yet somehow, I hear it loudly, even over the way my hunger for her has my blood rushing through my ears. I bring my mouth back to her breast, sucking a nipple through the shirt, while my thumb takes over massaging her clit. I stretch two of my fingers down to find her entrance and I slowly push them inside her tight heat, while still massaging her clit. “Oh God, don’t stop,” she orders.

She needn’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. I bite on her nipple and begin thrusting in and out of her pussy with two of my fingers. My thumb continues to grind on her clit. Gia’s hips are rocking against me now as sensation takes over. These sexy hot breaths are puffing out of her as her body vibrates with pleasure. I suck hard on her nipple, pressing it to the roof of my mouth, giving it a hard pull, all while silently cursing her shirt. I shift my hand around and extend one free finger down and curl to reach the small rosette opening of her ass. I press against the ring of muscle so there’s no part of her that she can’t feel me now. For a moment, she freezes. I don’t let

that deter me. I keep working her, refusing to stop. Her hips spring back to life as she starts riding my hand like never before.

“What are you doing to me?”

The question comes out as a long whine full of desire. I groan nibbling on her breast while I fuck her juicy cunt harder. She tightens around my digits and the need to push inside her with my cock is almost more than I can stand. She’s slowly killing me. I can feel by the way the walls of her pussy flutter around me and the answering echo in the tight muscles of her ass that she’s close. I release her breast only to lean up and beg in her ear. “Come for me, Kitten. Let me feel you fly apart. Come for me.” Her body jerks with my order as I flatten my thumb on her clit and press hard, grinding it while continuously fucking her with my fingers. My moves are hard and fast, giving her no chance to catch her breath. I want her orgasm. It belongs to me.

Suddenly, she cries out, her body tightening as she tries to hold it back, but that’s impossible. Her climax claims her, and she comes with a keening cry of my name.

“Victor!”

The joy I feel is beyond words. I keep working her and working her, and slowly move my finger from her ass and change my movements to soothe her pussy as she rides out the storm I unleashed in her body.

When she slowly comes back to Earth, I look at her flushed face and the satisfaction I see in her beautiful eyes makes me feel like a fucking king.

I claim her mouth, kissing her because if I don’t do something, I’m going to strip down and fuck her hard and in a way that she’ll never forget who owns her body.



# angelina

...

*Oh my God.*

My first real orgasm. I had some before my attack, of course. They were given to me by my vibrator—a cute small, purple, vibrating wand I named Simon. I love to read, and Simon was the sexiest character ever invented. I’m a *Bridgerton* fan and I like to fantasize, what can I say? That name has only gotten sexier after the TV show premiered. That was some terrific casting—that’s all I have to say.

My wand bends and curls anyway I want to move it and although I think it was made for the umm... the *backdoor* area, I used it only on the front because it got the job done and rather quickly.

I loved Simon, but I threw him out after my attack. Sex is the last thing I’ve had on my mind. Still, I thought sex could never live up to the pleasure that Simon gave me back then. I was wrong. *So wrong*. Honestly, I know whatever you could call what Victor and I just did, wasn’t what he wanted. If I can get past my hang-ups, it will be much better. At this point, I’m

pretty sure it will be so good that it might kill me. That's how much faith I have in Victor's abilities.

"Gia?" he whispers. It's then that I realize my eyes have closed. I should open them and look at him. Eventually, I will. Right now, I need another couple of minutes to contemplate how Victor just rocked my world and how things might change now.

"Mm..." I hum.

"Kitten, look at me," he responds, his voice tender. I think I even hear humor.

"I don't want to. I need a few minutes to review how you just killed me."

"I didn't kill you," he denies, and this time I definitely hear the laughter in his words.

"I'm pretty sure you did."

"Look at me, Gia," he huffs, sounding so sweet that I force myself to look at him.

"What?" I grumble, while thinking that this man is the most beautiful person on the face of the planet. He should be against the law. He's that spectacular.

"Are you okay?"

"You mean besides being dead?" I ask him.

I don't know where I'm finding my bravado. Maybe sharing this with him has freed me in a way. I'm not ready for more, but there's something about proving that I can still be a woman—a woman a man I care about wants—that is freeing.

"You're not dead," he chuckles and then he ruins the perfection of the moment by taking his hand away from me. I look down at his hand and I'm pretty sure I turn beet red when I see how wet his fingers are.

*Well, that's kind of mortifying.*

"Victor," I start to say something snarky to him, but I stop when he brings his fingers to his mouth and sucks them inside. *Holy shit.*

“You taste so fucking good, sweetheart. Soon, I’m going to eat you out so I can taste you while you’re coming.”

“I...uh...”

His grin deepens.

“I have no idea what to say to you right now,” I finally exhale, unable to find even one wall to hide behind.

He bends down and kisses me quick and hard. I want more, but it seems apparent that he’s not going to give it to me. When Victor pulls back, it almost feels like he doesn’t want to. He dips back down to kiss my lips once more in a chaste kiss that just leaves me wanting more.

“Do you want to clean up or are you good?” he finally asks.

I frown. I’m wet. I came hard. I can still feel it sliding out of me and trickling against my thighs. “Um... I probably should,” I squeak, blushing for the millionth time tonight.

He grins at me. “Go get it done. When you come back, I’ll take a shower.”

“A shower?” He nods, a crease forming on his forehead. “But you just showered this morning.”

He smirks. “Yeah, but my woman just came for me the first time. My cock is hard as granite and my balls hurt. I figure you’d rather me take care of myself in the shower instead of our bed while you watch.”

“I could, I mean with my hand...” I’m so flustered I can’t get the words out. This is something I never imagined having to face. I want to, a part of me hungers to make Victorio come. Unfortunately, there’s a bigger part of me worried I’ll freeze up and ruin the night.

“Hey, Kitten, stop,” he instructs me. “I love you even more for offering, but that’s not what this is about. Tonight was about you. We don’t have to go tit for tat here. I especially don’t want you rushing into something you’re not ready for. We’ll get there. I told you, baby, I’m not going anywhere. I’m here to stay.”

“Except you’re leaving me.”

“I’m still home tomorrow night and I’ll be back here as soon as I can.”

“You promise?” I pitifully ask. *Geez, I sound desperate.*

“Do you seriously think I’m willing to be without you any longer than I have to, baby?”

“You just don’t want to leave me here with Zane,” I attempt to joke, hoping to lighten the mood.

“You joke but every time his name passes your lips, I want to kill him.

“Zane is just a friend,” I laugh, still finding it hard to believe that Victor could be jealous over me.

“And I’m your man. I’m possessive as fuck, especially when it comes to you, and I don’t want another man around you.”

“Then stop worrying about getting me a bodyguard. I’ll be fine on my own,” I shrug.

“That’s not acceptable either. I’m not leaving you unprotected. I must go back to Greece for Antonio, and you will have someone watching over you while I’m there.”

“I’m going to go clean up. I’m suddenly tripping over testosterone,” I mumble, trying to sound like I’m annoyed, when in reality I’m secretly pleased.

“I’ll be here, hot stuff. Feel free to think of me while you’re touching yourself,” he jokes. When I get out of the bed and see his face, I’m starting to think he’s not joking at all. He must read my mind because his smirk moves into a full-fledged grin. “What? I’m going to be thinking of you and that sweet pussy of yours when I’m jacking off in the shower.”

“Victor!”

“It’s just the truth, sweetheart. When I paint the shower wall with my cum, I’m going to imagine it’s your ass.”

My mouth drops open and for a second, I think my heart stops. I can’t even begin to figure out how to respond. So, I do

the only thing I can think of. I run to the bathroom. I can hear Victor laugh, but I can't help it. I'm in over my head and it's definitely time to retreat.

# victorio

...

“Are you ready to roll?”

“Not really,” I laugh as I look at Antonio. “But I’ll be at the airstrip bright and early in the morning. After this, though, I’m going to need a couple weeks off to spend with my woman before I start training and going over everything with Niko.”

Antonio raises an eyebrow, and I shrug. “Is there a reason?”

“I’m going to stay at EZ’s club for a few days to do some research and then I want some time with my woman.”

“What kind of research?” Antonio asks.

“I’m going to hunt down whoever hurt my woman and then I’m going to end him,” I declare calmly. Truthfully, I’m anything but calm. I want whoever the bastard is in my clutches. I want him begging for his life, and then I want him gutted. I want his blood running under my feet like a fucking river and even then, I doubt it will be enough to curb my

anger. Still, he'll never be standing under the same moon as my woman and he will never have the chance to breathe the same air she is, so I'm okay with that.

Antonio lets out a whistle. "Does Angelina know you plan on opening up this particular can of worms?"

"Hell, no. This is something that I never want her to think of again. He's robbed her of way too much and I aim to see he doesn't get anything else from her," I growl.

We're sitting in Antonio's office. He's supposed to be going over what's going on with Marco, but the truth is, there's not much to say. I'll get there, assess the situation, and provide backup for Marco as needed. I'm taking three men with me, and I'll be in charge of those men. It's not much different from how things have been done in the past and I'm comfortable with it. I didn't really mean to discuss my plans about finding my Kitten's attacker, but I don't mind it either. Antonio and I are cut from similar cloths. He'll understand my need to find this bastard and ultimately, I know he'll help me anyway he can.

"She might not see it the same way as you. Girls can be funny like that. I know Emilia and my woman have both adapted and fit well into the family, but Victor, Angelina has been much more sheltered. She didn't have a strong man in her life. She may not understand."

"She will," I insist. "Gia hasn't had an easy life. The attack stole something from her, and she feels its loss with every breath she takes. I need to do what I can to help repair at least a little of the damage."

Antonio nods. He understands. He also knows that if it was Melina, he'd still be going to war to erase everything from that period of her life if it was possible.

"Max tried to check into it, before his sister made him stop."

"Gia's mother made Max stop looking into the attack?" I question, even though I'm just repeating him. "What the fuck

for? Did she not want to know who attacked and almost killed her own daughter for Christ's sake?"

"Racine said Angelina heard them talking and went into a panic attack and screamed that she didn't want anyone to know. She said Angelina threatened to kill herself if anyone so much as spoke about it again."

"Fuck," I hiss, feeling swamped by physical pain at the thought of Gia being so low that she thought the only out she had was death.

"Yeah. Max continued looking into it. He couldn't find out enough to get anywhere."

"Shit. I can't let this go, Antonio. I need Gia to be able to breathe free air and not look over her shoulder."

"Niko has Max's files. I'll have him send you the ones he has on Angelina when you're out there. Who knows, maybe you will see something that Max missed."

"Thanks, man. I truly appreciate that."

"Anytime, but I do have one more question."

"What's that?"

"Who is Peter Scott and why do you have EZ's man Ghost searching for him? Is he a lead you have on Angelina's attack?"

I let out a breath. This one is going to be embarrassing. "Fuck, what's Ghost doing blabbing my shit? I made it clear this was personal not business."

"Hold up, he didn't blab. Ghost used the Titan MC's contacts to get the information. The men didn't know it wasn't for the club and it ended up on EZ's desk. So, he emailed me the information, not knowing it wasn't for me. I just got off the phone with EZ a second ago. He called to apologize because he didn't know about it, and he felt bad he didn't send the information to the right person. The man has his hands full since he got married. He's also been working hard to keep his eyes on Liberty. So, his men have been running the club more often than naught. It's a fact that's not sitting well with him."



“It’s cool. I don’t really give a damn. It’s not like I care if you know what I’m doing. I paid for the info out of my pocket, not the family’s resources. I’m not working under the table. You know that.”

“I do know you, although I’m pissed. Angelina is family, so if you’re doing this shit, you do it with the weight of the DeLuca family name. You know who *I* am, too. Family is everything. Angelina is one of us.”

“She belongs to me.”

Antonio shakes his head. “I take it she agrees with that?”

“Absolutely.”

Antonio gives a small laugh. “It’s about time. If I had to hear this friend discussion one more time, I was going to go insane.”

I throw him an annoyed look, which makes him smirk at me.

“So, tell me, is this Peter guy the one you suspect in Angelina’s attack?”

I rub the back of my neck. “No. That’s another reason I didn’t use the DeLuca name. This concerns Angelina, but it’s not about the attack.”

“Then, who is he?”

“Fuck,” I sigh out with an annoyed breath. “He’s some dumb fuck that made my Gia cry.”

“Do you know how much I love that you’re strung out over a woman but keep acting like a pussy and not taking what you want?”

I roll my eyes. “Gia has scars. I can take my time to make her mine. I want to make sure she’s with me every step of the way.” I shrug.

“Did you ever pause to think maybe what she needs is a man to show her that she’s desirable?”

“I think I show her that,” I snap, but I’m not positive. I’m not sure it’s possible to make her believe it at this point.

“Take my advice,” he replies with a smirk. “Show her with your body. That’s what a woman needs.”

“Your woman and Gia are different people. Gia has scars. I have to be careful not to scare her to the point that she runs from me.”

“Show her the scars mean nothing. Women respond to the touch of a man. Show her with more than your pretty face or words, brother. If not, you may lose her to a man that will.”

“Like Zane? You need to keep him away from my woman,” I growl.

Antonio shrugs. “Technically, she isn’t yours. It’s not my job to piss around your woman’s feet to keep the other males away. That’s on you.”

“Piss around her feet?”

“Marking your territory. All alpha male animals do it.”

“I don’t think I should be taking relationship advice from a man who compares himself to a dog.”

“I said all animals and asshole, we’re all animals if you get down to it. We act and react on instinct and emotion. You’d be well to take my advice. Don’t forget I got my dick in my woman the first night we met and now, she’s knocked up and totally and irrevocably mine forever. Therefore, I win.”

“Some days I think you might be as insane as Melina says you are.”

“From your point of view, maybe. Once you man the fuck up, claim your woman, and tie her to you, you will see just how smart I am. Now enough of this. Who the hell is this Peter person and how did he make Angelina cry? We can’t be killing someone who bumped into her somewhere and knocked her down and was an asshole to her.”

“Liar. You’d totally kill someone who knocked Melina down and then bitched at her about it.”

He seems to think it over then shrugs. “Eh, probably. So, is that what we’re doing?”

“*We’re?*”

“It’s been a slow month and Milena’s pregnancy hormones are killing me. The woman wants my dick one minute and then seems to want to slice me open and feed my entrails to our dogs in the next. I need to let off some steam.”

I laugh. “Sorry, this asshole is in jail. I just needed to find out which one and arrange for him to have a happy—for me—and a very bloody—for him—accident.”

“Well, that’s boring as hell,” Antonio whines, sounding very disappointed.

I shrug. “They can’t all be fun and games.”

“I guess not. Why is he in jail?”

“He killed his pregnant wife, tried to cash in on her life insurance, and then skipped town with his mistress.”

Antonio’s face instantly becomes filled with anger. “In this *bloody for him* accident, make sure you have his dick and sack cut off and fed to him.”

“Planned on it,” I admit.

“Good. How does Angelina know him? Was his wife one of her friends?”

God, I don’t want to answer him, but I know I’m going to. I still try to skirt around the issue. “No. Hey, if we’re done for the day, I’m going to go pick up Angelina. We have a special night planned since I’m leaving out in the morning.”

“How does Angelina know him?” he asks, refusing to let the matter drop—just like I knew he would.

“She was in bed watching one of those damn murder documentaries she loves and this guy’s story was the one on. Angelina was staring at the television at the picture of the wife, holding her very pregnant stomach and just started crying. I don’t like her being hurt. It’s as simple as that.”

“Hold up. You’re offing this guy because of a television show and your woman’s reaction to it?”

*Motherfucking, son of a bitch. I knew he was going to give me shit over this.*

“What this guy did meant he really needed to be punished. I mean, he can still get parole. So, I decided to take matters in my own hands,” I explain.

“But you’re doing it because Angelina was upset over a television show, right? I just need to be sure I have this right.”

“If you choose to see it that way, sure.”

“Oh, I choose,” he laughs. “Wait till I tell Niko this one.”

I roll my eyes. “Are we done here?” I ask, standing up.

Antonio hands me a folder. “Here’s the information on that Peter swine. The reason you’re doing it cracks me up, but I’m going to enjoy hearing how you made it hurt. I hope you get inventive.” I take the folder and say nothing. There’s not much to say. “Call me when you land tomorrow,” he orders.

“Not when we take off?”

“Fuck, no. Six a.m. is when my Melina usually needs my dick. So, you only call me if you’re dying and need backup. Otherwise, do not disturb me at least until eight.”

“You’re just giving yourself two hours? That’s sad. I’m starting to understand why Melina wants to hurt you sometimes.”

“Very funny. My woman has no complaints in that department. If you don’t believe me, I could arrange a little show for you sometime.”

I can’t stop the grimace that comes over my face. “Fuck, no. I’ve heard enough stories. I don’t need to be involved in anything where I might have to see your dick. Besides, I’m pretty sure my Kitten would never talk to me again if she knew I had seen Melina naked.”

“I’d venture she would if she knew the context. Does she know that you used to be sweet on her cousin?”

I frown. “She doesn’t.”

“C’mon, my friend. We both know what I walked in on. You had clear feelings for Emilia when you thought Niko was dying, you let those out.”

“I *had* feelings. Had is the key word. I’d known Emilia for a long time. We were tight. There was never anything romantic. She was hurting and needed a friend and maybe I let it go too far in the heat of the moment. What happened is nothing compared to what I feel for my Gia,” I insist. It’s the damned truth, and at this point I don’t care if he believes me. God, I really need out of here. I usually like being here and talking with Antonio, but today he’s just finding reasons to annoy me. I’m not sure why I’m explaining myself, either. It’s not his business, but I feel the need to do it anyway. “What you walked in on wasn’t serious. Emilia’s heart always belonged to Niko. We both knew that. Shit, I was as happy as anyone that Niko made his way back.”

“I know that. I’m just saying, if I was you, I’d make sure that you kept the secret of it happening at all from Angelina. Girls see things differently than us men.”

“Point taken. I’ll call you tomorrow when we land,” I tell him turning around to leave.

“Hey, Victorio?”

“If you find the person who hurt Angelina, end them quickly. Something like that, it has a way of sucking you in. You can’t get vengeance big enough to heal the pain of the wound, no matter how hard you try. Niko found that out the hard way. If Emilia hadn’t brought him back, I’m not sure he’d be with us today. Be careful, yes?”

I nod. I understand what he means, but at the same time, when I find who I’m looking for, I’m going to make it hurt in every way I can imagine. No one will stop me.

*I won’t let them.*

# angelina

...

I'm about to go to the sofa to contemplate what to make for an early—*really early*—breakfast when Victor's damn phone begins ringing. It's probably not loud, but it feels like it is booming.

My head hurts, I'm groggy and it's only—I look over at the clock—four in the morning. Today sucks. It is officially the worst day in the history of days. Okay, I think as I yawn, that might be over-dramatizing things a little much. After all, there are wars, famine, horrible natural disasters, and so forth. I get it. Yet, for me *personally*, today is the worst day ever. Well, scratch that. It started before today. Yesterday was like the precursor of bad days. That means I should have known today was going to be horrible. I should have prepared.

*I didn't.*

I had to come home from work early yesterday. And why? Because for the first time in history, I started my period early. Yep, I started two weeks early to be exact. That's something that has never happened. I am usually regular—like clockwork

even. I was convinced at this point the universe hated me. If I had only known how much worse things would get, I would have begun to make an altar and pray to the fates to forgive me for whatever I did to deserve this misery. I didn't and I guess that's on me.

You see, I needed last night with Victor. I truly did. I knew he was going out of town and after the magic that was the night before, I wanted to explore things further. I was looking forward to it. Then, bam! Out of nowhere I got my period. It wasn't just a normal one, either. Nope, this one involved so much pain that I felt like I was dying. I could barely hold my head up. It was so bad that I came home early, grabbing a ride from a friend who thankfully offered. The minute I walked through the door, I took medicine and proceeded to pass out.

The day got worse from there when I slept longer than I thought I would and forgot to call Victor to tell him I wasn't at work. When he dropped by the shelter to pick me up, he panicked because I was nowhere to be found. He started calling my cell like a madman. It was embarrassing as hell to tell him *why* I had fallen asleep all evening—not to mention *why* I was sick. I didn't want to say it. I tried to avoid his questioning every way I could. He kept hammering me with questions about what was wrong and demanding I go to the urgent care place in town. He was getting on my nerves. Finally, I was so upset that I just blurted it out.

“I'm bleeding from my vagina!”

Yep, just like that. *Real classy like.*

I was mortified and slapped my hand over my mouth. Victor just went quiet, said he'd be home in a bit, and hung up.

*He didn't even say goodbye.*

For some reason, that really bothered me and that made me cry. I was still crying when Victor walked through the door, carrying one of those reusable bags from the grocery store. He put it on the counter, where I was crying over a bowl of ice cream and then—despite my protest—picked me up, carried me into the living room and settled on the sofa, putting me in his lap.

We stayed like that for a while. I even felt like things would get better.

*I was wrong.*

He got up after a bit, laid me on the sofa and tucked a fleece throw around me. He put my melted ice cream in the sink. I was stupid enough to eat out of the carton, so I lost the whole gallon of my caramel toffee surprise. The surprise, by the way, was marshmallows. It may sound gross to some, although I have no idea who those people would be, but it is so good that I could eat a whole gallon at a time if I let myself.

Victor came back in with some chicken soup, crackers, and grilled cheese. It was so sweet. This is where the day really starts to go off the rails. This is because, I'm allergic to chicken soup. Okay, I know that sounds insane. It probably is. I've never met another person who claims to be allergic to it, but I definitely am.

Something about the canned, condensed variety makes me horribly ill. I get a rash, sure. The worst part is that it makes my stomach cramp. I don't know why. I just know to stay away from it. I felt guilty because Victor went to so much trouble. I didn't want to tell him that I only bought it because Zane was supposed to be staying here and he had told me that chicken soup and grilled cheese was his favorite meal because it reminded him of his mother.

This thing with Victor might be new, but I wasn't stupid—despite the evidence my previous life choices may lead others to believe. I knew with a hundred percent surety that if I told my guy that I bought food specifically for Zane he would lose his mind. I didn't want to open that can of worms. So, I did something stupid. I decided to eat some of it. Geez, that sounds insane, but my stomach was already cramping. I figured I could handle a little more. Afterall, pain eventually fades, right? Plus, I would take some Benadryl to combat the rash, and all would be fine. I wouldn't disappoint Victor. It would make him happy. Plus, there would be no argument the night he was supposed to leave either. This was just safer.

*I was wrong so wrong.*



I managed to eat about a quarter of the bowl and pick at the grilled cheese. Honestly, I am not a fan of cheese. It's gross. It only belongs on pizza and then only lightly. You can put that sprinkle stuff on spaghetti, but I really draw the line anywhere else. Dante used to like cheese on his breakfast sandwiches. I should have known then what a monster he was. *Who puts cheese on a sausage patty?* I'm sorry, but that's just yucky.

Anyway, I started to feel kind of sick. I fought it down and figured I was going to escape. I really shouldn't have taken another spoonful, but when I put the spoon down in the bowl and told Victor I was done. He took it up on himself to feed me one more spoonful.

I wanted to say no, I really, *really* did. Yet, he looked so sweet and all I could think was that one more wouldn't hurt. It would make Victor happy. I already can't have any type of sex with him like I wanted—and I totally wanted to. I was even hoping to see if I could push myself further this time. I was so ready.

*And then fate stepped up in the form of my menstrual cycle being fouled up.*

So, I sipped the noodle soup from the spoon. The moment it was in my mouth, time stood still. I couldn't move. I couldn't swallow. I was too busy trying not to panic because I felt the part I had already eaten try to come back up. I silently tried to control my body, but it was no use. I made a horrid noise, capped my hand over my mouth and ran like crazy to the bathroom. Victor was hot on my heels and to my utter mortification held my hair while I puked into the toilet.

Yep, not only did I not have more sexy fun with Victor, but I also threw up on him, and to keep him from rushing me to the hospital when I began to break out in big, red, splotchy patches of bumps, I had to confess what I did and why I did it.

Which pissed Victor off. He got so mad at me that he said he'd be back and left. I waited and while I did, I rubbed allergy cream over the hives and swallowed a couple pills. I stared at the door, willing him to come back and apologize for

leaving without kissing me goodbye. He didn't. So, I curled up in bed.

Sometime around midnight, I yelped when Victor got in bed with me. He kissed my shoulder and asked me if I was better. I wanted to say a lot in response, but all I managed to get out was yes. He said good. Then put his arm around me and was asleep within minutes.

I wanted to slap him and tell him to wake up so I could fight with him. I wanted to ask him why he was being a big fat jerk. I didn't do any of those. I laid awake and stared at my wall in the dark. Eventually, I did fall back asleep—around two. I figured Victor and I could have it out in the morning.

*Have I mentioned how wrong I was?*

When four in the morning rolled around, Victor's cell started going off. He was snoring and I kind of smelled alcohol on his breath last night. So, I figured he was in a deep sleep. It bothered me of course, but mostly because in all the time I had known him, Victor had never been drunk. I'm pretty sure he was close to being drunk last night.

I was wide awake thanks to the phone. I got up to go to the bathroom, did my business, and tried to—mostly unsuccessfully—tame my wild mop of hair. I tiptoed back into the bedroom to find some clothes. I knew I was awake for good. I had slept for too long when I got home from work. It was dark, so I settled for Victor's shirt that was lying on the floor. It was a white button up. It smelled like smoke, but his cologne was there, too. It made me feel better. I finally thought the day would get better.

Again, I can't seem to stress this enough, I was *extremely* wrong.

That brings us to now. I'm staring at Victor's suit jacket and his damn phone obnoxiously ringing. The man in question is currently snoring, and at this point I'm worried he drank too much because I have never heard him snore. I start to ignore the phone. Yet, I'm afraid. It has to be urgent for someone to call at this time of night. Against my better judgement, I fish it out of the inner pocket. The screen shows that someone named

Morgan Rose is calling. I unlock his phone and stare at the screen. Victor's phone code is the day we met. He showed that to me ages ago, and it meant so much that I made my own code match his. *I'm kind of sappy*. I'm just not sure I should answer it. The smart thing to do would be to wake Victor up. I know that. I also know that Victor has to get up soon to get ready. He has to be at the airfield before six. I really don't want to wake him. He got in bed late last night as it is. I swallow down my doubts. Victor wants a relationship with me. He loves me. Sure, last night was a little rocky, but if you're in a relationship, you don't really have secrets—or at least that's the kind of relationship I want. With that in mind, I pick up.

"Hello," I whisper.

"Who is this?" a woman asks, and there's no disguising the fact that she sounds pissed.

"This is Angelina."

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number. I was trying to reach Victorio."

"This is his phone. He's in bed asleep right now."

The woman goes quiet. My stomach begins to churn in a way that has nothing to do with last night's chicken noodle disaster.

"I see," she says and there's something almost sinister about her voice. I don't like it at all. "I had drinks with Victorio tonight, he and I are old friends."

I could be overreacting, but the way she said old friends slithers inside of me and seems to wrap around my heart like ice.

"Okay," I respond, not sure what else to say at this point.

"Oh! You must be the girl he's been hired to watch over here in Miami," she exclaims. She's so calm and happy. Perhaps she doesn't know she's just stuck a knife in my heart, or maybe she does. "Can you tell him I called? He told me he was going to be in Phoenix soon and I happen to be going out that way, too. We're supposed to meet up for dinner, but I forgot to give him my cell and I wasn't sure he still had it."

“It’s um, programmed into his phone under the name Morgan.” *Shit, why did I tell her that?*

“He kept my number. I’m not sure why that surprises me. We meant a lot to one another. Maybe fate is giving us a second chance. Just make sure he knows I called, please. Sorry to bother you.”

“Uh, sure. I’ll do that,” I mumble, feeling like my world just imploded.

“Good. Thank you, Jalena!”

“It’s Angeli—” I stop because she hung up.

I stare at the phone like it’s a snake and let it drop down onto his suit. I look at him and tears sting my eyes.

Victor went out drinking and met someone from his past. They had drinks and apparently enjoyed their time together so much that he made a date with her. Suddenly I’m bombarded by memories of him saying he loved me, and he was here to stay.

*Lies.*

I can’t figure out why he would lie to me. Maybe I was a pity project. Bring the poor girl out of her shell and make her feel alive again, type of thing. Or maybe it was just to see if he could be the man to lay the damaged chick. I don’t know. I don’t guess it matters. I’m not going to let him know how bad he hurt me. I’ll fake it. I don’t have a choice. I have an hour to prepare. Then, he’ll be gone to Greece—no, evidently, he’s going to Phoenix.

*More lies.*

Apparently, I’m not only wrong—about a lot of things—I’m really fucking stupid. I forgot that whoever is in charge doesn’t like me and loves to deliver sucker punch after sucker punch. I don’t know how I’m going to keep it together when Victor wakes up. I really and truly don’t. I just know I need to. I have to walk away with at least a little dignity. Then, somehow, I will erase his presence in my life. It won’t be easy, but I’m going to do it. I won’t be a fool—no matter how much I love him.

# victorio

...

When my alarm goes off, I reach over to pull Gia to me. I don't like that she's not in my arms. We always sleep snuggled together. She's probably still upset because I left last night. It was stupid of me. I can admit that. I was just mad. I was pissed at myself because I didn't know she had an allergy. I was even madder that she ate something just to please me, knowing it would hurt her. The two of us need to talk, that much is certain. Still, I shouldn't have stormed out. All I could think is that I need to handle her with care. I was so upset that all of this happened, especially since I still had to leave the next morning. I needed more time with her. I resented the fuck out of Antonio and everyone for putting me in this position. I don't talk about my childhood—to anyone—but it wasn't good. The physical abuse my father doled out daily was secondary to the fact that I had no freedom. I didn't get to decide what I wanted, where I wanted to be or who I wanted to be around. I did what my father told me to do when he told me to. Let's just say that the things he ordered were dark and

twisted. Needing to be with Angelina and not being able to say I need to be home, threw me for a loop.

Maxwell Korslova saved me years ago when he picked me up out of the hell I had been living in and saw potential. He put me through school, he helped me become the man I always wanted to be and then, he gave me a job. A job—thanks to the training he made sure I received—that I excelled at. A job that led to me being his daughter's bodyguard and brought me into a family life that I never knew existed. I owed the DeLuca family and Maxwell Korslova everything.

Those wounds opened up yesterday in my talk with Antonio. Losing Maxwell cut me deeper than anyone would ever know. They didn't know our special connection. They didn't know my past except for the one that Maxwell helped me invent. I knew the truth though. Maxwell was the closest thing I'd ever had to a father, and he and Emilia were the only true family I'd ever known. I wanted to explain to Antonio what he witnessed between me and Emilia and why I was close to her—grieving with her. I couldn't. It wasn't because I didn't trust Antonio, I do. I like the bastard, probably even more than I liked his father. No, I didn't talk to him about it because—even a year later—the wound is still too fresh. That means, I was a mess when I came home last night. I wanted to lose myself in the feel of Angelina's body and the comfort of her scent wrapping around me.

Getting to her work and finding her not there, threw me. Then, to find out she was sick, things got worse. It was insane to make the leap of her being sick, to losing her. Yet, in the year that Angelina had been in my life she'd never been so sick that she didn't go to work. I panicked. I couldn't lose her. Losing Maxwell had gutted me, but if I lost my Kitten, I wouldn't survive. It would kill me.

When she confessed to me about her allergy and why she didn't want to tell me, I lost it. I'm supposed to protect her. It's my job. I should know all her allergies and things that might cause her harm. I was beating myself up in my head. Fuck, for all I knew, she could be allergic to bees, and one could sting her, taking her away from me. I'd been worried about my

enemies and the men who might hurt her. These were all things I could control. Yet, it suddenly occurred to me there were things beyond my control and I panicked. It didn't help to hear that she knew what I was doing could bring her harm and she did it anyway.

Jesus. *Why?* Why would she do that?

I knew my emotions would boil over and I didn't want that at all. So, instead of doing what I really craved to do, I had to leave and clear my head. I know it hurt my woman and I hated it. I just didn't have a choice right then. At least, it didn't feel like it. I wanted to yell at Antonio that I needed a fucking break. I hadn't taken one—not in all my years with the DeLuca clan. Why take a vacation when I have no family? Still, I was acutely aware that I had just told him I wanted a couple weeks before taking a new position—a position that anyone in the family would kill for. Calling him and telling him I needed him to find a replacement for Greece would put him in a hard position and may make him rethink making me his Capo.

When he offered me the job, I didn't much want it. My life was good. Then, I began to think about the roles I played for the family. I enjoyed being Emilia's bodyguard because I didn't have anyone at home waiting for me. I rarely got time off and when I did, it was to sleep at Maxwell's house. There was a chance I'd be assigned like that again. That couldn't happen with Angelina as my wife. I needed my nights free.

I push my thoughts away and concentrate on my future. I'll make it up to my girl. I'll get control of my emotions. Of course, that would be easier to do if she was actually in the bed with me. I frown. I get out of bed, rubbing my face and shoving my hair out of the way. It's getting too long. I need to get it cut. It can wait until I get back from Greece, though. I walk down the hall and stop when I get to the kitchen and living room area. My Gia is sitting on the couch, her favorite, worn black and white checked throw wrapped around her. She seems to be wearing the shirt I had on last night. Something about seeing her in my clothes feels damn good. I give her a smile. "You're up early, Kitten."

Something passes on her face that I don't recognize. It is an emotion of some sort, maybe hurt. Before I can question her about it. She smiles and stands up, the throw still wrapped around her.

"I have a lot I need to get done today. You have breakfast in the oven. I made that sausage and bacon casserole that you like. While you eat breakfast, I'm going to go take a shower."

The entire time she's talking, she doesn't look me in the eye. If anything, she does her best not to look at me at all. It's clear that she's upset with me. I knew she would be, but I was hoping I was wrong. I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck as I study her. She starts to walk past me and I reach out and grab her arm. "Gia, wait."

She does, but I don't miss the way her body stiffens when I touch her. *Fuck*. I made a bigger mistake last night than I realized.

"Was there something you need?" she asks.

I resist the urge to growl. I've messed up enough. I don't need to frighten her. "Where's my good morning kiss, Kitten? I missed you."

"I have morning breath," she says, pulling on her arm, silently urging me to let her go. I don't take the hint.

"So do I. I don't care."

"Well, I do," she insists, again jerking on her damn arm.

I pick her up and start carrying her back to the bedroom. "You're mad," I mutter, more to myself than to her.

"What are you doing? Put me down!" she squeals, but I ignore her and walk back to bed I sit down, but I do it with her in my lap and my arms holding her close, refusing to let her get away.

"I'm not mad. I just need a shower and you need to get ready to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere with you mad at me. I know I was an asshole last night, Gia."



“Not at all. You’re allowed to go out drinking. You don’t know me any explanations.”

“I didn’t go out drinking,” I mutter.

“Please stop playing me for the fool. I smelled the alcohol on you and the smoke is all over your shirt. I might be naïve, but I am not stupid.”

“Okay, I did go out drinking, but it wasn’t planned. I was upset after our argument so I went to a bar and ordered a few drinks while I tried to sort through the fact that I could have killed you and you just let me.”

She blinks, shock spreading on her face. “Say what?”

“You heard me. I’ve spent all this time trying to look after you and make sure you were safe, and I didn’t even know that you had food allergies. You could have died! What makes it worse, you knew you couldn’t eat it and you still did!”

“Are you saying you left to go out drinking and hook up with some woman because you were mad at me?” she laughs bitterly.

“I didn’t hook up with a woman. The only woman I want is you. I believe I’ve made myself clear on that,” I snap.

“Oh, trust me. After the morning I’ve had, I’m extremely clear about where your interests lie.”

“Good,” I mutter, but I get the feeling that she doesn’t understand shit. She’s looking at me like she can’t stand the sight of me. I’ve never seen that look on her face before—ever. When she broke things off with her mother, she didn’t even look at her the way she’s looking at me now.

*What the fuck is going on?*

“If we’re done here, I’m going to go shower.”

“We’re not done,” I huff out, trying to control myself. I need a cool head. I can’t upset her more. I don’t have time to soothe over her feelings like I want. I have to fix whatever this is quickly. “You should never have touched that soup. You should have told me. What on Earth were you thinking? Don’t you realize that I couldn’t live without you. Fuck, what if you

had died? Can you imagine what that would have done to me and that's not even considering the fact that it would have been all my fault?" Just thinking about it now makes my hands tremble.

She frowns as she looks at me. "It's not that kind of allergy. I don't even have a rash this morning. It's mild. You went to a lot of trouble for me. I didn't want to ruin it. That's the kind of things you do when you care about someone."

My heart squeezes because she admitted that she cares about me. It's not the same as love, but I'll take it. "That's bullshit, Gia. You don't do anything that might harm you. You know I love you. I don't want anything or anyone to hurt you. You don't hide allergies or anything else that affects your health from me. It might be a mild allergy now, but what if this is one time it wasn't a mild reaction? You can't take chances. I won't let you. You're too important to me."

"You don't want anyone or anything to hurt me?" she asks, looking at me like I've grown three heads.

"That can't be a surprise to you, can it?"

"Does that include you, Victor?"

"Of course, it does. I never want to hurt you."

"Too late. You hurt me last night more than I would have thought possible."

I study her face and I can see she's serious. In my surprise, I loosen my hold. She gets up and stands, turning to look at me. I let her go. I think she's being a little over dramatic. It was just a small tiff. She's not really had a relationship before—Dante doesn't count. Maybe she's just not used to being involved with another person and her emotions are leading her.

"It was just a lover's argument, sweetheart. We'll probably have more of them, but that's all it was. I would never purposely hurt you."

With my words, her face gets even tighter. Her pain is so easy to see it kills me. I don't know how, but I've made things worse.

“Who’s Morgan?”

For a moment, I think I might have heard her wrong. When I look at her face, I know I didn’t. She uses my moment of shock to move away from me. Unspoken accusations are written all over her face.

“Gia—”

“Don’t bother lying. She called this morning. It was barely four in the morning but since the two of you are such *old friends* and spent time together last night, I guess she figured it was alright to call.”

“Gia it’s not what you think. Morgan is a private investigator. I needed some research done. I knew she was good at her job. Running into her wasn’t planned, but I figured since I had, she was an answer to a problem I was having.”

“Funny, Morgan didn’t describe your friendship with her as work related at all.”

“Gia—”

“Have you slept with her, Victor?”

*Jesus fuck.* “Gia, damn it!”

“That wasn’t a yes, but yet, I think it was,” she says, her voice sounding lifeless.

“It was a lifetime ago, Gia. I haven’t touched another woman since I met you.”

“Maybe, but is it coincidence that just when we begin trying to get closer you leave me upset, hurting, and scared you’re mad at me—”

“Gia—”

She doesn’t let me finish. She interrupts me. “You leave to go out drinking and run into her and make plans to meet up again.”

“For work!” I insist, growling out my frustration.

“Go eat, Victor. You’re running out of time. You need to leave soon.”

“I don’t want to. The last thing I want to do is leave when you’re feeling like this, Gia.”

“I’ll be fine. I always am. Besides, you need to get to the airfield, right? Where did you say you were going again?”

“Greece,” I murmur, studying her because I’m sure I’m missing something.

“You sure you aren’t going somewhere else?”

The question makes my blood run cold for a minute. It feels like she’s insinuating something. That’s not possible. There’s no way she could know about my plans to go to EZ’s club. I mentioned it to Morgan, but only because I didn’t want her to track me down at Gia’s. Still, she is a professional. She wouldn’t have mentioned Phoenix in whatever small conversation the two of them had. I can fix this, it’s just that it may have to wait until I return. *Motherfucking hell.*

I feel like I’m torn in half here. I want to tell her about going to Phoenix, but I know it would hurt her. That’s the only reason I’m keeping it from her. Gia would know the only reason I’m going to Phoenix is because that’s where her attack was. Okay, the university she attended was in Tucson, but she lived in Phoenix and that’s where the attack took place. She doesn’t want me digging into her past. I know that because I’ve begged her to let me find the bastard numerous times in the last year. It’s a familiar refrain that always ends with her crying and yelling that she just wants to forget it ever happened. She doesn’t want me to go searching, afraid it will make whoever it was come after her again. Or hell, maybe she just wants to forget it ever happened. I can’t stop, though. What that bastard took from her is indescribable. He needs to pay, and I intend to make that happen.

“You know, I’m only going to help Marco. I wanted to surprise you, but I think we both need something to look forward to right now.”

“What’s that?” she asks, her eyes kind of dull. There’s no sparkle like there usually is. She is holding her stomach. *Maybe she’s still in pain.* That makes sense and I relax a little. I stand and put my hand over her two on her stomach. “When I

get back, you and I are going to go on a trip. I want to take my woman somewhere warm and sunny. We both need a break.”

I don't know what I expected. I sure didn't think she'd just stand there not saying a word. I feel her flinch a little in my arms too, her hands tighten and press in more on her stomach. God, she's hurting more than I realized.

“You're still hurting today aren't you, baby?”

“Yeah. I really am,” she says, sounding hopeless.

“Go take your shower, Kitten. Maybe it will help.”

“Maybe.”

Even I can tell she doesn't believe it. She nods and turns away. My heart hurts. She just looks defeated. “We could shower together,” I suggest.

She doesn't even turn around, she just shakes her head no. “Go eat. I'll save you some hot water.”

“Okay.” I wait for her to say something back. She doesn't, she continues walking into the bathroom. The closing of the door feels like it's suffocating me. I need to get to Greece and get home. Clearly my woman needs me by her side.

# angelina

...

I hear someone at the door and sigh. That's probably Zane. I enjoy spending time with him, but I really don't want to be bothered with anyone right now. I just don't. Victor finally left, but spending time with him almost destroyed me. He kissed me when he left and I tried not to respond, but I couldn't stop myself. I didn't cry when he left, but I'm sure he saw the unshed tears in my eyes. I don't know how he could have kept from it—unless he just doesn't care.

At this point, that's a clear possibility. I don't know how he can act so loving with me when he arranged to make a date with another woman the night before. I might have thought it meant nothing to him. I could have written it off completely if he hadn't lied about going to Phoenix. There's a chance I'm wrong. I'll have to confess to Emilia and ask her to let me know if whatever Victor has been doing in Greece is done. Then, I'll know. She has loyalties with Victor, I know. Still, she would tell me. I know she would.

I open the door, still deep in thought, expecting to see Zane's goofy but cute smile. Maybe he can cheer me up. When I look up to see Samuil Garin, my stepbrother, the smile dies on my lips. I haven't seen him since I was fifteen. Sam is older than me by about twelve years. That would make him in his mid-thirties now.

My mother left my father about six years after I was born. She told him that she wasn't happy, and he let her go. He did stay in touch with me, but he worked all the time, meaning we spoke or met sporadically. My dad was cold around me. However, he did make sure I was taken care of. I'm pretty sure if he knew how my mother treated me, he would have put a stop to it. I also think that's why he took her back, even though she had been living with Sam's father since we left.

Sam's father was a Russian named Abram Garin. I can't say I liked him at all. Then again, he didn't allow me to find anything to like about him. My mother liked his money. My father might have been cold, but Abram was cold and cruel. He didn't bother me. I wasn't worth his time—that made me mostly invisible in the Garin home. I'd seen his cruelty when it came to Sam and the house staff, though. I may have only been six—almost seven—when we moved in, but that was more than old enough to see the evil that lived inside of the man. I was glad when my mother left to return to my father. She only did it because Maxwell pulled strings to get him promoted so he made more money. *My mother is nothing if not predictable.*

“Hey, runt,” Sam cracks while giving me a lopsided smile. I don't think, I just run into his arms. He wraps them around me and pulls me up. “That's my girl,” he says close to my ear making me smile.

When he puts me down, I'm smiling sincerely, so happy that I can barely stand it. I've missed his presence in my life. That was just one more thing my mother took from me. Sure, Sam tried to keep contact, but between my mother and his father, it became impossible. He came in for my fifteenth birthday, but both my parents banded together to make him

leave. I don't know what they said to him, but it had to be bad, because Sam never tried to see me again.

Sure, we exchange emails from time to time, but that's it. Sam is easygoing and completely different from his father—at least when he's not around the man. He takes after his mother. He has muddy brown hair, brown eyes and this cleft in his chin that looks super sexy on him. He did take his height after his father. He's like six-three and broad-shouldered like a linebacker. Girls used to throw themselves at him. Heck, I might have too, but to me he's always been my brother.

His mother was American. It was said that Sam's dad loved her very much. To be honest, I never saw anything in the man that showed he knew what love was. Sam's mom died during labor, having Sam. This is something that his father never lets him forget either. I'm not sure how someone could blame their child for the death of its own mother just because it happened in childbirth. Then again, I'm of the opinion that the man is a monster.

I was lost in my thoughts, but I realize at once that I screwed up. My hand goes to the side of my face, but it's too late. Sam has seen my scar. I never mentioned my attack to him. There was nothing he could do. I knew he was living in Russia with his Mikhail. I didn't tell him, mostly because I didn't want Sam to look at me... *like he is looking at me right now.*

He grabs my hand and brushes his thumb along the jagged scar. I close my eyes, refusing to cry.

“What the actual fuck!” he growls, rage barely controlled in his deep voice.

“Sam,” I whisper.

“What happened to you, Angie?”

“I was attacked in Phoenix,” I whisper, the words ugly on my tongue. For a moment, I can't breathe. “It happened when I was in college, Sam. I'm fine, I promise.”

*I'm anything but fine.*

“Why didn't you tell me, Angie?”



“Because I knew you’d come find me, and I didn’t want you to see me and do...” I catch my breath and then wave my hand around. “I didn’t want you to do this.”

“Come see you?” Sam asks, sounding hurt.

I shake my head no. “Look at me with pity. Everyone does that and I hate it.”

“It’s not pity you see, little one. It’s anger.”

“I’d rather not see that either,” I confess.

“Are you going to invite me in?”

“Will you stop looking at me like I’m damaged goods?”

“That’s not how I’m looking at you,” he grumbles.

I pull away from him and make my way to the door, letting him follow me inside. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Angie—”

“What about food? Are you hungry? I made a breakfast casserole this morning and it hasn’t been touched,” I add, frowning because Victor didn’t eat. I hope he at least found something on the way to the airfield. I shouldn’t worry about him, but I do. I don’t know if they serve meals on the private jet or not. I imagine they would, but who knows.

“I’m not hungry. Will you just look at me?”

I force my gaze up, trying to prepare myself for the pity I know will be shining in his eyes. I study him and it takes me a minute before I realize that’s not what I’m seeing at all. Nope, not even close. Sam is still Sam and he’s looking at me like he always does. *With love.* I walk into his arms without questioning myself. After my morning with Victor, his hug is exactly what I need.

He sits down at the kitchen table and pulls me back in his arms. I sit on his lap willingly. I let him hold me. I burrow into him until my head is resting on his chest and my ear is pressed against his beating heart. It’s something I remember Sam doing to bring me comfort after I had suffered a run in with

my mother. “I’m sorry, Sam. I should have told you. I’m okay, I promise. I just have... *moments*.”

I figure that is an understatement. I also recognize that Sam can see through what I’m saying. He always could.

“You should have told me, runt,” he grumbles.

“We hadn’t talked that often and I don’t mean this bad, because you know I love you, but that’s hard to talk about with anyone.”

“I get that, but you had to know I’m safe. I also know how screwed up your mother is. I would have taken you away from all that shit.”

“And what? You would have taken me to Russia. I hate the cold,” I try to joke, ignoring the tears that are stinging my eyes. Sam is right. He has always cared about me.

“What the fuck is going on?”

I jerk as the door flies open so hard it bangs on the wall. Victor is standing there, looking like he’s ready to kill. Sam’s hands tighten their hold on me as he takes the man in. “Do you know him, Angie?”

“Yeah, he’s...”

“I’m her man,” Victor snarls.

“Angie?”

I swallow nervously. Then, I let my gaze move over Victor. As I do that, I begin to feel anger. It’s obvious he’s jealous. While that might give me a slight thrill, it also makes me angry. I decide to concentrate on the anger. Shouldn’t he be in Phoenix by now visiting *Morgan*?

“What are you doing here?” I snap at Victor, standing up.

Sam lets me, but he wastes no time standing beside me. His posture is protective. I should probably tell him that Victor would never hurt me—at least physically. Right now, I’m too pissed off at the man to defend him. I swallowed it down last night and let it go. I needed time to process everything. Victor

had never lied to me, so it was hard to wrap my mind around everything.

“I live here, or maybe you’ve forgotten who you’ve been sharing a bed with lately. Are you already trying to replace me, Kitten?” he responds, his voice cold and deadly. I feel a chill move up my spine. The problem is I can’t tell if it is fear or excitement. It’s probably twisted, but I think it is a mixture of the two.

“You’re supposed to be in Greece, remember? Or at least, that’s what you said.”

“You have exactly two seconds to get your ass away from that man and come over here. Then you have another second to explain what the fuck that question is supposed to mean, Gia.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ll come over there and kill the man beside you so that he’s not an issue. The choice is yours.”

My body jerks with his words because I’m pretty sure he’s not joking. There’s a look in his eyes that tells me he absolutely would kill Sam without blinking. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

“Sam—”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’d like to know who in the hell do you think you are to storm into Angie’s house and scream at her, because *I* am about two seconds away from ending you for scaring her.”

“I do many things to Gia, but I don’t scare her,” Victor says, his gaze roving over Sam as if he’s sizing him up. “If you think you’re man enough, come at me, *Sam*. I can hardly wait.”

Sam has muscles and he’s toned. I know he can handle himself against anyone. Victor is the same however, and at least three or four inches taller than Sam. I think he’s stronger, too. When Sam starts to move, I put my hand on his arm to stop him. I don’t want him to get hurt and as much as it pains me to say it, I don’t want Victor hurt either.

“Kitten, unless you’re trying to make sure this asshole ends up dead, stop touching him.”

My mouth drops open with his words. “That’s rich coming from you. Why aren’t you on a plane, Victor? Did your plans with Morgan fall through?”

I watch him and I could swear his body relaxes with my question. When his lips move into a semi-smirk, I’m almost positive. “Are you jealous, Kitten? Is that what this shit is about?”

“God, you’re so full of yourself. You spend months upon months telling me that I’m all you want and then make dates behind my back. I’m not jealous you asshole, I’m pissed off. Of all the men that I thought would lie to me, I didn’t think it would be you.”

“For the last time, Morgan is just someone connected to work.”

“Someone you’ve slept with,” I clarify. That wipes the smirk off his face. Yet, the guilt on his face kills me. He knows he’s hurt me, but there hasn’t been an apology at all.

“I met her by accident, Gia. It wasn’t planned. You know me better than that.”

“Maybe,” I acknowledge. “But the point is, you still made plans with her. You can’t be stupid enough to think that wouldn’t bother me, Victor.”

He looks surprised. I have no idea why. Maybe he thought that I would never stand up to him. It’s possible that I’ve been wrong, and because I allowed Victor to see me at my weakest and count on him to pull me out that he only views me as weak. God, does he think I’m someone so pitiful that I would ignore the fact he was meeting a woman who he slept with. A woman that called him at an ungodly hour and obviously felt confident in doing that. A woman who admitted that they used to mean *a lot* to one another.

“Is that what this is, Gia?” he asks, his voice controlled in a way that sounds detached. He’s never spoke like that to me before and it feels wrong now.

I stare at him, not understanding what he is saying. “What do you mean?”

“This asshole. You sitting in his lap, letting him touch you. Are you doing that to get back at me for hiring Morgan to do a job for me?”

“What I’m doing with Sam has nothing to do with you. Sam has been in my life a long time.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” I huff.

“Funny, I didn’t see him running to your side when you were in trouble. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen him or heard his name at all—not once in the time we’ve been together, Kitten. So maybe you should come up with another story and make this one I’ll believe.”

“I think you need to turn around and leave before I make Angie mad and beat the hell out of you,” Sam practically purrs.

I gasp in surprise, feeling flushed. I’ve never seen this side of Sam before. He’s not afraid of Victor at all. It’s almost as if he welcomes a fight with Victor. *He has to be insane.*

“Sam, stop.”

“I’m not going anywhere. This is where I live, and Gia is my woman. As far as I’m concerned, you’re the one who needs to leave.”

Sam just looks at Victor, shaking his head like Victor is crazy. “Then, we have a problem, because I’m not going anywhere either, because *Angie* is important to me, and I don’t think she wants you here.”

“You both need to stop before we all choke on the testosterone,” I finally get out, trying to control all of the emotions that are pushing through me. The trouble is, I find it near to impossible.

“Why aren’t you on a plane, Victor?”

“Plans changed this morning. Antonio caught us at the field. He needs the team somewhere else. So, I’m not heading out for a couple of hours. I guess I messed up your little rendezvous. I’ll give you a pro-tip free of charge, Kitten. If you want to string along two men at once, you should always make sure the other one is truly out of town before inviting the B-team candidate over.”

I physically flinch with Victor’s words. I gasp and I have to fight to keep from doing something stupid, like allowing myself to cry. I hate that crying is even an option. I’m not sad, I’m pissed. There’s a small voice inside my head that says I’m hurt, and I guess that’s true too. I choose to ignore it for now. If I have to, I can fall apart later.

“Would somewhere else be Phoenix?” I ask, my question may sound innocent, but it’s not and I can tell immediately that Victor realizes that.

“Did Emilia tell you?” he asks, sounding confused.

“No, your friend Morgan did that. She wanted to make sure you had her phone number. I can’t tell you how touched she was that you still had it programmed into your phone.”

“Jesus—”

“Of course, she said she shouldn’t have been surprised, considering how much the two of you meant to one another.”

Victor actually looks pale. He rakes his hand through his hair and stares at me. “Is there a reason that you couldn’t have fucking unloaded this on me last night, or maybe even this morning? Why couldn’t you give it to me so I could prove to you that it was nothing? What the hell, Gia? I think I’ve proved that I deserve more trust than this.”

“I gave you a chance this morning, Victor. You’re the one that insisted you were going to Greece and that was it. You never once mentioned Phoenix.”

“Because I knew if I told you I was going there, it would upset you.”

I laugh, the sound bitter—even to my own ears. “I wonder how many cheating men say that exact thing. That’s not it,

though. I'm hurt. If you wanted to explore something with another woman, or hell even sleep with someone, you should have told me. What you shouldn't have done is tried to make me feel like I could be enough for you—"

"You are everything to me. Don't you for one fucking second doubt that."

"Too late. You should have told me."

"Or maybe not set up a date with another woman in the first place," Sam adds, talking under his breath.

"You stay out of this, asshole."

"If it involves Angie, it involves me."

"The fuck it does! I love her and she loves me. You have no place in this equation."

Sam sneers, "I love Angie, and go ahead and ask her how she feels about me. Do it."

"Sam, stop. Just let it go. It's not important now."

"Actually, Kitten, I think it is," Victor argues.

"It's not. Sam is family. He came in to check on me—"

"And apparently, I got here at just the right time," Sam adds, and I barely avoid rolling my eyes.

"Sam," I admonish.

"You're lying, Gia. You forget I know your family. I've seen Maxwell's files on your mother and father, too. There's no Sam in your life. He wasn't mentioned once—anywhere."

"I have a life, Victor. Sometimes when you live that life things don't show up in files that someone compiles—especially from a distance."

Victor's mouth snaps shut. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that now he's pissed, but I push on. I really need this to be over.

"Nothing has ever happened between me and Sam. We're close. He's my stepbrother. So, whatever sordid thing going on

in your head, let it go, Victor. That's not who I am. I could barely let my guard down long enough to let you in—"

"Kitten—"

"And I'm definitely regretting even trying now."

"Damn it, you don't mean that, Gia."

"Yeah, I really do. You see, I have a completely innocent explanation as to why I have another man around when you're not here. You can't say the same about Morgan. You also can't stand there and tell me it never occurred to you that meeting an ex-lover wouldn't hurt me."

"I didn't. It's not like you're making it out to be."

"Now, I'm calling you a liar, Victor," Sam laughs, making my head jerk up so I look at him.

"You can go fuck yourself."

"I'm being serious. I'm a man. I know if I had someone as special as Angie waiting for me at home, I wouldn't be out hooking up with another woman who used to warm my bed. I sure as fuck wouldn't be setting up more dates with her, *even* if it had to do with work. Only someone who isn't worth shit would do that to a woman—any woman—especially, someone as special as Angie."

Victor doesn't respond in words. He charges at Sam. I let out a cry as the two men tumble backwards. I jump, looking at them in shock as they begin to trade blows. This is the last thing I want. I recoil with each blow they trade.

"Stop it! Both of you stop!" They of course ignore me. "Victor! Stop!" I scream when he delivers a particularly ugly blow in Sam's stomach.

"Can't, baby. I'm going to kill the motherfucker," he says, sounding as if he's enjoying every bit of this.

They're standing staring at one another now, fists drawn and ready. They're sizing one another up, and I'm desperate to try and stop this from going any further. I think about jumping between them, but as they start trading blows again, that thought flees. I look around the room, desperate to find



something to stop them before either one of them gets hurt. My gaze lands on a broom. It's not much, but I'm positive it's safer than trying to get between them. I quickly move to grab it, and just get back to them as Victor's fist connects with Sam's nose and blood splatters everywhere as it drips out of Sam's nose and Victor continues hitting him. Sam is doing his best at hitting him back, but it's clear he's momentarily stunned. I take the broom and begin hitting Victor with it, gripping the handle tightly. He mostly ignores me as I hit his back, causing me to get more inventive and slap him over the head with it.

"Damn it, Kitten! I'm a little busy here!"

"I told you to stop!" I growl, throwing the broom at him and going to Sam. "Are you okay, Sam?"

"I'm fine, Angie. I'm getting ready to teach this asshole a lesson."

"You mean you're getting your ass handed to you," Victor laughs. He's wiping some blood from the corner of his lip, watching Sam closely.

"What is it with you? First Zane and now my brother. Have you lost your mind?"

"He's not your brother."

"He's my stepbrother, but that doesn't mean I don't love him any less," I qualify, not sure why Victor feels the need for the distinction.

"What did I tell you, Kitten?"

"That you're a jerk?" I huff.

"The only man you love is me."

I stand there looking at him as if I'm frozen. "What?" I finally get the word out through clenched teeth. "I'm pretty sure you *never* told me that."

"Well, I am now. I'm the only man you can ever say you love. Unless we have a son," he says with a shrug as if he's talking about the weather.

“We aren’t having children,” I half-whisper, almost strangling on the words. I ignore the thrill that threatens to erupt inside of me, reminding myself about him acting an asshole over Sam when he made a date with some woman he used to sleep with. “I’m not doing anything with you. Whatever we were is over.”

“Bullshit.”

“I mean it.”

“You don’t. You love me—we love each other. You trusted me with your body. It doesn’t end like this. Fuck, it doesn’t end period.”

“Victor!” I squeal. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“What? Don’t you want brother dearest to know that I’ve had you?”

He’s standing in front of me and right now he doesn’t even seem like the Victor I fell in love with. The Victor I love would never leave me so exposed. I don’t think, I’m not sure I could right now. I’m too humiliated. I walk up to him and before I can second guess myself, I slap him hard across the face. “I don’t even know you. The man I thought you were would never discuss me like this. He would have made sure I felt valued above all.”

“Gia—”

“And most of all, he would have never hurt me like you have the last couple of days. Actually, now that I think about it, I’m not sure I *ever* knew you. Maybe the Victor I thought you were, is just a fantasy.”

“Damn it, Gia—”

“Just go to Phoenix and meet up with your *old friend* and leave me alone.”

I don’t realize I am crying until I began to feel the tracks of my tears running down my cheeks. I want to wipe them away, but I don’t bother. Honestly, I’m not sure I have the energy to raise my arms.

*How did everything go so bad just when it felt like I was finally getting everything I wanted?*

He doesn't leave. Instead, he takes out his phone and dials a number. His eyes never leave mine. I want to look away, but I can't. There is too much intensity coming from him. My heart pounds so hard that I don't see how it keeps from making my whole-body quake. He puts the phone on speaker so I can hear it ringing.

"Victor! It's so great to hear from you—" I wince as I see her name, finally finding the strength to wipe a few of the tears that are falling.

"Morgan, would you like to explain to me why you led my woman to believe that the two of us has some type of relationship beyond business?"

"Your woman?"

"I told you that I was seeing someone, Morgan."

There's silence on the other end. I try to not get my hopes up, and concentrate on the fact that regardless, he kept things from me. Still, I don't want him to have lied about this. I want to believe that I am truly the woman he wants. Right now, I am also scared. Sam seems to sense that and moves over to me, putting his hand on my shoulder, and pulling me into his body. Victor lets out a growl under his breath, the warning clear.

I stand up straighter, putting distance between Sam and I. Victor watches. His face is tight. He doesn't look happy, but at least it doesn't appear he is planning on slitting Sam's throat at any second. I don't know why I feel the need to pull away from Sam, but I do it. I'll analyze my reasons later.

"Victor, I don't know what you're talking about. You didn't even tell me who you were dating. How could I have spoken to them?"

"You called my phone late at night. How could you not have expected to talk to her?"

"I...*Wait*. You're dating our client? Victor that goes against every rule you've ever had. You never mix business with

pleasure. You wouldn't even sleep with me until after we finished the job we had together."

I can't help it. I flinch at her words. I start to run from the room. Victor reaches out grabbing my arm and his hand imprisons my wrist, refusing to let me leave, no matter how hard I tug against his hold. He jerks my hand roughly, pulling me into his body. He shifts his hold, making it so his arm circles my waist and holds me close against his body. The phone is still in his other hand, as he watches me.

"Gia isn't a client. She's my woman. She means everything to me, and as soon as I can convince her, she will wear my ring. You put that in danger with whatever bullshit you spewed last night."

"You said you were seeing her, that didn't sound serious to me. Plus, I didn't know she was the woman you spoke about. I thought she was the woman you said you were protecting."

"I am protecting her, but she's not a fucking job. She's my world. If she wasn't, I wouldn't have asked you to search out the information I needed so I could make sure she was safe."

"I...I'm sorry, Victor. I didn't know. I didn't lie to her, though. You and I did mean something to one another. You even kept my phone number in your contacts. That has to mean something. You can't deny we had something great once, Vic."

"Let me go" I whisper.

He refuses, not with words, but by the look on his face and the increasing force in his hold. "Morgan, I haven't seen you in over five years. How could you even think I'd want to restart anything with you? We slept together twice and it was just sex. I valued you as a professional. We were friends, but it never went deeper for me. I am also *sure* I made that clear when I left."

"I see. Well, I have your message loud and clear now."

"Good. If it needs to be said, don't bother looking me up in Phoenix or anywhere else. I'm not happy that you would lead Gia to believe that we shared anything remotely personal last

night. All we talked about was business, and I told you straight out when you tried to move the conversation into a more personal light that I was seeing someone and happy.”

“Understood. You know how to reach me if that changes,” she says, and this time anger fills me for a different reason. Victorio is making himself clear, and even if that doesn’t get him entirely out of the doghouse, it does mean something to me.

“It won’t. Gia will be my wife and the mother of my children. She’s everything to me. I more than love her. I’d die for her.”

He says these things with the phone in his hand, the speaker pointed toward him, but his gaze never leaves mine. His eyes are heated and his hold on me possessive, and I know that what he said might have been said aloud for her to hear, but the words are for me. *For me*. Then, before she can so much as say goodbye, he hangs up.

“Victor...”

He hands me the phone. “Delete her name out of my contacts, Kitten.”

I look at his phone and shake my head no. “I d-don’t need to do that.”

“I need you to.”

For some reason, I still shake my head in denial. With a sigh, he proceeds to do what I wouldn’t and deletes her from his phone. He puts his phone back in his pocket. “I’ve never lied to you, Gia.”

“What about Phoenix?”

“That’s where Marco’s girl Helena is right now and it’s where the Titan MC is based. EZ is going to help me find out some information and I knew you wouldn’t like me doing it, so I opted to keep you in the dark. I was going to hire Morgan to help with that because she is a very good private investigator. That’s all it was, Gia. I can see where I made a mistake, but to be honest, I never thought of Morgan in that light. She wasn’t an ex, sweetheart. She was an itch I once

scratched after being on the job for six months without a break. You know I wasn't a saint before we met. I've never claimed to be. I can promise you that since you came into my life there has never been another woman for me. I've never looked at anyone since meeting you and I never will."

"You're going to look into my attack."

"I am. Whoever did it, doesn't deserve to breathe the same air as you. I don't want the moon shining down on them and you at the same time. They need to pay and I'm going to be their executioner."

"I'm still here," Sam reminds us. I turn to look at him, stricken. I forgot anyone else was around but me and Victor. Worse, I don't want to discuss my attack with him. For that matter, I don't want to discuss it with Victor either.

"Feel free to leave," Victor replies, full-on snarky. It's a side of him that I haven't really seen.

"Stop. I love Sam and I haven't seen him in a long time."

"I told you how I feel about you using those words about anyone who isn't me, Kitten."

"You're being crazy. Besides that, you and I have a lot to discuss. I don't like you keeping secrets from me. I don't deserve that. I'm not weak, you know."

Okay, there are a lot of times that I *do* feel weak, but I don't want Victor to see me like that. If he does, whatever relationship we might have would be ruined from the beginning.

"You already know I think you're one of the strongest women around. That's not the issue. I don't want to cause you more pain."

"Then, don't do this."

"Sweetheart, you told me out of your own lips that you wished you were strong enough to get vengeance."

"Damn it, Victor—"

“I’m doing this, Gia. It’s happening with or without your support, but I can’t lie. I would like you to support me in this. I need to do it. I just need to.”

“I could help,” Sam speaks up.

“The fuck you are. Man, I don’t even know you. What I do know is I don’t like you.”

“I can’t tell you how much I don’t care,” he replies to Victor.

I let out a yell of annoyance. “Will you two stop! Doesn’t what I want matter here? I mean, it does involve me,” I huff.

“No,” they say in unison.

“You’re not working with me,” Victor tells Sam. “Gia is my woman. This is my responsibility.”

“She’s my family. That makes her *my* responsibility, and I will do whatever I need to do to make her happy,” Sam counters.

At this point, I’m ready to scream. “I’m not anyone’s responsibility. I’m my own person, Having you two talk about me like I’m not pisses me off. Stop it!”

“Whoever hurt you is going to pay, sweetheart. You can fight me, but I’m going to do this,” Victor argues.

“Even if I don’t want you to?”

“Don’t ask me to give this up, Gia,” he says, squeezing my hand. “I love you. This is important to me.”

“Victor, I never saw anyone. There were no witnesses. I wasn’t found until days later. I don’t see how you can find out anything.”

“I might not be able to,” he finally confesses. “I still have to try.”

“If you find something out, we have to discuss it before you do anything,” I finally respond. He grimaces, not looking happy. Victor doesn’t argue, however. “What time are you leaving?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “I have to meet up with the rest of my team in a little bit. I just wanted to come and talk to you beforehand.”

“Darn. And here I was going to invite you to dinner with Angie and me. Hate that you’re going to miss it,” Sam says, holding a wet cloth to his nose which seems to have stopped bleeding. I have no idea when he did that. The world kind of faded away while Victor and I were talking.

“Gia, if he keeps it up, I’m going to kill him.”

“You two are going to have to learn to get along, because I want you both in my life.”

“If he’s so important, where has he been?”

“In Russia,” I explain.

“Well not for the last year. It’s just there’s been some trouble in the family, and I didn’t want to bring my troubles to your doors.”

“Family?”

“Nothing to concern yourself with Vincent,” Sam snipes.

“Victorio,” he growls back. “Although, I’d rather you didn’t bother calling me anything at all and just leave.”

“I just bet, but that’s not going to happen. I’m here for Angie.”

“She’s more than taken care of,” Victor counters.

“Didn’t look like it when I got here.”

“Okay, can we stop this? Victor, you need to leave. Sam, you and I have a lot to catch up on,” I interject, wanting to stop this overgrown pissing match before it gets started.

“Melina is wanting to visit with you. I told Antonio I’d have Sloan bring you over. She’ll be here soon.”

“Who’s Sloan?”

“A new member of my team. You’ll like her. She’s happily married and tougher than any of the men who have watched you before.”



“Victor?”

“Yeah, Kitten?”

“Did you have Zane fired?”

“No,” he laughs. “He’s going on this mission with me. I have to pick who I want to work with when I start my new position. If I’m going to work with Zane, I need to see how he is when shit goes down.”

“And is it?” I ask, suddenly very worried.

“Is what?”

“Shit going down?”

He frowns. “Helena has herself in some trouble. So probably. We’ll get it taken care of though. Sloan is flying in. She’ll be here in a couple hours.”

“Victor, I don’t need or want a bodyguard.”

“I don’t care. I can’t rest if I don’t know you’re okay.”

“Then, you don’t need to worry because I’m here. I can take care of her.” Sam delivers that news with a cocky grin, indicating he knows exactly how much Victor is going to hate that.

“You have got to be shitting me. I don’t even know you. I’m sure not going to trust you with the most important person in my life. Besides, I want someone trained to watch over her.” Victor is back to looking pissed. There’s not much I can do about it. “Sloan can take care of things.”

“Hmm...” Sam says. He’s not arguing, but I can tell he’s not agreeing to letting Sloan take his place making sure I’m safe. I don’t tell Victor that, however.

“This is all silly. I don’t need a bodyguard, what I need is food. Are you taking me out for food, or what, Sam?”

“Definitely. I found this quaint little eatery that you’re going to love. They make the best Stroganoff I’ve ever tasted.”

“Even better than Anya’s?” I laugh as I ask.

“I can’t say that out loud. I swear that woman knows if someone is disparaging her cooking.”

“I still remember when she threw a shoe at you and I swear it curved the table just to hit you,” I giggle.

“Right? It was my own fault. I should have never told her that her Mikoyan was dry.”

“You really shouldn’t have. You know it was a perfect outlet.”

“I did, but I was a kid,” he replies with an easy smile. For a second, we’re both lost in our memories.

“I hate to interrupt a trip down memory lane,” Victor growls. “I want a kiss goodbye, Gia.”

“Victor, I mean, things are better, but you did...” I stop talking. He didn’t lie, but he kind of did by omission. Plus, he just plain hurt me. He might not think hiring that girl was a big thing, but it clearly was.

“Baby,” he whispers, pulling me into his arms.

“You hurt me,” I respond.

“I know, sweetheart. I promise, I’m going to do my best to make up for that. It won’t happen again. From here on out, there will be no secrets.”

I do my best to smile at him. It might not completely reach my eyes, but it mostly does.

“Okay, but there better not be.”

“I do have one request, however.”

“What’s that?”

“Make sure you don’t end up in *Sam’s* lap again. If you do, I will kill him. It’s my right as your man.”

“You’re acting insane,” I breathe out.

“Just do as I ask. You may not understand this, but right now the need to cut the bastard in pieces for even touching you is raging through me.”

“I...promise.” I don’t know what made me readily agree, other than the fact I was afraid for Sam’s life. I look over Victor’s shoulder, but apparently Sam has disappeared—maybe to check his nose and get rid of his washcloth. That’s probably a good thing. I’m not sure he’d like the way Victor is calmly talking about killing him.

“Good. Now, I’ve been listening to Niko, Marco, his brothers, and Antonio since early this morning going over our directives, dying to leave just so I could spend a little more time with you. I need some good, and you’re everything good in my life. I need your mouth.”

“It’s really unfair how good you are at sweet talking,” I mutter.

He bends down to whisper in my ear. “Give me your lips, Kitten.”

I lean up, meeting him and as our lips touch, Victor kisses me with a sweetness, a gentleness that I can’t remember ever experiencing. It’s an enticing combination, making me lose myself in the man I thought I had lost, but a man I’m starting to think might be mine completely.

# victorio

...

“Are we going to get there in time?” Levi asks.

I look over at him and Zane and don't really know what to say. We had plenty of time to get into position, but after a two hour hold up with the plane, we're running late. Air traffic control had several employees that didn't show up and were too short staffed to allow us to take off safely. Then, on top of that, their computers inside went down. We were stuck until it was all fixed and extra staff finally dragged their asses inside.

I sigh, turning my attention back to Levi. “EZ and his men are already there. She'll be okay,” I tell them, and I hope I'm right.

Helena has herself in some very hot water. Zervas has apparently gone off the rails. He has Helena as a hostage right now and is traveling with her. I don't know all the details. We're the grunt work. We're meant to track her down and extract her. I need to make sure we do that. Marco is flying down, but I'm not sure he's going to get there in time either. He'll be later than us since he's coming from Greece.

Our plans are in motion and Helena has managed to get a message through to EZ's woman, Liberty. She's given her some clues and I guess we're chasing those. EZ is supposed to brief us when we rendezvous and go after the son of a bitch.

I look out the window of the DeLuca private jet and wish I were back home. One good thing about taking over Niko's former position, I won't be going on any more of these missions unless we need extra fire power. I don't mean to sound like I don't care about Helena, I do. The thing is, I need to be with Gia. Walking in and seeing her in another man's lap shook me. I still don't know how I didn't kill that son of a bitch. The only thing that stopped me was the fact that I knew it would hurt my woman. That's the last thing I want. Besides, I was the idiot which had inadvertently caused her pain. She's right. I should have known that hiring someone I had slept with in the past would hurt her. I've never had a relationship, so the feelings I have for Gia are as new to me as they are to her. I don't question them, though. I was telling the truth. She is everything to me and I don't want anyone else—*ever*.

In my defense, When I saw Morgan again, I just saw someone who was good at her job. I didn't like that Antonio got information I wanted before I did. This wasn't family business. It was *my* business. That meant I wanted everything reported directly to me. Hell, our past meant so little to me that I didn't even think about it. We had been doing a job together for Maxwell. It involved a stakeout and being snowed in. Sometimes you just need to let off steam. She was there, I was there and it just kind of happened. The second time it happened, she began taking about how we could still see each other when the op was over. That was when I set the record straight. I'm not sure how Morgan got things so twisted.

I'm a man, everything is cut and dry. I'm learning now that I am in love that women are not the same. Their reactions and thoughts follow so many turns and curves that I'm going to need a fucking roadmap.

I turn my attention back to matters at hand. We'll be landing in Phoenix soon and we need to be prepared. My gaze moves over to look at Lodi and Stone. They're talking off to

themselves. I've had my eye on Lodi for a bit. Antonio and Niko were putting him into an empty Capo position. They want him working with me, but something is off about him. I can't put my finger on it. I don't have any reason to feel this way, but I do just the same. I shrug off my thoughts. Niko and Antonio vetted Lodi carefully, I'm sure. I'm just being uptight because I'll be taking on a new position and I can't afford anything to fuck it up. Besides, this operation will show me all I need to know about the men I'm thinking of including in my circle.

I need to concentrate on what's ahead of me. We will be landing soon. I need to be ready. Just as I decide to put all thoughts from my mind and spend a little time focusing and preparing, my phone buzzes. My lips move to a smile without a thought. The only person that would be texting me right now is Gia. Anyone else is either here with me, or just finished a phone conference with me. I frown when I see the number flash on the screen.

“Sloan? What's going on?”

“I'm here at the address you provided, but there's no one here, Boss.”

Fuck, she went to dinner with that asshole. “Stay there. I'll get back with you.”

“You got it.”

I frown as I click the button to end our connection. Then, I immediately dial Gia. It rings a few times before going to her voicemail. *Damn it.*

The phone dings as I get a text message and when I see it's from her, I get pissed.

**Gia:**Hey what's up?

**Me:**Where are you?

There is a minute or two where all I see are three little dots, telling me that she's responding, but hasn't sent the message yet. I try to control my anger. I don't like Gia being around this Sam asshole, and I know without asking he's with her. I should have killed the bastard.

**Gia:**At the theater with Sam. We decided on a movie before dinner.

*I just bet ole Sam was behind that decision. Jesus, if I didn't need to desperately be in Phoenix right now, I'd have them turn this damn jet around.*

**Me:** Sloan is at your house, wondering where you are.

**Gia:** Sorry, but I did tell you that I didn't need a babysitter. I'm fine and if anything was to go wrong, Sam is trained. He can protect me.

**Me:**What do you mean trained?

**Gia:**He's had intense weapons and combat training, as well as martial arts. You really don't need to worry, Victor. Sam is really good. If anything, he was holding back with you. He knew I would be mad if he hurt you.

*Son of a bitch!* Does she think that dumbass could take me? Does she have so little confidence in me? I just stare at my phone unsure of what to say at this point. If I was there, I'd turn her over my knees and spank her ass red. Then, I would fuck her within an inch of her life. Then, once she passed out from her climaxes, I would begin cutting pieces of pretty-boy Sam's face up. I'd make sure no woman would look at him and want a second look ever again.

*Especially my woman.*

**Gia:**Victor? I'll have Sam drop me off at Antonio's after dinner, okay?

**Me:**We have a lot to discuss.

**Gia:**I know. I promise you that it's not like what you're thinking with Sam.

**Me:**Maybe not for you. It's him I'm not sure about.

**Gia:**Not every man sees me like you do, Victor. I'm not sure anyone else does.

**Me:**You're wrong, but just remember that I'm the only one that matters.

**Gia:**I won't forget. Keep yourself safe.

**Me:**I have to go. We're landing. Text when you get to Antonio's.

**Gia:**Ok. I miss you, Victor.

**Me:**Miss you too, sweetheart.

I move from that conversation to Sloan. I text her that Gia is out tonight, and she only needs to report to Antonio early in the morning. Then, I put my phone away. There's more I need to discuss with Gia, but I don't know what to say to her right now. I need to clear my head. I'm fucking pissed. I don't want to say anything I can't take back and risk pushing her away from me. One thing is definitely fucking clear. Gia and I are going to have to come to an understanding on what it means to be my woman.

*Beginning with how my woman can't go to the movies with any other fucker but me.*



# angelina

...

I stare at my phone with a sigh. I needed time to talk with Victor. That was hard to do with him being in Arizona and me here in Florida. He's planning on looking into my attack and that alone has my anxiety on the edge. If Sam hadn't spent the evening distracting me, I'm pretty sure I would have had a panic attack by now. I don't know why it's so hard for Victor to understand that trying to think about the past is so hard for me. It feels like if it's not mentioned, it can stay buried—unable to hurt me. The minute someone tries to bring it up, it's like I'm giving it a license to resurface and bring me more hell.

*I just want everything from the attack to disappear.*

That might not be the most adult way to handle things, but it is all I can handle right now.

“I'm sorry, runt.”

“Sorry?” I ask Sam, securing the seatbelt and laying my phone in the cupholder. We just finished up with dinner and

now my stomach just keeps churning. I wish I could force Victorio to come back here and talk with me. I want to convince him to leave my past buried.

“You didn’t have a very good time on our date.”

Something about the way he says date worries me. I shrug it aside. Sam is my brother. It may not be by blood, but we both accepted those roles years ago. I admit that at one time, I wanted more. Sam never saw me as a woman, however. I was his kid sister, and eventually I came to accept that. Now, I’m glad I did. The attraction I felt toward Sam was nowhere near as intense as what I feel for Victor. It could even be possible that Sam and I would have made each other miserable.

I give him a tight, entirely fake, smile. “I’m okay. I’m upset with Victor.”

“You should be,” Sam says, surprising me.

“I should?”

“Of course. He’s looking into something that you told him not to. You have every reason to be upset, Angie. This is your life. You should have a say in people unearthing the most painful memories you possess.”

“Hold up. I thought you were all for getting revenge against the person who attacked me. What’s changed?”

“I am all for it. I want to give you closure. However, I only want to expose you to that if you want it. I’d never force that on you.”

“So what? You would avenge me behind my back, and I’d never know?”

Sam just smiles, which is neither a yes nor a no. I shake my head. This is silly. It’s not like Sam would waste the time to do that anyway. We haven’t had contact in years. Plus, we didn’t have the type of relationship that would make him possessive over me—not like Victor. Besides that, Sam probably has women everywhere. I doubt any of them would appreciate the fact he was spending time and effort on me.

I shake my head at him, making him laugh. “That’s kind of what Victor tried. You see how that worked out.”

He laughs. “Yeah, I’m smoother than that asshole, though.”

“Whatever you say,” I giggle.

“Are you sure you want me to take you to DeLuca’s?” he asks, the mood in his car suddenly changing.

“Yeah, I’m going to visit with Melina, and Emilia is coming over with Zoe tomorrow. I’m going to enjoy myself and try not to get baby fever,” I joke.

“If you do, maybe I could help you out with that,” Sam smirks.

“You did not just say that,” I gasp, shocked to the soles of my feet.

“Oh, I definitely did,” he winks. *Yikes*. Okay, I’m just going to ignore that remark and bury it way down deep, never to see the light of day. “Now, I’ll take you there, but honey, you do know who Antonio DeLuca is, right?”

“C’mon, Sam. We both know our lives are not exactly picket fences, here. You forget I know who *you* are too,” I argue, ignoring he called me honey.

He holds his hands up, his elbow hitting the steering wheel of his ostentatious Rolls-Royce. One thing hasn’t changed, Sam definitely still has a taste for the luxurious life he grew up with. “Okay, okay,” he laughs. “I get it. I’ll take you to DeLuca’s.”

“Thank you—”

“On one condition,” he says, interrupting me.

“A condition?” I laugh. He’s being crazy. If he doesn’t take me to Antonio’s, I’ll just drive myself once he drops me off. I’m starting to seriously get fed up with men in general.

“Yep, runt, I have a condition.”

“You know, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly the skinny ragamuffin I was when I first came to live with you

and your dad. Runt doesn't exactly fit now."

"Oh, believe me, I noticed. You're drop dead gorgeous now."

"Please," I huff, knowing that he's lying through his teeth now.

"I'm serious. You're seriously gorgeous."

"Have a thing for scarred women?"

"Stop that, Angie. Your scar does nothing to mask your beauty," he says, holding my neck and stroking the scar's path along my jaw. "All I see when I look at you is a strong woman who is a survivor and holds all the beauty in the world in her eyes and her smile."

My heart speeds up as I look at Sam. "What's happening here?" I ask him, confused. He can't be making a pass at me, right? Sam never saw me like that, ever. He also knows I'm in a relationship—at least of some kind—with Victor.

"I'm about to tell you what my condition is for taking you to DeLuca's."

"Okay..."

"You have to agree to go out to dinner with me Friday."

"What?"

"I come to see you and spend time with you, runt. You're going to be gone for two nights. I think it's only fair you agree to have dinner with me to make it up. It's not as if I live here. You're the only reason I'm here."

When he puts it like that, I feel guilty. He's completely right. If the roles were reversed, I'd be really hurt. "I could cook you dinner," I suggest.

"Nope. I want to show off my beautiful date."

"Oh really? Who are you bringing?"

"Very funny. Just be ready Friday at three. Deal?"

"Three?" I gulp. "Isn't that kind of early?"

"I've got a special day planned with you."

“You better not make me regret this,” I warn, and he gives me a wink.

“I’ll try my best.”

I roll my eyes, but I feel better. The awkwardness between us seems to be lifted. I’ve just been overreacting. My emotions are too out of control over Victor and what I know he’s doing. This is Sam. I know where we stand. We’re best friends, buddies... *family*.

I relax back into the seat as Sam starts the car and pulls out of the diner’s parking lot. I’m going crazy. For a minute, I almost believed Sam was flirting with me. When he touched my face, it almost felt like he had feelings for me. It was like he wanted to erase my scar and reassure me that I was still pretty. Any girl would like to feel that way, but I don’t want it from Sam. As much as I love him, he’s not Victor.

I close my eyes and picture Victor’s face. When he comes home, we will have a lot to talk about. I also need to get past this fear I have. I’m safe with Victor. He may have hurt me, but it wasn’t intentional. I just need to be more honest with him and let him know when his actions hurt me.

Most of all, I need to stop being afraid...

# victorio

...

Gia's phone goes to voicemail, and I curse under my breath. "Kitten, your ass is going to be sore when I get home. You better call me the second you get this. If you don't check in soon, I will hunt you down and you won't like what happens."

"Your woman pissed?" Levi asks as I hang up.

"I didn't think so," I grumble. "She does have me jumping through fucking hoops, though."

"If you decide to let her go, I'm still available," Zane chimes in.

"Shut the fuck up before I cut out your tongue so you can't bother me anymore," I reply sharply. Our gazes lock and I let him see the truth written all over my face. Killing him right now would make me feel a hell of a lot better than I do.

"She could be asleep, you know. There's a three-hour time difference," he points out.

I glance at the clock. I guess he's right. I just thought Gia would check in. Of course, she knows this run could be

dangerous. Maybe she's just giving me time to work. I take a deep breath. That makes me feel a little better. She has been through a lot. It's entirely possible. I smile as I imagine her waiting on the sofa for me to call her, her face relaxed in sleep, the phone lying beside her.

"Man, you are so pussy whipped," Levi laughs.

I just shrug. I'm not going to deny it. Gia owns me—every single part. "Believe me boys, there are much worse things," I reply.

"How far are we out from this place?"

"EZ said fifteen minutes or so. His men are going to park at the Waffle House across from the motel and make it there on foot," Levi answers.

"Give the orders to the rest of our crew. Each SUV needs to take a different angle of the motel. Levi, you park our SUV at the back of the vehicle. We can cover that angle. EZ is going through the front. I'll meet him in the lobby. You and Zane can cover the back entrance."

"Got it boss."

"I always was a backdoor kind of man," Zane chuckles, and I swear I really want to kill the motherfucker at this point.

"Just make sure the other men are in position. Stone and Lodi need to meet us in the lobby."

"The others will guard each exit out of this place. We cannot allow Zervas to get away," I insist.

"You got it," Zane responds, switching into his all-business mode now—*thank God*.

In no time at all we're pulling into the blacktopped parking lot. Securing our guns, I silently motion for Zane and Levi to head to the door. I take a breath and then head to the lobby.

When I get there, I'm surprised to see Liberty at the front desk, while EZ and his men are lined up against the wall. "What's going on?" I ask, my eyes glued to the back of Liberty's head. Liberty is beautiful. Her long, cascading curls of red hair down her back remind me of Gia's only the color is

brighter. My woman's dark auburn is calming—Liberty's has the opposite effect.

“Never get married, Pretty Boy. You can't control a woman by your dick if she knows she now has sole ownership of it.”

“What's she doing?” I ask, managing to do a piss-poor job of hiding my smirk. The fact that Liberty keeps tying EZ up in knots is something I find hilarious.

“Listen,” he orders. I decide to step a little closer as I wait to see what's going to happen next.

“I know it's against the rules. It's just, I really need your help. My rat-bastard of a husband can't keep it in his pants. I have it on good authority he's here tonight with some blonde skank. I need proof he's sleeping around. If I can get photographic proof, our prenup agreement is void. Then, all his millions he hides from me will be mine. Can you find it in your heart to help me?”

“I could get fired,” the woman hedges, clearly torn.

“I'd never tell him how I found his room and he's not smart enough to ask. I can give you enough money to make this job nothing but a bad dream, though.”

“You could?”

“Shadow,” Liberty calls out.

The man standing beside us moves up, grinning at EZ. “Prez, I have to admit, I didn't like you and wanted you here like I wanted my dick shot off. But your old lady has balls of steel. I'd follow her through the fires of hell.” EZ flips him off.

“Fucking woman isn't content enough to make me a prisoner by doing something to my dick so it doesn't work with anyone but her, she has to go and wrap my own men around her finger. How the fuck did I let this happen?” he hisses out, clearly upset with himself. I laugh, just as Lodi and Stone join us.

Shadow hands Liberty a thick white envelope. She winks at him, then puts it on the counter in front of the other woman.



EZ growls, and I swear I see Liberty smile. I watch as the clerk opens it, her eyes going wide. Even from this distance, I can see there's a fuck of a lot of money in there.

"What's his name?" the girl asks, still clutching the envelope tightly.

"Zervas Cirillo," Liberty answers.

"I'm sorry. We don't have anyone checked in tonight under that name."

"He would have just checked in recently. He's the three B's. You know, blonde, big and beefy. I suppose he's even kind of cute if you don't mind the fact that he has no brains. He also looks like he's been on way too many steroids."

"Oh, I know the guy you are talking about. He checked in under the name Smith."

"So original," Liberty huffs, making the clerk laugh.

"Yeah, we get a lot of Mr. and Mrs. Smiths. Here's a room key but if you're asked, then your husband gave it to you."

"You got it," Liberty responds. "Thank you..."

"Tabitha," she answers. "You can call me Tabby."

"Thanks Tabby. See you around."

"Doubtful. I'm thinking a change of scenery is best for me."

Liberty nods and walks back to us. Once she rounds the corner, she gives the key to EZ. There's a green sticker on it with the number two hundred and one written in white. "Let's move boys," EZ mutters. "We've studied the schematics of the hotel online. We can go up the stairs from the side entrance outside. It should bring us up within a room or two."

"Keep yourself safe," Liberty tells him.

"That's starting to sound like you care about me, baby."

"I'd hate to lose your dick," she says with a shrug. "One that good is hard to replace."

"You can't replace it or me, and you know it."

“Maybe, maybe not. It’s up to you to keep me from ever trying.”

EZ pulls her into his arms and gives her a hard kiss as the rest of us walk toward the exit. It’s just a few seconds before EZ is catching up with us, determination written in every line on his face.

*It’s showtime.*

# angelina

...

“You sound sleepy.”

“I am. It probably makes me sound old, but I’m already in my bed,” I admit.

“Sloan mentioned you came home early.”

“Grr...” I fake growl. Victor laughs as I hold the phone closer to my ear, curling deep into my covers.

“I just need to know you’re okay, sweetheart.”

“I’m fine except for being tired, psycho,” I joke.

“God, I love the way you laugh, Gia. It makes me miss you almost as much as hearing you’re in bed.”

“Victor.” His name comes out more like a moan as I do my best to ignore the way my body is responding to just the sound of his voice.

“Just being honest with you, baby. That’s all.”

“I know. I just miss you, too. We should probably change the subject before I get sad because you’re not here.”

“I like that. I want you to miss me.”

“Um... how’s the weather?”

He lets out a chuckle and if I close my eyes, I’m sure I could practically see the way he’s shaking his head at me. “Okay, I get the message—new subject.”

“Exactly.”

“Antonio said you were having a good time visiting. Why’d you come home early, Kitten?”

“My second night was cut a little short because Emilia and Zoe finally went into labor.”

“They did? Both of them?”

“Yeah. Emilia first, but Zoe went into it at the hospital. Which was a good thing. They were putting both of them in to induce labor this week anyway. Those babies didn’t seem to want to come out,” I giggle.

“Did everything go okay? I wonder why Antonio didn’t mention it?”

“Probably because Melina threw a fit that they were in labor, and she wasn’t. He had his hands full. I don’t know how he managed it, but her doctor decided if she wanted to have the baby, they could induce her labor because she was just a week away from her official date anyway.”

“So, all three of them are currently having a baby?”

“Nope. All three now have babies. So, I suppose, there are two new males in the DeLuca fold and Antonio now has a beautiful princess to worry about.”

“Wow.”

“You can say that again.”

“How are the new mothers?”

I smile as I remember their faces. “Ecstatically happy. Having their babies together is exactly what Zoe and Emilia

wanted. They both were over their due date, so they had a harder time with delivery. They will have to stay in the hospital a little longer for recovery, but their little boys are the picture of health. Melina and Antonio were too busy beaming at little Izzy to say much at all.”

I smile as I think back to the way Antonio and Melina were together as they looked down at their daughter. I want that with Victor. I somehow must get brave enough to push through my hang-ups. I need to do it soon, too. I don’t want to lose him. Having Morgan show up—no matter what Victor said about her—was a wake-up call for me.

“I can’t wait to see them,” Victor says softly. “Actually, I can’t wait to see *you* again. I miss you, Gia.”

His words warm me. “I miss you, too. The bed feels kind of empty. I miss your arms around me.”

“God, mine too.”

“You could always come home. Antonio mentioned that Helena was with Marco, there’s no reason for you to stay there now.”

“I’ll be home soon, sweetheart. I promise. I can’t stay away from you for too long.”

I sigh with his response. It’s not what I wanted to hear—especially since I know why he’s staying.

“What’s your plans for tomorrow? I’m not used to you being off work.”

“I’m actually missing work, but they’re remodeling the entire building. We were lucky to get a grant to do it. The place will be amazing when it’s all said and done. They’re even going to make playrooms for the kids and a small play yard out back.”

“That’s great, Kitten. Although, I have to say, I’m a little bummed that you’re on vacation and I’m not with you.”

“Then, come home,” I plead again, only to hear him exhale in frustration.

“I have to do this, Gia. I get you don’t want me to, but I have to. It’s who I am. So, tell me what you’re doing tomorrow. Are you going to see the babies?”

“Probably not. My friends need time to recover and time with their men. I don’t have anything planned until later in the day,” I tell him, wondering if I should have just lied. He still would have known, because it didn’t slip by me that I had a bodyguard at my house yesterday when I got home. I started to invite her in, but I didn’t. I feel a little guilty about that, but I told her to go home, and she refused. It’s not my fault if she wants to be nuts.

“What are you doing later?”

“Won’t *Sloan* report and tell you?” I huff.

“Gia, I told you I’m going to keep you safe. That’s with or without your cooperation.”

“It’s your money you’re wasting. Have at it, I guess.”

“I have more money than I’ll ever need. Spending it to keep you safe and trying to spoil you is all I want.”

“You should probably see a therapist for your issues, Victor.”

“Smartass. Why do I get the feeling that you’re trying to avoid telling me what you have planned tomorrow?”

*Because I am, and you’re really smart?*

I rub my forehead a little harder than necessary. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know what Victor’s reactions are going to be to my plans. I don’t want to tell him, but I also don’t want to keep secrets either. Besides, I wasn’t joking. Sloan would tell him where I was. This would be easier in the long run. It’s kind of like ripping a band aid off.

“I’m going out to dinner again with Sam.”

“You’ve already had dinner with that prick,” he growls, his voice dark and deadly. It’s enough to send goosebumps over my skin.

“Victor—”

“You’re pushing me too far, Gia.”

“Don’t be like that. I told you that Sam is family. He came all this way to see me and I’m not going to ignore him. He was my lifeline when my mother moved in with Abram. You know how my mother is—”

“Of course, I do. But—”

“Well, she was a hundred times worse with Sam’s dad backing her. He and I bonded over that, and Sam will always be a part of my life.”

“Bullshit. You haven’t even seen him in years.”

“We kept in touch in emails. He didn’t know about the attack, or he would have been here, Victor. He’s important to me, but there’s no reason for you to get upset.”

“Easy for you to say. I’m not the one going out on a date without you tomorrow.”

“Vic—”

“Put yourself in my shoes, Kitten. You have to know how hard this would be on you. You freaked out over Morgan, and I wasn’t even going out with her.”

“Wow, Victor. Do you really want to go there?”

“Damn it,” he curses.

“You had sex with her! I have never slept with Sam. I never thought about it. In fact, the only person I’ve ever thought of having sex with is the idiot who is staying in Arizona and keeping that from happening.” I didn’t mean to say that, but it’s out there. I *did* expect him to respond. Yet, all I’m hearing is silence. “Victor?”

“How often do you think about having sex with me, Kitten?” he purrs.

“We weren’t talking about that, you jerk. We were talking about you not worrying about Sam.”

“I’m still going to have Sloan following you. If that asshole tries anything, you go to her immediately. Do you hear me, Gia?”

“Sam won’t try anything,” I mutter.

“Promise me.”

“*Fine.*” I breathe as I try to figure out how to deal with Victor being so protective and jealous—while ignoring the fact that I like it.

“Good, now on to better subjects. How often exactly do you think about having sex with me?”

“We’re not doing this right now. If you want my answer, come home. Better yet, come home tonight and you can go out to dinner with me when I meet Sam.”

“Fuck, woman. Do you know how much I want that?”

“Then, do it. Nothing and no one is stopping you, but you.”

“Can you give me three days?”

“Does that mean you’re coming home?”

“Three days,” he confirms. “I can cut my trip short, *if* you do something for me.”

“Something for you? Like what?” I question cautiously.

“Tell me what you’re wearing right now?”

“Victor?” I whisper, feeling my body flush with heat.

“What are you wearing? C’mon, Kitten, tell me,” he hums.

“Your T-shirt,” I finally answer, fear skittering through my body. I can’t tell you exactly what I’m afraid of—*maybe the unknown.*

“Mm...” His voice vibrates through my body. “Do you have underwear on?”

I lick my lips, my throat suddenly dry.

“Panties only,” I admit. Those two words seem to fill the room like a giant alarm. I’m quickly getting in over my head. I can’t stop it—I’m not sure I want to.

“I need you to slide your hand beneath your panties and move your fingers over the lips of your pussy. Can you do that



for me, Gia?”

*Oh God.* With his words I could feel my inner thighs get wetter as a fresh gush of my arousal coated my sex. My body trembled, as my eyes closed in pleasure. Without realizing I was doing it, my hand skated down against my stomach as my fingers dove beneath the elastic of my panties.

“Yes,” I pant, waiting for him to tell me what to do next, and knowing I’ll do it. I’ll do anything Victor wants. I’m his to command.

“Tell me what you feel, sweetheart.”

“I... Wet, Victor. I’m so wet.”

“Have you been thinking about me, Kitten.”

“Victor...”

“Have you been touching yourself while you were thinking of me?”

“In the shower,” I admit before I can stop myself.

“Oh, my dirty little Kitten made herself come thinking about me?”

“Y-yes.”

“I like that. When I get back, I’m going to make you shower with me. Would you like that, baby?”

I rub my lips together as my fingers glide over my wet folds, teasing my clit. Victor’s voice is hoarse and sleepy. The sound of it just makes me wetter. Until he made me cum, I’d forgotten how good it felt. It feels like he’s unleashed something inside of me and I don’t think I’ll be satisfied until I belong to him completely.

“What would you do to me?” I find the nerve to ask.

Victor breathes into the phone. “Now that I know what you’ve been doing, I’m going to pin you against the shower wall and make you show me how you made yourself come.

“Oh God. I’m not sure I’m brave enough to do that.”

“You are. You want to make me happy. My Gia wants to be my good girl, so I’ll reward her.”

“Reward me?” I gasp, feeling myself getting wetter and wetter.

“Mm...all good girls deserve a present, Kitten.”

“What would you give me?”

“My cock. He’s very lonely for you right now.”

“He is?”

“Yeah, baby. He’s crying for you right now. I had to wrap my hand around him and stroke him.”

“Are you...are you doing that right now?”

“Yes. The head is covered in precum, Gia. I need you to come lick it off.”

His words seduce me. I close my eyes and imagine Victor’s beautiful face, his firm hand wrapped around his cock as he moves it up and down. It’s remarkably easy to imagine and I capture my clit between two fingers and squeeze it. The sensation makes my hips jerk off the bed.

“Oh!” I cry out as pleasure runs through me. I can feel an orgasm building and I want it more than I want my next breath.

“My woman likes that I’m fucking my cock with my hand,” he purrs. “Tell me what you’re doing, Gia.”

“I’m grinding my fingers against my clit. Oh God, Victor, I’m aching for you.”

“Do you have us on speakerphone?”

“I do,” I moan. I can feel the muscles inside my pussy craving something I can’t give them.

“Good. I need you to use your other hand and put two of your fingers inside you. Fuck yourself with them, baby.”

“Victor...”

“Do it, Kitten. Remember, you want to be my good girl and make me happy, right?” His voice is rough, graveled. I

might be inexperienced, but I know it's full of desire. He wants me and God, I do crave to be his good girl. I just want to be his.

“Yes.” It's one word, but it encompasses everything.

“That's my baby.”

“Damn,” I hiss.

“Are you fucking yourself?”

“Yes. Victor, I'm so wet. I can hear it every time my fingers move.”

“I want to bury my face in that cream and eat out your sweet cunt. I bet you'd grind your sweet pussy into my face.”

“Honey,” I gasp.

“Fuck, Kitten. I'm about to come. My balls are so tight. Are you going to come for me?”

“I'm close.”

“Take your fingers out and spank your clit, Gia.”

“What?” I ask, too lost in my lust to grasp what he's demanding.

“You heard me. I want you to spank your pussy. You need to lash that hard little clit with your hand. Don't be gentle either. Do it or I'm going to have to punish you.”

“I...”

“Now, Gia. Don't disappoint me.”

Disappointing him is the last thing I want to do. I whimper as I remove my fingers. I bring my hand up and hold my pussy open with my other and slap against my clit.

“Fuck, baby. I could hear it. You are wet. You're so fucking wet and it's all for me.”

“All yours,” I tell him. Then, without being told, I slap my pussy again and again.

“So greedy,” he groans. “Grind your clit, Gia. I'm going to come and when I do, I want to hear you. Come with me.”

“Okay,” I agree, already moving my hand around my clit exactly the way I know will bring my climax. I tighten my legs together for friction, my fingers pushing harder and moving back and forth and then side to side against the swollen nub.

“I’m getting closer, Gia. You better be ready. I’m going to come and shoot my load all over that sweet little cunt and then I’m going to gather it all up and fuck it inside of you. My good girl loves it when I cum.”

I can see everything he’s described in my mind and that’s all it takes. I cry out his name as I come hard. I feel my release leak out of me as I pant hard, trying to get control. I hear Victor growl and I know he’s coming. I pick up the phone with my wet hand. “Come for me, honey. Give it all to me,” I croon into the phone.

At this moment, I feel something I never thought I’d feel in my life.

*I feel beautiful.*

“Fuck, Gia, I love you.” Those words in Victor’s voice feel like a promise—a vow that I will always be safe with him.

I’ve always known it, but tonight something has shifted inside of me.

“I love you, Victor.”

I say the words so lightly that I’m not sure he hears me, but as we talk for a little longer, we’re at ease with one another and everything feels different. I think I finally believe that one day I can be the woman that Victor needs me to be.

That’s the last thought I have as I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

# victorio

...

I took a quick shower after I hung up with Gia. It had been years—hell decades maybe since I had cum in my bed with my hand wrapped around my cock with no woman in sight. Still, what I just shared with my woman was one of the best things I’ve ever experienced in my life. After drying off and getting dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, I decided to check in to see if I had any new information. I have been hacking into the police station in Phoenix as well as the D.A.’s office. I’ve found nothing. I was just hoping that Ghost would have more luck. I wasn’t holding my breath, though.

I moved through the small hall of the clubhouse. This place was a far cry from the DeLuca compound. I’m pretty sure it used to be an old roadhouse and was made from rough lumber and cinderblocks. It was oddly comfortable, but this place wasn’t my scene. I knew immediately my Gia would hate it. What’s more if she showed up here and saw all the strippers on the poles in the front bar area—along with other members getting off in various ways with what EZ and the others described as club candy—means that my Kitten would

lose her cool to find me here. There's no way she'd make it in this lifestyle. I doubt I would either, because these guys look at women like a dessert bar they're going to devour. If one of them even tried to look at Gia like that, I'd have to kill the bastard.

The only woman I've seen them act half-way respectable around is Liberty, and I am pretty sure they do that because they are afraid of her. The woman has brass balls from everything I can see.

I make it to the computer room, which is filled with computers and huge ass screens. There are eight large, mounted screens that show different camera angles outside that filter through on a timer to show sixteen different views. One thing is for sure, they don't lax on security for the club. Some of this stuff is more advanced than what DeLuca has. I'll have to talk with him about that. I notice there are also some gaming stations set up at the far end of the room. Who knew bikers got off on video games? I shrug the thought away as I look at the man behind the biggest computer—a MAC with a huge ass screen—bigger than any I've ever seen. It has to be a special-order computer screen that's not on the market. I've never seen a set up like this before I got here, and I know I want one when I get settled into my new office back in Miami.

“Hey Ghost, did we have any luck?” I ask EZ's resident tech savvy member. He's got some position here in the MC, but until EZ, I've never been around a club to know how it's set up. I just know that EZ runs it and some guy that even I'd have trouble taking down, called Shadow, is his second in command.

“I keep hitting brick walls,” he responds, mostly grunting.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

“No luck?” EZ asks, coming into the tech room.

“Nope. I'm about to give up. I don't really have anything to go on. There were no street cams, no camera footage at all. There were no neighbors home, and she was mostly isolated. I'm going to go and talk to her neighbor at the time. Her name

is listed as Mildred Illas. She still lives in the same house. All reports say that she wasn't home, but maybe she knows something. The police never interviewed her after they found out she was out of town on a cruise the day the attack happened and for a week after that. I'm hoping against hope that maybe she can help."

"That sounds like a good plan. When are you heading out? Do you want a couple of us to go with you?" EZ asks.

"I'll do it in the morning after breakfast. Just one man will be fine. The woman is older. I don't want to give her a heart attack," I joke.

EZ grins. "I'll go with you. Libby is busy working, so I don't see her through the day."

"Sounds good."

I'm curious about Liberty and EZ's relationship. I've not been exposed to one like it before. They snap at each other constantly. It's not in a hateful way, though. It's almost as if fighting is their foreplay.

"Me and the boys are going out tonight. You want to go?" EZ asks.

I look up at the clock on the wall. It was bedtime for my Kitten, but not so much here. I didn't really want to go anywhere, but I wanted to be alone even less.

"Sure," I answer. "Nothing better to do."

*Damn I need to go home as much as my woman wants me to.*

# angelina

...

When I woke up this morning, the last thing I planned on was taking a trip. It started off a great day. Victor called me to say good morning. His gravelly voice told me that he was still half asleep and only woke up long enough to call me. It was enough to convince me that I hate time differences. It didn't matter if it was Greece or Arizona—they still sucked. I also missed him so much that I ached. What's more, it appears he feels the same way. Which meant our ten-minute conversation was sweet, sex and frustrating.

It was frustrating because he wasn't here with me and I wanted to be in his arms. It got worse when I told him I was still keeping my dinner with Sam—despite him coming home early. I let him know I planned a family dinner with Sam and him on his return. He agreed to that, but demanded I cancel my plans for tonight.

I'll be honest, for a minute I started to agree. Then, I realized that I was being stupid. I needed to prove to Victor that he couldn't control me. I might be broken, but I am



stronger, and I need to stand on my own feet. It's important that Victor see me as an equal—not a helpless victim he has to protect.

Victor told me he would see me in two days unless I decided I didn't need him at all and hung up. His words felt harsh. They hurt, yet I understood them. I still went along with my plans however, and after meeting up with Sam things went from bad to worse. Now, I'm here, on a plane—*yes, plane*—on my way to somewhere I don't know. Sam is sitting beside me and I'm texting a *very* irate Victor. I glance over at my stepbrother—who I'm carefully considering killing. He's not trying to read my texts, but he has a very satisfied smile on his face. I roll my eyes and turn my attention back to my phone.

**Victor:** Sloan said you aren't home yet.

**Me:** Victor, it's only six. We're at the theater. We decided to watch a movie before dinner.

**Victor:** You've been with him since three. Most movies last two hours.

**Me:** Are you seriously timing my date with Sam?

**Victor:** So, you admit it's a date.

**Me:** Not like you're making it sound! Sam is family, not a boyfriend.

**Victor:** Does he know that?

**Me:** I know it, smartass. If you don't like me being alone with Sam so much, give up trying to dig up my past and come home.

**Victor:** I told you I would if I don't uncover anything in the next couple of days.

**Me:** You didn't say that. You said you'd come home—period. You have to let this drop.

**Victor:** We'll talk about it when I'm there and you're not out with another man.

**Me:** You're acting nuts.

**Victor:**I let my woman go out with another man, so I fucking agree.

**Me:**You can't see me, but I'm rolling my eyes.

**Victor:** Tell him if he tries anything on you, I will kill him.

**Me:**Victor, you're being unreasonable.

**Victor:**No, Kitten. You are unreasonable expecting me to be ok with you being out with another man.

**Me:**He's not another man. He's my brother.

**Victor:**Except he's not. I have to go.

**Me:**I can't believe you're mad at me, Victor.

**Victor:**Text me when you get home, Gia.

**Me:**Victor, I don't want to fight. You're the only man in my heart. You're the only man who has ever been in my heart. You know that right?

I wait a few minutes and he doesn't reply. There's not even those three dots that tells you that someone is typing.

"Damn it," I growl, feeling fear moving inside of me. I don't know how to handle Victor's silence.

"Something wrong?" Sam asks, as I put down my phone.

"Victor's upset." I'm pretty sure that's an understatement, considering he never responded to my last text. He *never* does that.

"He didn't like you being on a plane with me?"

Guilt hits me with his question. "I didn't exactly tell him."

Sam laughs so hard that one could call it a 'guffaw'. He's deriving entirely too much pleasure from this actually, and it's kind of annoying. I shoot him a dirty look but that just makes him laugh harder.

"If I told him, he would have had a stroke or something. Victor would have hunted us down and made good on his threat to end your life." I'm not exaggerating. I'm just grateful that when I got in Sam's car, he had his bodyguard go talk to Sloan to explain I was safe. I thought it weird, but if we had

Sam's bodyguard with us, we hardly needed her, too. I'm definitely grateful for it now, because if Victor knew I was in an airplane with Sam, he might kill us both.

"Runt," he replies, still laughing. He takes a minute to gain his composure and then looks at me unrepentant. "You more than most know what I do for a living. I can handle your ex-boyfriend with no issue."

"He's not my ex. I don't think. I'm not sure what he is."

Sam frowns like he doesn't like my answer, but in the end just shrugs. "Either way, I can handle him."

"I wouldn't be so sure. I think Victor was holding back at the house. He's just as trained as you, maybe more so."

I think I'm right. Earlier, over the phone, I made sure Victor knew how well-trained Sam was, just in case he didn't know and his ego was hurt because of the punches Sam got in against him when they fought. I was afraid that was where part of his anger about Sam was coming from. I may be inexperienced, but I do know a male psyche can be fragile at times.

Heck, I think that's true with anyone. I know I felt horrible, and not good enough, when that Morgan woman called Victor's phone. Even after the way he spoke to her, I find myself wondering what she looks like. Is she gorgeous? I bet she doesn't have an ugly scar along her face. I puff out an annoyed breath, angry with myself for my own thoughts.

"Are you okay?" Sam asks, and this time he sounds worried.

"I don't like lying to Victor. Where are we going, anyway?"

"I told you. I'm taking you out for dinner at a famous Michelin star restaurant with an amazing view of a city below. You're going to love it."

"What city?"

"It's a surprise."

“I’m sure they have Michelin star places in Miami. I don’t understand any of this. You didn’t tell me we were going to fly anywhere, Sam. I have to be back tonight. You know that right?”

He grimaces and something in the way he looks at me sends off warning bells. I study him for a moment and that feeling only increases.

“What aren’t you telling me, Sam?”

He lets out a sigh. “You know who my father is, right?”

“That’s kind of a stupid question.”

“I want to make sure you remember what he is, Angie.”

“Yeah. I mean, I was young, but seeing the armed guards around the house and meetings he always had, I kind of knew something wasn’t normal. Plus, I mean my dad had a similar life, although I had a feeling your father’s was a little more intense,” I explained. “I knew for sure, though, because I heard the conversations he had with my mother.”

“Those two did like to spread their evil around each other,” he answers.

“They did. I’m not sure why they ever broke up. They’re just alike.”

“Yeah. Trust me, they had their reasons for every single thing they did. Anyway, my uncles have been training me to take my father’s spot in the family.”

“I didn’t realize he died.”

“He hasn’t.”

I inhale deeply, almost afraid to let it out. “Sam, he would kill you before he let you take the reins.”

“I’m aware,” he quips with a sad smile. “It’s not like ole’ Abram felt much family loyalty to begin with. In his eyes, he owes nothing to the son who murdered his own mother.”

“You didn’t do anything to your mom,” I argue, reaching out to grab his hand, pulling it to me so that I can grasp it with both of mine.

We're sitting beside one another in luxury leather seats in a small private jet. The seats are more like state-of-the-art recliners. I've never seen anything like it. When we first got here, I had no idea what we were doing. Sam explained he wanted to take me somewhere special. I told him I'd have to be home by nightfall and he agreed. I knew it would piss off Victor, but we could always discuss it *after* he got home. By then, it would be too late for him to stay mad. Sam would be gone—safe from being murdered. I had no doubt that Victor would kill him, none at all. That's the reason I lied. I mean, *technically*, we were in luxury seats watching a movie on a big projector screen with surround sound speakers. It was *almost* like a theater. I bite my lip, knowing Victor will be understandably mad at me and I can't blame him.

I look up at the screen in front of us, the movie paused and wonder how hard it would be to convince Sam to turn the plane around now. I should have never agreed to come in the first place. I'm regretting my impulsive decision more and more by the minute.

"What are you going to do? Do you even want to take over for your father?"

"I do. My uncles are the ones that are holding the family together and their dealings together. I would be working with them. They both want our family name to be strong and stand for something—besides the shame my father has brought to it. It's not the kind of life I imagined, but I can see what they're doing, and it needs to be done."

"Sam, people go to jail every day for doing stuff your family does."

"I know."

"They die," I remind him.

"And sometimes, I'll be the one to order those deaths, Angie. I have no problem being the man I need to be. Especially if that means making sure men like my father don't have the same power. There's a difference between ruling for family and ruling for greed."

“Your father will likely have you killed before you even get a chance to test that theory.”

“You seem so upset,” he murmurs, making me frown.

“How does that surprise you, Sam? I care about you. I don’t think this is something you should do. Of course, I’m upset.”

“I thought your response would be different. I thought you would be less judgmental.”

“I’m not judging you, Sam. I’m worried about you. There’s a difference.”

“I’m fine. What I am doing by helping to take my father down is better for everyone. That’s my goal. You’ve seen my father up close. I didn’t expect this response from you. You do know who and what Victor Conroy is and does, right?”

Every single muscle in my body locks tight. I can’t move. I don’t even think I breathe. “I never told you Victor’s last name, Sam.”

“Don’t look at me like that, Angie.”

“How am I supposed to look at you? Have you been checking into the people in my life?”

“That’s a hard question to answer,” he stalls, sounding more hesitant and regretful than I’ve ever heard.

“What does that mean? I would think it is pretty damn easy. You either say yes or no.”

Sam grins. “How is it that all your family and friends think you’re so quiet and shy? Do they not know the real you?”

“They don’t think I’m quiet and shy,” I deny, but I know I’m lying. I have made it a habit to not assert myself and to hide in the shadows. I don’t like drawing attention to myself. It just became easier to be somewhat of a wallflower. The only person that slips around is Victor, and even then, it’s not all the time. Sam, on the other hand, knew me before my attack. So, he doesn’t know the shell of myself that I have become.

“Liar. Although it seems you don’t hesitate to stand up to Victorio.”

A smile tugs on my lips when he says that. Until the incident with Morgan, I began to feel like I could be myself around Victor. It’s like my body and my mind both knew I was safe with him. Now, I’m back to being reserved. I’m so tired of living my life afraid all the time.

“You’re changing the subject. I want to know what’s going on. Wait, I don’t. I’ve changed my mind. All I want from you is to take me back home right now.”

“Now that, I’m afraid is not possible.”

“What do you mean? Of course, it’s possible. Turn this plane around, Sam. You promised you’d have me home tonight.”

“And you will be,” he agrees.

“Then, let’s just go home now.”

“We’re almost to our destination and I did promise you a great dinner at my favorite diner.”

He’s not looking me in the eye. I can’t shake the feeling that something is going on. I pick up my phone once again to see if Victor ever responded.

*He hasn’t.*

“You better not be lying to me, Sam,” I mutter. I put my phone down on the table in front of me. I can’t help but notice Sam stays quiet.

*Shit. What kind of trouble did I get myself into?*

# **sam**

...

I look over at Angie and feel a million different things—the biggest one being regret. She’s going to hate me. I know it, but there’s not a damn thing I can do to stop it. Right now, she’s staring at her phone. I know she’s waiting for that damn Victorio to text her.

Victorio Conroy was a complication that I hadn’t planned on. I knew he was her bodyguard. I’ve had Angie under surveillance for a while. No one besides me and my most trusted men know. The men I have watching over her are inside the DeLuca organization. They are able to monitor things without anyone being the wiser. That has worked to my advantage and one of the main reasons I’ve left her on her own for so long.

I did try to keep her with me when she was younger. Her father wouldn’t allow it. He threatened to call my father and I couldn’t have that. My uncles and I have invested too many years to get where we are now. It has been a painful process, but finally we are at the point where we have more control



than my father. That bastard is in for a huge surprise, and I can't wait to be the one to deliver it.

“What are you thinking?” Angie asks.

It is only then I realize that she's staring at me. I wonder for how long, not that it matters. I have a few secrets that I must keep from her right now, but I plan on coming clean when she's safe. I don't want to keep her in the dark. On the contrary, I want Angie to know everything. If we are to make our relationship work, it's the only way. She may fight me at first, but it has to be like this. Angie and I will join together to be a strong, united front. She will be by my side as I help lead my family in a better direction. It must be that way so that I can keep her safe. She's too important and I've stood in the sidelines of her life, waiting until it was safe enough to make a move. That was a mistake that can't be repeated.

“I am thinking that you are going to make a beautiful queen.”

“Queen?” she asks, her beautiful emerald eyes shining up at me in confusion.

She has no idea. I know she won't agree to this without an emotional connection. I am confident that with time, I will make her love me. Angie is full of love. It's also a bonus that she already cares for me. I will use that to get what I want. I know that I will also need to adapt. I may have always loved her, but it will take time for me to get to know her as a woman, not the girl I once knew and admired. We will have to find a way to connect in ways we never have before. It will work. It's the only alternative. I can't allow Angie to get caught in the crossfire again. It's because of me that she was hurt in the first place. If I had been with her all those years ago, the attack would have never happened.

*Fuck.*

“Sam? Are you alright?”

“When we were growing up, you had a big crush on me. Do you remember?” I watch as her cheeks bloom in color,

making me smile. “You don’t have to be embarrassed, Angie. I liked it.”

She smiles, slightly rolling her eyes. “Of course, you did, you always had all the girls falling over you and you loved having your ego stroked. I was way too young, but I saw the way they flung themselves at you.”

“You noticed?”

“Oh, please.”

“I’m sorry,” I respond, squeezing her hand as I bring it up to my lips to kiss. She looks totally shocked at my actions. That’s not surprising. I’ve never allowed myself to go there before, but it’s time. *It’s past time.* I must claim Angie as mine and get her under the protection of the family and my name. It’s the only way to keep her safe. I failed once. *I can’t allow that to happen again.*

“What are you sorry for?” she asks, and I wonder if she knows how expressive her face is. It gives away her every emotion. She’s so innocent. God, I should have protected her. Guilt eats at me relentlessly when I look at her.

“For you having to see that. I didn’t know, I thought you were too young and innocent to understand.”

“Oh please. You accuse my friends of not seeing the real me, but no one could be naïve enough not to know what you and those girls would do in the pool house, or your room, or your father’s room. Then there was that time with the twins in the game room.”

“Is that why you stopped letting me teach you how to play pool.”

She makes a face of disgust and yet somehow even that is cute on her. “I knew what you did on that pool table. I wasn’t going to touch it again.”

I lean down and kiss her forehead. “Things will be different now,” I promise.

“What do you mean?”

“You will see. You may hate me at first, but I will show you how happy I can make you. I won’t stop trying, Angie. You need to know that. I vow to you right now that I will always try to make you happy until my dying breath.”

“Okay, Sam. You’re starting to freak me out now.”

“I’m sorry, my love.”

“Love? Uh, Sam, what is going on? Why haven’t we made it where we are going by now? It shouldn’t have taken this long. Where are you taking me?”

“Don’t get upset, Angie.”

“Too late!” I yell. “Where are you taking me?”

I let out a sigh. “I had hoped this would go easier, but it is my fault.”

“Sam what is going on with you? You should have never tricked me into coming with you tonight. I demand you take me home.”

“You’re mistaken, Angie. The problem is that I left you alone for too long. I should have come to you years ago. If I had, you would have never been hurt when you were in college. I would have been able to protect you.”

“That’s crazy. We weren’t even talking back then.”

“And that too is my fault,” I admit as I reach down carefully with my hand into the side pocket of my seat, searching for what I need. I don’t want Angie to see me. It will probably just make her more afraid. “I have a lot to atone for when it comes to you, but I promise you that I will. I will make sure you want for nothing.”

“Sam, I’m moving past anger and into panic. What have you done?”

“Nothing, that didn’t need to be done for your safety,” I respond as I carefully get up, purposefully walking behind her seat. When I see her move to mess with her seatbelt so she can get up too, I take the syringe that I fished out of the seat. Then, I remove the plastic cap off that protected the needle, and it

drops to the floor, unheeded. Quickly, I release the syringe's contents into the back of Angie's arm.

"Ow! What was that?"

"What?" I ask, playing innocent. She careens her head back, trying to turn and see me, but I walk around to the side, depositing the syringe in my suit pocket as I do. "Is something wrong, Angie?"

"I... What did you do to me?"

"Nothing, love. I promise everything is fine. I'm taking you home."

"You are?" she asks, sounding confused. I can tell the drug is already working.

"I am. You look tired. Why don't you sleep. When you wake up, you'll be all warm and snug in bed."

"I should call, Victor," she says, reaching out for her phone. I grab it before she can.

"I'll call him. Don't worry. I'll explain things."

"If you're sure," she says but the word 'sure' draws out extremely long as if it will never end. "I am really tired all of the sudden." Her eyelids start to flutter, then carefully close. I lean down and kiss her forehead.

"It's all going to be okay, Angie."

"It is?" she responds, her lips barely moving enough to let the words out.

I bring my lips against her ear. "It is. I'm going to take care of you now, love. I promise."

She doesn't respond. She's finally succumbed. I hate that it had to be this way, but unfortunately, I miscalculated. I gave her too much time while I made things safe for her. Angie's developed an attachment to this Victor—one that will have to end. She just needs some time alone with me. All we will have to do is reconnect. I'll remind her of the feelings she once harbored for me. Once I get her home where she's safe, we'll have all the time together we need.

I look down at her phone and drop it on the floor of the plane. Bringing my foot up, I slam it down on the phone. I hit the intercom button to the cockpit. “How long until we stop for refuel?”

“We’re stopping in Tuscaloosa. Should be there in a few minutes,” Lyle answers.

I nod. The flight to Seattle makes fuel borderline. So, we will stop to top-up the tank. Plus, I wanted to make sure to cover our tracks. I had my men change our flight plans after they filed. It took some monkeying, and even managed to glitch the computer systems for air traffic control for a bit—but it worked. If anyone tried to track down our jet, it would show we flew to Alabama and then down to Mexico. That should keep them occupied for a while. By the time they figure anything out, Angie will be beyond reach. With luck, the two of us will have grown close enough she won’t fight our future. If she does? Well, there are contingency plans in motion. I just hope they aren’t necessary.

“Good. Make sure the staff has the villa completely prepared,” I instruct, and then end the connection. I’ll toss Angie’s phone out at the airfield, so they can begin tracking the wrong flight. The best way to hide is to make sure your opponent gets lost in a maze of false information. I pick it up when it starts ringing. Through the shattered screen I can see a broken mish-mosh image of Victorio. It makes me laugh.

*Too late fucker.*

He probably received Sloan’s text that she’s home complaining with a migraine and went to bed safe and sound. He’ll assume that’s why she’s not responding to him. That will give me a day, maybe two if I’m lucky since he’s in Phoenix. It’s all finally coming together. I have Angie and I’m not letting her go. Pretty soon, Victorio Conroy will be nothing but a bad dream and firmly planted in Angie’s past.

*Exactly where he belongs.*

# victorio

...

“Thanks for talking with us Ms. Illas.”

“Please call me Mildred,” she says, raising her feeble hand and waving her long, crooked fingers that are bound to be misshapen by arthritis. Ms. Illas, is a short but stout woman, with long, curly, silver hair. She’s in a power wheelchair and is currently sitting with a huge white cat in her lap, petting it while talking to me. Her house is small and that’s made worse by stacks of magazines and mail-order catalogs lying on the floor in large piles. There’s an old television that was made before the invention of flat screens. It’s sitting on a feeble, particle board television stand, and there is a blue sofa with pink toss pillows. The walls are dark paneled, filled with family photos and a large Farmer’s Almanac calendar that shows the different moon phases.

EZ and I are sitting on the sofa and I’m almost positive that both of us are trying to ignore the stench of a used litter box, because besides the big white cat in her lap, there are at

least ten more—that I’ve seen—running around. Currently a large coal black one is sitting at EZ’s feet, studying him.

“Mildred, my fiancée Angelina used to live next door here several years ago. Someone broke in her home and attacked her—”

“Oh, I remember Angie. Such a sweet girl. I’m glad to see she’s found herself a good man. You are a good man, aren’t you, son?”

EZ laughs and I quietly elbow him.

“I love her. I’d do anything for her. I’m trying to find the man who attacked her so he can never touch her again.”

She seems to study my face. I let her because I have absolutely nothing to hide. I’m not a good man, but I’ll be the man my woman needs.

“So, you’re here to ask questions? I’m sorry, boy, but I barely remember what I had for breakfast two hours ago. My mind likes to play tricks on me,” she replies. I feel my hopes begin to fade away. This entire trip has been useless. The only thing I accomplished was to let another man take my woman out.

“Do you remember Gia—Angie at all?” I press, unwilling to give up without trying.

“Of course. I told you I did. Maybe your memory is worse than mine,” she answers, and EZ laughs out loud. *The asshole.*

I smile and chuckle a bit myself. She may be old, but she’s got a fire in her—that’s for sure.

“Do you remember anything about the people who visited her? Maybe close to the time you went on the cruise?”

“Not really, I try not to get in other people’s business you understand. Plus, like you said, I was on that cruise I won.”

“You won a cruise? I’m thinking I need some of your luck,” EZ jokes.

“No, you don’t. That cruise is the only thing I’ve ever won in my life. It was the darnedest thing. I don’t even remember

entering. Of course, I've warned you how my memory is," she says, staring off into space like she's trying to remember something important, either that or she forgot we're here altogether. Either one is a distinct possibility.

"How did you win the cruise?" EZ asks, beating me to asking the same thing. His question ends in a grunt, though, when the black cat jumps up and stands in his lap. He takes his claws and proceeds to pick at EZ's jeans making himself a bed. I can tell from EZ's slight facial movements, the claws are very sharp, but he doesn't object.

"Melissa! Get down from there," Mildred admonishes.

"She's fine," EZ says, casually scratching the cat behind his ears. Well, *her* ears. I guess he is a she.

"Pussy has always loved me," he quips, making me laugh even when I don't want to.

My attention goes back to Mildred. She thankfully didn't hear EZ. She's still staring off into space. "Mildred?" I nudge. I don't know why I'm asking. None of this information could really help me figure out who attacked Angie. All I know is that I don't want to leave one stone unturned.

"It was from the Around The World travel agency. I think they were based out of Washington. I thought it was a hoax, to be honest. Sure enough, when I called the phone number on my prize notification, it was real. I may not have remembered entering the contest, but I must have. They had all my information."

"Seems to me your memory, Ms. Mildred, is sharp as a tack."

"About some things," she admits.

"You don't remember any of guys that Angie dated back then?" I ask.

I know I'm an idiot. I know she didn't date anyone. I'm just trying to see if she remembers any men hanging around Gia's rental back then. Gia said she didn't date. I believe her, she's too innocent. That means if Mildred remembers anyone and can give me just a name to go by, it might help.



“Not really. Only one suitor stands out to be honest and I don’t know anything about him. I don’t even know his full name.”

“His full name? Does that mean you know part of it?” I can’t help the hope that begins bubbling up in me. I’m desperate for a lead.

“Maybe, I’m not sure. He came by about a week before I left for my cruise. I remember because I called out that Angie wasn’t home. He said he knew that. He was just dropping something off for her.”

“Was that common? For him to come around when Gia—uh, Angie, wasn’t home?”

“Sometimes. They had a weird relationship. I never really saw them together. He must have worked long hours because sometimes he wouldn’t even show up until after midnight. He was really nice and courteous, though. Plus, on his days off, he’d show up and clean Angie’s house or fix her dinner.”

None of this is lining up with what I know of Gia. She said she never dated this asshole and I have no doubt at all she told me the truth. She would have mentioned having a boyfriend back then. I *know* she would.

“How do you know he cooked and cleaned for her? Did Gi—Angie tell you?”

“No, the man did when we were talking one day. Before I could ask him more, the guy with him yelled that they had to go. He called him by name though. Malachi.”

I frown. “Malachi? Are you positive?”

“Mostly, the guy he was with had a thick accent, so I may have heard wrong.”

“What type of accent?” EZ pipes in, still stroking that damn cat who is now purring so loud that it’s a little scary.

“Now, that I can’t remember. Italian? Russian? It was one of those. It’s been a while you know. Malachi called him Abraham though.”

I sigh. This was worthless. I knew it was a longshot going in, but I was praying I was wrong.

“Well, I’m sorry we took up your time, Mildred.”

“I enjoyed it. Not often an old biddy like me gets two gentlemen callers that look like they stepped out of my television from two of my favorite shows.” I get up and EZ does, too. He’s considerably slower because he has to lift the huge cat off his lap and place her gently on the couch.

“What show is that?” I ask her, genuinely interested.

“Well, you look like you walked off my favorite soap, Days of Our Lives. Put a suit on you and you could definitely be one of Stefano DeMira’s family. As for your buddy, I’m thinking he could be from Sons of Anarchy.”

EZ laughs with Mildred’s analogy, but the cat Melissa must have decided she wanted more pets and was upset she wasn’t getting them. She jumps up EZ’s leg and proceeds to let out a loud screech right before she sinks her little kitty teeth into his ass.

“Motherfucker!” he growls, as the cat jumps off the couch and takes off running like the fires of hell is on her heels.

“Melissa is a biter,” Mildred says like this is a common occurrence. “I could clean your patootie with some alcohol if you want.”

I grin and do my best to not to bust out laughing. EZ shakes his head. “No thanks, Mildred, as tempting as that offer is, I don’t think my wife would appreciate it. She might do something to retaliate and never touch my ass again, and I like it when she does. Besides, she bites my ass often and it hurts more than Melissa’s.”

I’d say he was joking, but I’ve met Liberty and I’m pretty sure he’s not.

“Lucky woman,” Mildred says. I don’t bother to stop my laughter now. I walk toward the door shaking my head.

It’s time I head back home to Miami. Gia was right, I should have stayed home.

When we make it out to our bikes—mine borrowed from one of EZ’s men—I hop on, feeling more than a little defeated.

“Don’t look so glum asshole. I didn’t come all this way just to let some pussy bite my ass.”

“Well, that’s all you got. We didn’t get anything we can use in there.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” EZ answers, confusing the fuck out of me.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Let’s get back to the clubhouse and see if Ghost can work his magic. I’ve got a hunch and I want to see if I’m right.” He starts his bike and gives me a wink, before talking again. He raises his voice to yell over the sound of his bike. “Don’t worry, I’m usually always right.”

He peels out and leaves me to follow him, which I do while praying the crazy son of a bitch is right.

# angelina

...

I wince as I slowly pull myself awake. I feel like I've been on a three-day bender. Not that I ever drink that much, but my head feels like what I imagine it would if I did. I lay back on my pillow, afraid to open my eyes. For a minute, I'm going to pretend my head isn't pounding. I've had migraines before, but this feels different—*and somehow more painful.*

“You're awake.”

My body jerks in reaction to the voice. *What is Sam doing in my bedroom?*

“Sam?” I mutter, forcing my eyes to open.

For a minute everything around me is blurry. I blink trying to focus. When that doesn't work, I rub my eyes and try again. Eventually, I manage to clear my vision enough to see him standing beside my bed, holding a pitcher. I do my best to turn, keeping my blanket pulled up tight. I'm completely disoriented and as I slowly look around the room, I realize that it's not mine at all. I'm also completely dressed, except for my

shoes. My gaze moves up to Sam and I see guilt written all over his face.

“Angie—”

“What did you do?” I growl.

“I’m trying to keep you safe,” he replies calmly. He’s so calm that I want to slap him. He grabs a glass off a large cherry nightstand with a marble top. It matches the huge four-poster bed. The posts go up at least eight feet and they are encircled by an intricate wrought iron structure that has a pale white material draped through it expertly, encircling the bed and yet pulled back to look beautiful. If I wasn’t in the middle of a nightmare, I’d take more time to appreciate the beauty and opulence of the whole room. Instead, I’m thinking of killing Sam.

He pours what appears to be water from the pitcher in his hand into the glass. After setting the pitcher down as he hands me the glass. “Drink this, you need to flush the medicine out of your system.”

I watch him as he straightens back up, momentarily robbed of the ability to speak. Thankfully, my shock wears off quickly when I decide I don’t want to just *think* of killing him, I want to actually do it.

“Medicine!” I screech. A wariness moves over Sam’s features and that’s good. He should be wary. *He should be terrified.*

“Angie, calm down—”

“I’m not going to calm down, you ass! You drugged me!”

“It was just a mild sedative,” he responds, acting as if I was overreacting.

I drink the water, mostly because my mouth is so dry that it’s hard to talk.

“It was drugs! You had no right. I can’t believe you. What on Earth were you thinking, Sam?”

“I was thinking that I needed to get you away so you can be reasonable, and see that I’m trying to protect you, and this

is the only answer.”

“What are you talking about, the only answer?” I ask, putting the glass down and staring at him. I’d like to get up, but I’m pretty sure my legs wouldn’t hold me up right now.

“I need to make sure you’re safe while we deal with my father. He knows the only way he can hurt me is through my uncles or through you. My uncles are safe. They can take care of themselves, and our army is more powerful than his at this point—not that he knows that.”

“What does any of this have to do with me, Sam? Your father is nothing to me. I haven’t seen him since my mother left him. You’re not making any sense.”

“You may not have seen him, but he has been there, Angie. He’s kept his fucking eyes on you constantly, using you to keep me under control. Now that he knows that won’t work, he’ll exact revenge and he’ll do that by completely destroying you. I can’t let that happen.”

I felt a chill move down my spine. I swallowed back the fear that I felt. Is Sam telling the truth? None of this makes sense. Plus, the Sam I remember would have never kidnapped me. He always handled me with care. I shook my head. I need to figure out what’s going on here, then I need to find out where in the hell I am and get out of here.

“I can take care of myself. Plus, Victor would never let anything happen to me. You’re overreacting. Why would your father ever go after me? Sam, we haven’t been a part of each other’s lives in years.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Angie. I’ve had people watching over you. I’ve tried to protect you for years. Ever since I discovered...”

He stops talking and just stares at me. There’s a look on his face that I can’t wrap my head around, but it looks like guilt. Hell, he should feel guilty. He kidnapped me, lied to me, and *drugged* me.

“Discovered what? On second thought, never mind. There’s nothing you could say that would make any of this

better. I'm getting out of here, and then I'm going home."

"You need to be reasonable here, Angie—"

"Reasonable? You want me to be reasonable when you drugged and kidnapped me?" I yell, losing control. I hate feeling helpless, and here Sam is trying to destroy all of the progress I have made over the years. I can't allow that. I will not be the woman who was helpless and waited for someone to kill her. I don't think Sam will kill me. On the contrary, I think in his messed-up brain somewhere that he is trying to protect me. It's just that in the process he's doing much more damage than he realizes.

"You need to listen to me. I know how to deal with my father. You will be fine. We just need to make sure you are under the protection of the entire family."

"What does that mean?" I huff. I'm almost afraid to ask, but I figure at this point, I need to know.

"To get our allies to take part in this war, I need them to know that you are one of us."

"What does that even mean?"

"Angie, you may not like this, but it's the only way."

"Like what?"

"We're going to get married."

My mouth drops open. Of all the things I expected, that wasn't it at all. "Get married?" I squeak.

"It's the most logical solution, Angie. We love each other."

"We don't!"

"We do. You can't deny that."

"I don't love you like *that*. Heck, right now I'm not even sure I like you."

He laughs, although he looks uncomfortable. "I know it will take a bit to let our feelings grow so that we can become a

true husband and wife, but the love is there. We just need to slowly turn it into something more romantic.”

I don’t move. I can do nothing but stare at him and blink. “You’ve lost your mind. How could I not see that you had gone insane? You’ve completely lost it.”

“No, like I said, I’m being logical. Which is something you need to be, too,” he huffs, clearly getting agitated.

I look around me, wondering if this is some kind of elaborate prank. There must be a camera guy somewhere, something to explain how my once level-headed stepbrother has somehow jumped off the ledge into stark-raving mad insanity.

“I don’t even know what to say to you...” My voice is little more than a whisper. I can’t even process how twisted Sam’s mind has to be.

“You have to be smart, Angie. This is the only solution.”

“I need to be smart,” I repeat, still speaking softly.

“You do.”

“I need to be smart,” I say again, louder this time.

“Angie—”

Before he can finish, I reach over and grab the pitcher of water he left on my nightstand and lunge it at him. It hits his chest, and water splatters over his body and up into his face as the pitcher falls to the floor.

“I can see that you need time to process what we’ve discussed,” he says. His voice is tight and controlled, but I can feel the anger beneath, I just don’t care.

“I don’t need to process shit. You’re insane. I am getting out of here and going home!”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that, Angie. I must keep you safe.” With that, he goes to the door and looks at me. “I’ll be back to check on you after you’ve had time to calm down and listen to sense.” He opens the door and I try to get up and follow him, but the minute I stand up a wave of dizziness



overcomes me, and I fall back down on the bed. I listen as my door locks. He's fixed it so he can lock me in here against my will. I close my eyes and try to stop the room from moving around me. Victor is going to kill me. Of course, that will be after he kills Sam, and right now I can't even drum up the energy to worry about that. I might just help Victor...

# victorio

...

After a shower, I get dressed in some jeans and a blue T-shirt. I'm feeling useless. I'm feeling kind of hopeless. I asked EZ several times on the way home to tell me what he had going on in his head. I was hoping he'd let me know something. He refused, saying he didn't want to get my hopes up. When we got back, I went to grab a shower and a bite to eat.

Now, I'm searching out EZ. I'm tired of not getting an answer. I need to get back home to Miami if there's nothing to find here. I don't know why I'm trying so hard anyway. I think if there was something to find, Maxwell would have found it. Then again, he didn't come down here. He trusted others to do what needed to be done. Where Gia is concerned, I'm going to handle everything personally. She's too precious.

I run into Shadow in the front room, getting a lap dance from chick called Trixie. I don't know if that's her real name, a stage name, or a club name. I don't want to know. I get all the guys—well, except EZ and those with women of their own—don't mind sharing their women and even tag-teaming them.

But that is *not* me. I've made it clear to every woman here that I am not on the market. After seeing the hurt in Gia's eyes over Morgan, there's no way in hell I'm going to do anything that might hurt her worse. Besides, the simple truth is, she's all I want.

"Have you seen EZ?" I ask him, hating to bother him in what I sense might be a pivotal moment—to put it gently—but still doing it.

"Computer room," he grunts as Trixie dry humps her naked ass against Shadow's lap.

I leave just as he pulls her up and undoes his pants. This is not my life, but I'm thinking if Antonio hadn't been born into the DeLuca family, he would have made a hell of a biker. I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't visit EZ with his wife just for shits and giggles. He doesn't let anyone touch Melina. If they do, they die. That doesn't mean he doesn't like putting her body on display so they can all see what belongs to him.

I'm the opposite. If anyone sees my Kitten naked other than me? I'll end them. She's mine. *God, I miss her.* I go straight to the computer room and find EZ bent over a computer screen talking to Ghost.

He looks over at me and grins. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

"What are you working on?"

"Well, when Mildred mentioned a Russian accent—"

"She said it could have been Italian, too."

"Yeah, but then she mentioned the name Abraham," he argues.

"Did that ring a bell?"

"Well, the only Abraham I know is our former president," he chuckles.

"So, it's another dead end."

"I *do*, however, know an Abram which could sound similar if you're in your eighties and hard of hearing, or if your

television is on. Old Abram isn't just Russian, he is *the* Russian."

"We don't really deal with the Russians. I mean, Antonio is looking at opening a base here in Phoenix, but so far, we've left Bratva territory to the Bratva and they're respected our property, too. At least, that was the deal until this thing with Helena popped up."

"Well, Abram is the eldest brother of the Levkin clan. As bad as the three Russian amigos are here in Phoenix, their brother Abram who lives in Malibu, is worse. He's wired up a million different ways, and all of them wrong. Word is, he's got one of the biggest human trafficking rings around. Ivan Levkin is the leader here. He's a year younger than Abram. He's a slimy motherfucker, but if the rumors are true and he's answering solely to Abram these days, Marco's woman was about to be shipped out of the country to be used in ways no woman wants.

"Fuck," I hiss. If that's the case, we probably saved Helena in the nick of time. Then, a scarier thought hits me. "Were these the men that attacked my woman?"

"It's possible, but they didn't—for whatever reason—take her, and that's not usually the M.O. where Abram is involved."

"Do you have any pictures of this asshole?" I ask.

My heart is running away with me. Just the thought of this kind of scumbag being near my sweet Gia and my blood runs cold.

"I just pulled some up," Ghost says in his gravelly voice.

He angles the computer screen to give me a better view. And I look at the images. The first is a man, older than me, probably in his early forties. "Is this him?" I ask, frowning. Nothing about him looks familiar, but that's not surprising. "We could always take his picture and show Mildred," I mumble. Another image moves to the screen. This one is Abram again and he's with a man who is about the same age as him, or maybe a little younger.

“This is Abram with his Underboss, Adam Dolan. Word on the street is he is just as evil as Abram himself.”

“I still don’t know either of them,” I admit with a sigh. “We can head back to Mildred’s in the morning if your ass is up to it.”

“No pussy has put me out of commission yet, and if my wife can’t do it, no furry four-legged one will either,” he quips. “There’s one more picture for you to look at.”

Ghost pulls it up and I freeze. This time Abram is standing by a plane, looking stoic. He has his hand resting on that of a younger kid. The kid is what catches my eye. “I know him,” I snarl. My head is pounding, and my palms are sweaty with the need to find Gia now.

“You do?” EZ asks.

“That’s Gia’s stepbrother.”

“Fuck,” EZ grunts.

“Jesus, do you think Sam is the one who attacked her back then? That son of a bitch would have to be stalking her to show up all these years later.”

“That’s one possibility, but I’ve heard talk of Abram’s boy. They said he had broken away on his own and his father pulled him back in. Some whispered a woman was involved. Others said he was scared of his father and just did what the man demanded. There’s not a lot me or Ghost, either one, can find on Abram’s son to be honest.”

“I’m not much help either. I’ll admit I don’t like the son of a bitch, but mostly I don’t like him around my woman. He didn’t seem like the type who would physically harm a woman, though. He also seemed to genuinely care for Gia.”

“Then, what do we do?” Ghost asks.

“We investigate further,” I tell him. “The first damn thing I’m going to do is call Gia and tell her to stay the fuck away from this asshole, though. I haven’t talked to her except by a quick text. She’s upset with me, but this time I’m going to make her take my call.”

I dial the number and tap my foot as I wait for her to answer. It rings, but then immediately switches over to voicemail. I try not to panic. The last text I had from Sloan said Gia was secure. Still, she's the next number I phone. The same exact thing happens, and in all the time I've known Sloan, she has never failed to pick up her phone. She once answered his call during the middle of fucking her husband. There's no way it going to voicemail means good things. I try Gia again and it goes to voicemail just like before.

Panic hits me like I've never felt before. I yell out my frustration. I never should have left her. IF something happens to her it is going to be all my fault. If I close my eyes all I can see is her face etched in terror with Abram leering down at her. I pick up the corner of Ghost's desk and flip the fucking thing over on its side. Ghost's computer, his screens, and various papers all go flying, careening to the floor.

"Damn it!" Ghost barks.

EZ grabs me by the shoulders. I try to fight him, but he jerks me hard. "Lock it down, Victorio."

"He could have her," I explain, saying my biggest fear out loud. "If something happens to my woman..." I break off, my body quaking with fear like I've never known.

"Get control over whatever you're feeling right now and find a way to push it aside and concentrate on how to help your woman. There's a chance he doesn't even have her."

I nod. I know in my heart he does. Gia wouldn't go this long without talking to me, no matter how upset she was. Still, EZ is right. I do need to know for sure. I sift through the wreckage of the desk and find my phone. I quickly dial Antonio's number.

He picks up on the second ring, which helps. If his phone had gone to voicemail, I don't know what I would have done.

"Hey, Vic, man. Did Angelina give you the good news?"

"Yeah, and I hate to bother you, Boss, but I need a favor."

Something in my voice must alert him because his easy-go-lucky mood is instantly replaced. "Tell me what you

need.”

“Man,” I start, my voice breaking. I have to clear my throat and get control, then start again. “I can’t get ahold of Gia or Sloan. Both phones go to voicemail. I need to know if she’s okay. If not...” My fucking voice stops again, there’s too much fear inside of me. I feel like I’m choking on it.

“I’ll send a crew over immediately. We’ll be back in touch soon.” He hangs up, not giving me a chance to say thanks—not that I could anyway.

When I look back up. Ghost is at the smaller desk on a laptop. “I need everything about these fuckers, including all of their holdings and any place they might be holding my woman,” I tell him. My voice is still weak, but I do feel a little more balanced. Antonio is helping. We’ve been through this with his woman. I’ll get Gia back. I will. There’s no other option.

“I’m already on it. You’re going to owe me a new computer screen,” he murmurs.

“You find my woman and I’ll buy you a whole room of computers,” I agree.

“No need, just replace that one. It’s my favorite.”

I don’t respond. I’m hanging over his shoulder along with EZ trying to see everything I can. It takes about twenty minutes before Antonio calls back. I put the call on speaker and keep looking at Ghost’s computer screen. “Talk to me,” I tell him, already knowing it can’t be good news because it’s Antonio on the phone and not my Kitten.

“Angelina is nowhere around, Vic. There doesn’t appear to be a struggle inside her home. So wherever she is, chances are she’s fine. But...”

“But?”

“Fuck. Vic, we found Sloan in the bushes. She was alive, but unconscious. She came to when we started working with her. They’re on their way to the hospital with her right now. She’ll be okay. The thing is, she can’t remember anything. The last things she remembers is getting ready to

follow Angelina and her stepbrother to the restaurant where they were having dinner. Sam put Angelina in his car while his bodyguard came over to Sloan to discuss logistics, then everything is blank.”

“He drugged her.”

“Gordon said that’s what it sounded like to him, too,” Antonio answers. “I want you to tell me what you need and how I can help you, Vic.”

I clear my throat. “I need a crew of men and a jet. Gia’s stepbrother is apparently a Levkin.”

“Fuck, as in Ivan Levkin?”

“Worse, his older brother, Abram. I don’t know him, but from everything that EZ and Ghost have dug up, he’s tied into human trafficking and shit. Ghost is researching Levkin properties and holdings. I’ll go to every place they have and set it on fire if I have to.”

“I’ll text you when they take off. Keep your head, Vic. We’ll get her back.”

“Yeah,” I answer, hanging up and unable to say anything else. I just concentrate on looking over Ghost’s shoulder for information and praying that Gia is okay. If something happens to her, I won’t survive it.



# angelina

...

I lay on the bed, feeling hopeless. I'm kicking myself for not listening to Victor. I know he's probably worried to death. I hate that I can't contact him. I asked the woman who brought my breakfast if I could borrow a phone, but she just shook her head no. I know Victor is looking for me. I don't have any doubt about that. I just hope that when he finds me, I'm not somehow married to Sam. I wouldn't do it willingly, but apparently my dear stepbrother isn't above using drugs on me. God, how could I have been so blind? I never would have imagined that Sam would do something like this. I tense as the door opens. When Sam comes in smiling like he doesn't have a care in the world, I pick up the TV remote on my nightstand and chuck it at him. Sam ducks and my damn throw was off the mark and goes wide.

*I always did suck in PE class.*

"I can see your mood hasn't improved," he says.

He looks like he doesn't have a care in the world. He's had a shower and is wearing a new suit, looking immaculate. I on

the other hand haven't changed, despite the fact that Sam somehow ordered me a whole new wardrobe and put it in the closet here. Everything still has tags on them. *Who does that?* The man is clearly deranged.

Sam walks over and I shrink further on the other side of the bed. I don't want him anywhere near me. That clearly upsets him.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Angie. I'm doing everything I can to make you safe. You have no idea how complicated everything is."

"It could have been simple if you just left me at my house!" I huff.

He lifts the cloche off my breakfast and shakes his head at the full plate of food underneath. "You need to stop acting like a child and eat something."

"You drugged me, Sam. If you really think I'd be willing to eat anything you provide at this point, you're more deranged than I already think you are."

"Angie, you know I wouldn't hurt you."

"Correction. I *used* to know that. Then, you kidnapped me. Now, you think I can just trust you? No way, asshole."

"I had hoped you'd be calmer this morning," he says with a sigh.

"Oh, I'm calm," I argue. "I'm just waiting for Victor to come and rescue me. When he does, he will kill you and I'm not even sure I'll feel bad about that at this point."

Sam laughs, proving he is insane. I wasn't kidding. Victor will kill him.

"You need to face some facts. There's no way Victorio will even find you. He doesn't know who I am. You never told him my father's name. I doubt he even knows my last name. Plus, our parents were never legally married. There's nothing to lead him here."

"You're wrong," I insist. "There will be something somewhere. Your father is too high profile. Victor won't rest."

He'll turn over every stone to find me."

"It *is* impossible, but if Victorio does show up, he'll be walking into a trap. I won't let my men kill him because it would hurt you, but I'm warning you, Angie. I won't let him stop me. I have to do this. It's the only way I can protect you and make everything up to you. I wasn't there to protect you years ago. I let you get hurt and I'm going to make sure that never happens again."

"What—"

"Even if I have to force you to accept me, you will do it, Angie."

"In your dreams," I huff.

"I'll be up later, so we can eat dinner together."

"Save yourself some trouble. I'm not touching your food."

"Wrong. You *will* eat it, even if I have to hand feed it to you."

"Try, and I'll bite your fingers off," I drawl.

He gives me a look of utter confusion and frustration. He lets out a grunt and then stomps out, locking my door.

I stare at the closed door, feeling kind of helpless. After talking with Sam, I find I'm worrying more about Victor. I can't let him get hurt. The only problem is I have no idea how to protect him. I'm basically a prisoner. I walk to the window to stare outside. I'm fighting tears as I try to get control of my emotions.

"Please be careful, Victor. Come find me but don't get hurt. I love you," I whisper, praying somehow my words get to him, even if I know they won't.

# victorio

...

## *One Week Later*

We've traveled everywhere around the US and still haven't found any sign of Gia. I'm fucking tired and worried sick. I've never gone this long without my woman and I'm close to breaking. To make matters worse, I have no idea what to do next. I ruled out going to Russia to find her, because we tracked Sam's plane to Alabama and the flight plan was to Mexico. It never showed. Which left me at a crossroads. Since then, I've been systematically going through every holding in the US that the Levkin brothers owned or were tied to one of their corporations—either dummy or legitimate ones.

I went down to Alabama to the private airstrip that Samuil's plane took off from. There was nothing there but a private airstrip. It was empty except for a broken cellphone. It was Gia's and when I found it, I just held it to myself and tried not to cry in front of all my men. I'm not giving up. I'll move heaven and Earth to find her. I'm just losing hope.

I move my hand to the back pocket of my jeans, where her phone rests. I close my eyes while holding it and silently promise her that I will find her... *somehow*.

I go to the computer room and sit down beside Ghost. He had a chair moved in because I'm always here. It's the only place where I feel like things are not totally hopeless.

"How many more properties do we have that we need to investigate in the US?" I ask.

"What makes you think he's in the US for sure?" he questions back, studying my face.

"It's just a gut feeling," I answer honestly with a shrug. "It's not easy to get women out of the country especially on a plane, private airstrips or not—especially if she's not willing and my girl definitely wouldn't be."

"True, but it still can be done."

I nod, forced to agree. "It can, but I don't see Samuil leaving his uncles behind so easily. Especially when the gossip is that the younger Levkin brothers are gathering allies to go to war against Abram. Samuil seems to have sided with them. If there's a war, you can bet he'll be there to face his father. He's too damn cocky not to."

Ghost seems to accept that. "There are three properties left. One is in New York. The second is in Tampa, Florida and finally, there's one in Seattle, Washington."

I study the places in my mind, weighing each choice as I struggle to come up with my next destination. I've tried to be very methodical, and I wish Ghost was on my team permanently. He's good—*really* good. It wasn't easy finding these properties at all. The man was relentless, sifting through a mountain of paperwork and a hell of a lot of fake corporations. I made it a little easier because I didn't bother looking at the properties that were easier to find. As much as I hated to admit it, I think that slimy motherfucker was too smart to do that. On that basis alone, I make a quick decision.

"Let's cross out Tampa. It's too close to DeLuca headquarters. He'd want to make sure Gia was far away from

me.”

“That leaves Manhattan or Seattle,” he replies.

I rub the tension in my forehead. I can feel a migraine building. “We’ll head to Seattle in the morning.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s a logical choice. It’s closer to Arizona where his brothers are stationed. If I look at it like that, it makes the most sense.”

“I’ll have my crew ready,” Ghost says.

“I’ll have mine. Do we still have a crew watching the Levkin brothers here in Phoenix?”

“Yeah, no sign of Angelina or Samuil. I’ve even tapped into their security cameras.”

“I didn’t think so, still I was hoping...”

“Go get some sleep man, you look wiped. We’ll head out in the morning. I’ll have my men ready around seven.”

“Sounds good,” I mumble, then walk out down the hall to my room.

# angelina

...

I follow Sam's maid into his office. Apparently, I'm being summoned. I don't know what I did in a former life to give me so much bad karma in this one, but I'm ready to cry uncle now. I smile at Loretta. I try to be nice to her. She's just doing her job. It's not her fault that her boss is an insane idiot. She gives me a reassuring smile back and then leaves, closing the door behind her. I stare at the door a little while wondering what would happen if I made a run for it.

"Don't even think about it, Angie."

I turn around and stick my tongue out at him.

"I see you're still being childish."

"That's me. It happens when I've been kidnapped!"

"You need to see to reason," he argues.

"That's rich coming from a man who is obviously insane."

"Damn it, Angie. Marrying each other is the easiest way to make sure you are safe. I'm doing all this for your own good."

“Oh, in that case, thanks but no thanks,” I answer, not hiding my sarcasm one bit.

“Damn it. I’m being serious here. If my enemies know you belong to me and are covered under the Levkin name, they won’t strike out at you.”

“I’m not marrying you, Sam. I don’t love you. I’m not even sure I like you at this point. Besides, I’m in love with Victor.”

“In time, you will forget him and learn to love me. I’ll do the same with you.”

“There’s no way in hell,” I argue. “Seriously, Sam, how could you be so stupid? You can’t force love.”

“We will.”

“I can guarantee you that we won’t. Besides, if you’re so confident that you and your uncles can overthrow your father, there’s no reason to go through all this. I can agree to stay in this fancy prison you’ve brought me to until you guys overtake Abram.”

“Angie—”

“Then, I’ll return home,” I add, interrupting him.

“It won’t work that way,” Sam argues. I really am starting to dislike him. “Because of my father’s actions, other enemies already know of your existence. Once we kill my father, vultures will circle wanting to take control. You will be a tool to use against me. I can’t allow that.”

“Sam—”

“I can make you happy, you’ll see.”

“All I see is that the only thing you do is make my head hurt because you’ve lost all common sense.”

I walk towards the door.

“Angie, we’re not done talking.”

“Oh yeah, we’re done,” I exhale, trying to control my anger.



I walk to the door and I can hear Sam's footsteps behind me. There's no way I'm going to turn around. I'm getting out of here.

"I said we're not finished," he grumbles.

"Oh, we're definitely finished. I don't want to see you again unless you're coming to tell me your brain has started functioning again and you're setting me free!"

Just as I get to the door, Sam's hand snakes out and grabs my arm, spinning me around. "I'll show you that you could want me as much as you want Victor," he threatens.

I open my mouth to respond and that was my mistake. Sam slams his mouth against mine and thrusts his tongue into my mouth. My body goes rigid. I feel like I've entered an alternate universe and I think I'm going to be sick. His hold on me is solid, but I do my best to push him away. *I just need to get free.* He's not budging. I try to bite his tongue and he grunts into my mouth. As he tries to wrap his tongue against mine, I feel that familiar feeling of panic creeping upon me. I do my best to beat it down. I refuse to be a victim again. Victor showed me something beautiful and I'm going to survive this, so I can let him show me everything. I won't allow Sam to take my progress away from me. I relax my body, letting him think he won. As he tries to deepen the kiss, I fight the nausea rising in me. I try to concentrate on the things I was taught in self-defense classes. I bring my leg back, bend it, and then swing my knee into his balls. The impact isn't as great as I've managed in class, but it is enough for him step away from me.

"Angie—"

Before he can say or do anything else, I bring my arm back, clinching my hand into a fist and slam it into his eye. I hiss at the pain that radiates through my hand. I try not to let it show, but I pray it hurts him worse than it does me.

"What the hell, Angie?"

"No man will ever force himself on me again," I bark.

I spit, trying to rid myself of the taste of his tongue in my mouth. I wipe my mouth, wishing I could erase the feel of his

lips, too. “I don’t want you, Sam. Nothing you do will ever make me change my mind. If you keep this up, we won’t even be able to salvage our friendship. Hell, it may already be too late.”

Sam stares at me, then opens his office door. “Take her back to her room,” he tells the guard outside. “We’ll talk tomorrow, Angie.”

I walk in front of them, not looking at Sam again. He’s gone too far this time.

# samuil

...

I watch Angie leave, not taking my eyes off her until she's up the stairs and out of my sight. Only then do I close the door, go back to my desk and all but collapse in my chair. I hate myself for what I just did. I'm feeling desperate and Angie has no idea how perilous times are getting. Our showdown with my father is getting closer and Angie will be left unprotected. Perhaps if she knew the lengths my father went to last time to make me bend to his demands, she would understand my urgency.

I could never tell her, though. It would open old wounds. I don't want to hurt her. That's not the real reason, though. I don't want Angie to blame me. I don't want her to hate me. I probably already achieved that little milestone now. God, I can't believe I forced her to kiss me. I know she has scars and I tried to push myself on her like a madman.

I lift my hand to rub around my eye. It's puffy and will be black soon. I don't care, I more than deserved it. Fuck, I deserved worse. Although, the knee to my balls didn't exactly

feel great. I suppose I bought that ticket, too. I did so much damage tonight and the only thing I proved was that Angie was right all along.

There will never be anything between us. Kissing her felt all kinds of wrong. The more I tried, the worse it felt. If anything, my whole damn body recoiled from the kiss. Angie is my sister. She may not have that title by my blood, but she has it in my heart and my mind.

I let out a large sigh, and then push my hand through my hair. How in the fuck am I going to keep her safe? Once my uncles and I take my father's place the vultures will begin circling and they all know I have one major weakness. *Angie*. Thanks to my father bragging how he used her to get me under control, they also know using her is effective.

My father exploited it for all he was worth. For three years, I became my father's errand boy, doing things that still makes my skin crawl. I did it all just to make sure Angie was kept safe. I did everything my father asked until my uncle Ivan stepped in to bail me out. Thank God he did because my father actually decided to dip his toe into human trafficking. He had contacted some dim-witted idiot in Phoenix with the ability to launder our money who also had easier ways to traffic narcotics because he owned an art gallery. My father threatened Angie again and I was desperate. I knew he wouldn't hesitate to use her in ways no woman would recover from. I alone knew exactly what the bastard was capable of. Uncle Ivan saw what was happening and came to my father, telling him that he had turned his back on Micah and Viktor. He said he wanted to join forces with my father, and passed every test my father threw at him. I knew some of the shit he did was hard on Ivan. How could it not be? He stuck with it, though, telling my father that their brothers were too weak to rule the Levkin name. I don't know how he sold that bullshit to my father, but he managed it somehow. Most people didn't even realize his father was a brother to the others, because his father had a different mother and was much older than my uncles.

Ivan did all of this because he wanted to shut down the human trafficking business my father had begun. It was so important to him that he threw his own reputation away. People now believe my uncle is knee deep in exploiting underage women, selling their bodies and those of young boys too. When in fact, it is my own father. How that man's blood can run through my veins is beyond me. Then again, I did just force Angie to kiss me. God, I'm just as bad as that bastard. My phone begins ringing pulling my thoughts away from my dilemma. I start to ignore it until I read the caller ID.

"Uncle Mikhail?" My greeting comes out as a question because we agreed that he wouldn't contact me here—just in case his calls are being monitored. We use burner phones to converse, but Mikhail is high profile. He could still be under surveillance.

"One of your men inside the DeLuca organization contacted me to give you a heads up. You have some company headed your way. Be prepared."

"Fuck. Victorio is smarter than I thought."

"Look alive, nephew. They will be leaving in the morning."

"Got it. I'll check in soon."

He hangs up and I sigh. I have two choices. Take Angie away from here or try to reason with Victorio. Since I know that my original plan with Angie is a no-go, those are the only options available to me. If we can't handle kissing each other, there's no way marriage is a viable option. We would both be completely miserable. Not to mention, getting kneed in the balls and having black eyes is not how I want to enjoy my time with a woman who will share my bed.

I pick up my phone, dialing the number I programmed into my contacts before completely destroying Angie's cell. We'll see if the asshole is willing to bury the hatchet somewhere besides in my back—or if he will decapitate me with it.

# victorio

...

I lay back in my bed, my hair still wet from my shower. I had to take one because when I came to bed to rest, I ended up imagining my woman's face and body and jerking off to her. God, I miss her. I'll be getting her back tomorrow. If she's not there, I will burn down Samuil Levkin's estate and end his miserable life in the process. There's a burning in my chest, an ache I can't fix because I miss my baby way too much. I'm only half a man when she's not with me. It's fucking painful. I rub my chest, feeling pain there that I can't really explain. Gia is part of me.

My phone starts ringing. I frown when I see the ID shows it's a blocked number. That in and of itself is fucking odd. Only a select amount of people know this number at all. I sure as hell don't give it out to anyone that might land me on a robocall list. It keeps ringing and to satisfy my curiosity, I answer it.

"Hello?" I keep my voice calm and wait.

"We need to talk."

Anger courses through me. Samuil fucking Levkin. “You son of a bitch! You have a lot of nerve calling me. When I get you in my grasp, I’m going to take so much fucking pleasure in squeezing the life out of you.”

“Okay, now that you have that out of your system, I’d like to talk to you about protecting Angie from my father.”

“Right now, I’m more worried about protecting her from you, dickweed.”

“If that’s how you’re going to be, I’ll leave tonight and take Angie with me. This time, when I go, you won’t be able to find her. If you think I can’t do that, you clearly haven’t been paying attention. Now, if you’re willing to be reasonable, I’ll stay here so that when you arrive tomorrow the two of us can work together to make sure Angie stays safe.”

I do my best to rein in my anger because I know he’s telling the truth. He’ll take Angie away before I can get to her. I’m stuck here. My heart is hurting, feeling as if it is in a vise. The pain is intense. Helplessness courses through me and my insides feel raw. One of our own is betraying us. They fucked me over and now I’m stuck. Samuil already knows I’m coming down there tomorrow. There’s only one way he could find that out. I compartmentalize that and push ahead.

“You have my attention,” I clip out, barely containing my anger.

“My uncles and I are going to war with my father very soon. Before I do that, I need to know that Angie is protected at all costs. I have to make sure that no matter what shit my father pulls, she will be safe. I can’t be controlled by them using her against me. To do that, your organization and mine need to become allies. A statement needs to be made that Angelina is being given to you with my blessing.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You have no say in Gia’s life.”

Sam breathes into the phone, the exhalation of air sounding painful, as if it’s being pulled from him. “You’re a smart man, Victor, or do you prefer Victorio?”

“I prefer to have my woman back and never hear your voice again,” I explain.

“Tough shit. Anyway, *Victor*, I’m sure you have already figured it out, but in case not, I’ll explain it to you.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Years ago, when Angie was in school, my father wanted me to become his muscle. He demanded I take part in shit that I wasn’t comfortable doing. When I say that, I mean shit that gives me nightmares. Some of it involved women who weren’t of age to agree to give their bodies away but did it anyway. They were lied to, of course. They had no idea what they were getting into. When I refused to do my father’s bidding, he decided to show me his power by seeking out the one weakness I had and destroying her. This girl was special. She was everything good. She was sweet, beautiful, had a heart of gold, and she was so innocent. I wanted to protect that innocence so much that I wrote her out of my life. It almost killed me, but I just couldn’t risk it. My father decided to destroy my sister. I only had two friends in my entire life, but one of those was this beautiful, precious girl.”

“My father had her attacked in the worst ways you could imagine. He left her alive, only to use her as a pawn, forcing me to agree to get under his thumb.”

My blood runs cold. He’s right I had mostly figured it out. Hearing him confirm it boils inside of me, making a wound that nothing can heal.

“I think you understand that the only reason I haven’t seen Angie face to face before now was Abram Levkin. I swore I’d find a way to make it right. I wanted to make sure my uncles and I had the firepower to end my father and I was able to keep Angelina safe.”

“That’s not your job, Samuil. *I’m* Gia’s man. I’m the fucking man who will keep her safe. Your father can’t touch her. I’ll bring her to Antonio’s to make sure she’s protected.”

Sam laughs, but the sound holds zero humor. “Do you really think that will work, Victor?”



“I know it will,” I snap.

“Then, perhaps you should ask yourself one question.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“How did I know you were headed to Seattle in the morning?”

“I’m going to have fun beating you down, Samuil.”

“Victor, nothing you could do to me will hurt more than the hell my father made me and Angie live through.”

“We’ll see. So, tell me, what’s next?”

“Come to Seattle and talk with me. You can spend a couple of days while we get everything lined out.”

“Do you think I’m so stupid that I’d walk into a trap?”

Samuil laughs. “Do you think I’m so stupid that I would openly invite a man who wants to kill me if I wasn’t forced to? Believe me when I tell you, Victor, the two of us have one thing in common. We would do anything to protect Angie. That’s the only reason I’m reaching out to you, but if it makes you feel safer, bring five of your best men to watch your back, but keep it to just the DeLuca family. I don’t need the Titans knowing my every move before I make it. My uncles assure me that EZ is a man of his word, but none of us trust those other motherfuckers. Their old leader was as evil as my father.”

I laugh. “That’s different—a Levkin worried about someone being evil. You do know your reputation, right?”

“You and I both know neither of us are good men. I’m not saying we aren’t evil. I’m merely saying that the two of us have limits. Men of the ilk of my father do not and that is a very clear definition of why we must protect Angie at all costs.”

I grunt, finding nothing I can argue with about that. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll have some cars waiting on you,” he informs me, confusing the hell out of me.

“That’s not necessary. We can manage.”

“It’s already done,” he replies, hanging up the phone.

I stare at my phone, going over the conversation. I’m still not sure how I feel about it. The only thing I do like is that tomorrow Gia will be in my arms once again.

*Well, if I’m not walking into a trap...*

# angelina

...

“Another fucking day in paradise,” I mutter, feeling lost. I should be asleep trying to prepare myself for another round with Sam tomorrow, but I’m too wired. I honestly don’t know how much more I can stand. If I wasn’t on the third floor, I’d climb out the window and try to find my freedom that way. I’m getting desperate enough to try it regardless of the height.

There’s a knock on my door and without warning Sam comes inside. I scurry off the bed and try to prepare myself for war. I grab a lamp off my bedside table, holding it up as a weapon. “If you come near me, Sam, so help me God, I *will* kill you.”

In response, Sam smiles at me, but I see the sadness that is etched on his face. His eye is swollen and slightly bruised. I feel a small amount of satisfaction. It will no doubt get darker, but I am sad that it’s not more swollen already.

“You can calm down, Angie. Believe it or not, our kiss showed me that we have no future, at least not a romantic one. I’m sincerely sorry for hurting you and for forcing you into

that kiss. I hope that one day you can forgive me enough to be my friend and little sister again.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” I tell him truthfully.

“All I ask is that you think about it. Right now, I would like to offer you a peace offering.”

“What do you mean?”

Sam shocks me when he tosses his phone down on the bed between us. “Call Victorio. Tell him to come tomorrow like I invited him. I only want his help to make sure my father is contained and you are safe. If we achieve that, then you can leave with him. If not, then he can help me watch over you until it is safe. Either way, you will still leave with him.”

“What’s changed?”

“Nothing and everything. I only want to make sure you are protected, runt. If it’s not by the Levkin name, then I’ll be satisfied that it will be under the DeLuca name with Levkin backing.”

I have so many more questions, but I’m dying to talk to Victor. I moisten my suddenly dry lips and look at Sam. “You can leave now, I’ll call Victor.”

Sam shakes his head. “You’re something else, Angie. This sounds horrible, but I am sad that there’s no sexual chemistry between us because you are a hell of a woman.”

I watch as he walks away. My brow furrows as I try to figure out what’s going on in his head, but the truth is I don’t care enough to dwell on it. I jump back on the bed and snatch up the phone, immediately dialing Victor.

“If you’re calling to tell me you’ve changed your mind Samuil, you can go fuck yourself. There’s no rock you can crawl under that will hide you from me. Gia is mine, and if you insist on keeping her, I will hunt you down and gut you after making you pray for mercy.”

Hearing his voice makes me melt. There’s so much I want to say, but the truth is, there are just three words I really want him to know.

“I love you, Victor.”

“Kitten?” he questions, sounding completely shocked.

“God, I’ve missed you so much,” I cry, tears beginning to slide from my eyes. Their salty wetness hits my lips, and the taste of them is on my tongue.

“I’ve missed you too, sweetheart. I’m so sorry it has taken me so long to find you.”

“I knew you would. I don’t understand what has changed with Sam, but I’m so glad he asked you to come here.”

“Bullshit he asked. I was coming, Kitten. It’s just the bastard found out about it.”

“I think he may have gone off the deep end. He keeps saying he’s trying to keep me safe from his father and other enemies, but he’s trying to convince me to marry him.”

“I’ll kill him!”

“I think he’s sincerely worried about me, Victor. I just think he might be cracked in the head. Besides, I might have blacked his eye and told him you’re the only man I want.”

I hear Victor chuckle, and the sound seems to vibrate through me and settle at my core.

“You did that, baby?”

“Oh yeah. I told you, Victor, I love you.”

“I love you, too. You know that, right, Gia?”

“I do. I have a lot of reasons to be pissed at Sam, but I think my biggest is that he took me away just when I wanted to tell you that I was ready to try...”

“Try what, baby?”

“Going all the way. I think I’m ready. When I’m with you, you’re all I think about. You’re all I want, honey.”

“God, you’re killing me. I should fly to Seattle tonight and get you.”

“I’m not sure I’d argue,” I laugh. “I need you.”

“I’ll be there early tomorrow, I promise. It won’t be a long flight from Arizona.”

“Will you take me away from here?” I ask, and even I can hear the hint of begging in my question.

“I’m going to hear Samuil out. I need to discuss his reasoning on why he took you. He wants me to trust him, but I don’t think that’s possible.”

“I think you can trust him, Victor, but please be safe. Sam isn’t the same person I remember from my childhood.”

“I’ll be careful, Gia. I just need you back in my arms.”

“I want that, too.”

“When you get back, we’re going to have a discussion about the fact that you went out with another man when *your* man forbade it.”

“Although you seem to set feminism back to the dark ages with that whole forbade word, believe me when I tell you that if I had it to do over, I would tell Sam to go fuck himself.”

“Is that my sweet, innocent Kitten using the word fuck?” he purrs.

I feel my panties getting wet. God, I need him.  
“Maybe...”

“You’ll need to make this up to me when we’re together again,” he adds.

“How would I do that?” I ask.

“I’ll think of something. Still, your punishment might be less severe if you touch yourself for me right now.”

“I love you, but I’m not doing that in a bed that Sam owns, Victor.” My whole body finds the idea revolting. I cringe just thinking about it.

“You will tomorrow night when I’m there with you. You’ll give me everything I want.”

“I’d rather you take me far away from anything to do with Sam.”

That makes him laugh and I enjoy the sound, closing my eyes, my heart filled with happiness.

“Now, that’s exactly what I wanted to hear from you days ago,” he points out.

“I’m sorry, Victor.”

“I love you, baby. You need to get some rest because I plan on wearing you out tomorrow.”

“Sweet dreams, honey,” I breathe.

“You, too, Kitten. Keep that phone close by. Call me when you wake up.”

“I will,” I promise, and then I hang up. I don’t want to, but he’s right, we both have busy days tomorrow.

*I can’t wait...*

# victor

...

I'm used to expensive, palatial estates. Antonio and Marco's have been some of the finest ever made, I'm sure. Samuil Levkin's, however, is beyond that. His driveway is over six miles long with two gates, and each of them has guardhouses. There are statues dotting the otherwise grassy landscape. The huge ten-foot gates are glossy, black wrought iron with the letter L intricately woven into a complicated design. The L is displayed in gold. I'm almost positive it's solid gold. I mean, if you have it, I guess there's nothing wrong with wasting money if that's what you want. But those two gold initials could probably feed a third world country for years.

We're just now pulling up to the front drive which stops at the huge home that looks to be five stories. The drive is a mixture of concrete and brick. The home itself is white with complicated, white and black toned brick terraces, along with other outdoor areas that blend in seamlessly with the home.

I'd call the overall effect intimidating, but so far from a home that my Gia would love that it is absurd. I'm worn out



and I feel like I'm crawling out of my skin. The need to get her out of here burns inside of me. That feeling only increases as our cars come to a stop. My crew and I are in two vehicles. I'm sitting with Ghost in one vehicle. Lodi, Levi, and Zane are in the other. EZ and a few others are in town, awaiting instructions. If they don't hear from us, EZ has enough firepower and explosives to come find us. That's also something that only Ghost, EZ, and I know. It sucks to keep secrets from my own team, but until I find out who Levkin has planted in our organization, I have no choice. Hell, I purposefully divided the way we're grouped in the cars because I can't look at the other men without wondering which one is stabbing me in the back. My gut tells me that of all of them, I can trust Levi. Right now, I'm not sure I can trust my gut, and that's a problem.

As we get out, there's a man standing on the top step by the huge double front doors, waiting for us. When we get to him, he bows his head... *Christ*. He just bowed his fucking head. I don't even know what to do with that.

"Follow me," he says, never giving us eye contact. "As we move through the huge foyer full of elaborate stairways, my gaze shifts around, searching for my Gia. The outside of the home went for a statement of old money, and the inside was expensive marble tile and hand-carved woodwork. Personally, I wouldn't have been surprised to look up and see Leonardo DiCaprio standing at the top of the grand staircase—as if we were on *The Titanic* itself."

Our escort stops at a door which has also been hand-carved, then he turns to face us. "Your men have been asked to wait in the sitting area," he informs us, his hand indicating a bunch of couches and chairs over to our right. Mr. Levkin will see you in his office, through this door. I nod to Ghost and Zane and then, all my men walk over there. They, however, don't sit. They stand. Half faces one side of the home, the other half face me. They also keep their backs to one another—ready for anything.

"I want to see my woman," I tell Sam as soon as I open the door.

“I’ll have her brought down after we talk. I haven’t been able to let her roam free. It might have escaped your notice Victor, but Angie can be... difficult.”

I smirk as I take in the black eye. I need to teach my woman how to hit harder and maybe wear rings... “I don’t have that issue. She *wants* to be with me.”

“Before you get too cocky, there’s no way you can convince me that you agreed to let her go to dinner with me while you were out of town. The woman is too headstrong for her own good.”

I frown. The bastard does have a point. I shrug. Samuil stays seated at his desk, so I go to the chair across from him. I need to know exactly what is in this bastard’s mind and give Antonio and Niko a heads up. I’ve already called them on the way this morning with an update.

“Are you just going to stare at me all day? Is that why you invited me?”

Samuil lets out an annoyed breath. “I was hoping to convince Angelina to marry me to make a statement to my father and his cohorts that Angelina was now a Levkin and protected by me and my uncles. It’s a well-known fact that our family is divided. We have our allies, and my father has his. It can’t go on. A house divided is bound to fall. My father is too evil to take control. It’s our job to stop him.”

“Angie, won’t do anything with you,” I snap, taking him in. His eye is black, but otherwise he looks polished. I’m strangely surprised to see that when he talks about Gia, there is real fear present. He truly is worried about her. That makes me more alert than ever about the threat of Abram Levkin. I haven’t forgotten my conversation on the phone with Samuil and the anger is there—deep inside of me—simmering.

Samuil holds his hand up and shakes his head. “That’s why I called. Angie has already made that point abundantly clear.”

“Then, I’ll take Angie home and I’ll protect her.”

“That won’t work. I’ve had men close to you ever since Angie has been brought into the DeLuca fold. We’ve foiled

two attempts already. My father won't give up. He knows my only weakness is her. I may not be in love with her—"

Just hearing him say those words, unleashes a growl filled with anger. He is nothing to my woman and he needs to get that through his fucking head.

"But I do love her," he continues. "I wouldn't have survived my childhood without her. I failed her once, not knowing how truly despicable my father was. I won't do that again. You're here because I need your help to ensure that she's always safe."

"What do you propose?"

"I'd like to make a public announcement that the DeLuca organization is putting their weight behind mine and my uncle's bid to overthrow my father. I want it fed through the channels so it will get back to him immediately. Word will spread that a DeLuca Capo will be marrying a Levkin. We will invite our joined allies and those of my father here, where I can control the landscape and the narrative with your help. We can plan a big wedding. Whether it is real or fake, is up to you. Although, if you opt for fake, the paperwork must be above board. Even after we take out my father, his more unscrupulous allies, who would like nothing more than to take over our organization, will search for any lies—any weaknesses. If they find anything concerning Angie, we will be back to square one all over again."

I study him. It's a sound plan. I do think he's going overboard. Samuil is carrying heavy guilt when it comes to Gia, making him go overboard to protect her now. I could tell him that, but since my ultimate endgame is to be married to Gia, have her pregnant with my baby and tied to me forever, I'm willing to go along. It would seem Samuil is doing me a favor—even if he doesn't know it.

"We should conference call Antonio and Niko. They're standing by. That way we can set up the logistics," I announce.

For a minute, I see surprise flash over his face. "So, you agree?"

“I do. I’ll be the one to talk to Gia about it.”

“Do you think you can get her to agree?”

He seems worried about that point. I suppose he has a right. My Kitten is stubborn. She won’t agree to marry me easily. I’ll just play my cards close to my chest and give her the truth as much as I can.

“She’ll agree. She loves me and she knows that she is my heart. I would be lying if I didn’t think it’s going overboard, however. I don’t see why we don’t do away with the bullshit and just kill your father. If ever a man deserved killing, it would be him.”

“I couldn’t agree more about my father. Still, it won’t work. There are a lot of factions in our circles that follow Abram closely. They despise me, because I know their secrets and that means my uncles also know the things they never want to let out into the light of day. Thanks to my father, they know the only attachment—my sole weakness—is Angelina. They were there when my father used her to get me under his thumb. They know how he got to her, and they won’t hesitate to go after her.”

I rub my temple. My Gia deserves a wedding and a proposal not filled with this shit. “She deserves better,” I complain.

“I agree, but these assholes will use her, just the same. They also hate the DeLuca name as much as they hate me. The fact she’ll be under the DeLuca umbrella won’t make her safer. It will put a bigger target on her back. That’s why I was trying to bypass you to begin with.”

“That’s a mistake that almost got you killed—it still might,” I warn.

“I did what I had to do. You need to understand that we need to make this public showing and draw my father out to end his life publicly. We need a united front and to make his death hurt in such a way that it’s a statement that if anyone fucks with us—*any of us*—they die. We can also use the

opportunity to make sure my father's allies are aware we know who they are. This will work, Victorio."

"Easy for you to say. It's not your woman out in the open that could get hurt," I argue.

"I never want anything to happen to Angie. She's the reason I'm doing all of this. We can do it all here. This place is like Fort Knox. We will put all of my father's allies in one section and surround them with our men. They will be negated from the beginning. The DeLuca representation, and hell even the Titans if you want them, will be here, too. You can even invite your allies. My father will make his move not knowing his allies are useless."

"Are you sure Abram is so cocky as to make a move with all of us together? Even a dumb man has to know that's suicide."

"My father believes he is a king. Mostly, he is the king of underestimating me. That will be his downfall."

"How soon do you want to do this?" I ask, unable to argue that Samuil is wrong. Everything he is saying makes sense. I know I could keep Gia safe differently. Yet, the Levkins did get people in our organization. It would be safer to gamble where we have more control, because my Kitten must be safe—no matter what. There's the added advantage that doing this will secure a strong alliance with the Bratva, and Samuil will make sure that alliance stays intact, if for no other reason than he wants to make sure Gia is safe and happy. His guilt won't allow him not to. The biggest factor, however, is that I want my ring on her hand. This is the easiest way to accomplish that.

"It can be whenever you want. We will plan it around the time schedule you set. I would suggest it be soon. Neither one of us wants this drawn out."

"I need to talk to Antonio and Niko. The four of us should have a phone conference in the morning," I tell him. "If everyone agrees, we can plan it for a week from today. That will give Antonio time to be here, as well as organize what men he wants with him and which of our allies will come to

the wedding. We will need a safe place to keep the women and children if you're right and shit hits the fan. I want Gia protected at all times."

"I've already seen to that. I will show you after you visit with Angie. You can make sure it's up to your standards."

"That works. A week will also give me time to convince Gia to marry me, too."

Samuil surprises me by laughing. "It won't take that long. She loves you. I got this black eye from her trying to prove she could learn to love me the same way."

"How did you do that?" I ask, deceptively mild. I have a feeling my little Kitten didn't tell me everything.

Sam's expression suddenly turns wary. *Too late motherfucker.*

"It was just a kiss, Victorio. Angie didn't want it. When I tried to force the issue—"

I don't need to know anything else. She struck out at him when he tried to force her to kiss him.

I leap over the desk, with an unholy howl of anger, intent on killing him. My fist slams into his nose and then I wail on his ribs. Samuil gets in a hit, knocking my head back. When I try to lunge at him again, his chair overturns and we both go to the floor. We both scramble to stand. I charge head-first into Samuil's stomach, keeping my head down. Sam leaves his midsection open for my punches, but he grabs my head and slams it backwards into a wall. I charge back at him, flipping our bodies around so his back goes against a window, his shoulder breaking the glass pane.

"I'm going to kill you motherfucker. No one touches my woman!"

I uppercut him, and before he can retaliate the door to the office opens so quickly, it bounces off the wall.

"What the hell is going on?" Gia yells.

Both Samuil and I freeze. I drop my hold on the bastard and turn to look at Gia like the love-starved fool I am. God

she's beautiful. She's wearing jeans and a pale blue T-shirt. Her beautiful red hair is curly and has been brushed until it shines. It falls down her back and I itch to gather it in my hands. God, how is it possible that she got even more beautiful in the time we've been apart? While I'm busy drinking her in, Samuil uses the opportunity to sucker punch me, causing me to bend over from the force of his blow. I stumble but would have been fine if the heel of my foot hadn't landed on a part of Samuil's office chair. I go down before I can catch my balance.

Gia comes running over, kneeling down, and putting my head on her lap. I'm not hurt at all, but there's no way I'm going to pull away from her. Just having her close again makes me calmer. The piece of my soul that's been missing is suddenly filled. I'm back with my woman.

“Are you okay, honey?”

“I am now,” I groan, pulling her lips down to mine and ignoring the cut on mine. The discomfort doesn't matter. I just need to touch her. She tries to pull away when Samuil clears his throat, but I don't let her. I stare into her beautiful green eyes as I hold her neck tightly. “Kiss your man, Kitten. I've been starved for you for far too long,” I order and my beautiful Gia smiles before whole-heartedly giving me her lips once more.

# angelina

...

I always lose myself in Victor. Yet, after being without him, I can do nothing but go wherever he leads me. Everything around us fades away. It is only the two of us—nothing and no one else. Everything I feel for him, I try to put in my kiss. I whimper as the kiss deepens and he shifts our bodies. His hand slides up to cup my breast and I feel my nipple harden under his palm. He growls, and I swallow the sound down as he squeezes, pressing harder against my nipple and creating a friction inside of me that makes my pussy wet.

My lungs burn with the need to take in oxygen, but I ignore it. Victor is my air—*he's my everything*. His tongue weaves magic around mine as my nails bite into his shoulders. I feel a hand slide under my shirt and against my stomach. I want it. I love the way the heat from his touch electrifies my whole body. When he begins to lift my shirt, the cool air that hits me brings me to my senses.

I regretfully pull away. When Victor wraps his hand against my neck to bring me back to him, I resist. “Victor,



we're not alone," I whisper.

I watch as his eyes, so dark with passion, begin to clear as reality comes back to him, too. I hate it, even if I know it's necessary. With a sigh, he gives me another quick kiss. "I've been too long without you, Kitten. Sorry," he mutters quietly.

"I'm not complaining. I feel the same," I assure him with a smile. He grins, giving me a wink. He gets up, bringing me with him. His face suddenly goes hard as he looks at Sam. "This isn't over," he growls, and I wrap my arms around him, pulling in closer to try to reassure us both that we're here together.

"I didn't think it would be," Sam answers. "I just need to know we're on the same page."

"We'll call Antonio in the morning," he grunts. Then I'm gasping as he picks me up and carries me away.

I don't fight it. I just hold on to him. My fingers begin to unbutton his shirt, revealing his skin beneath. I press my lips against the exposed skin, breathing in all that is Victor.

"Tell me how to get to your room in this fucking place, Kitten."

I mutter out instructions without lifting my lips away from his skin. I just can't manage it. I've missed him too much. He must have understood somehow because it's not long before he's laying me on the bed and joining me, taking me into his arms, pulling my head against his chest and tucking my head under his chin. His hold is tight, as if he's trying to reassure himself that I'm here. I wrap my arms around his body and squeeze him harder myself, perfectly understanding what he's feeling.

"You're never getting away from me again, Gia."

"I don't want to," I admit, my voice breaking as emotion overtakes me. I feel my tears, but I don't contain them. I'm holding Victor again. I'm in his arms. I couldn't control my emotions even if I tried.

Victor kisses me again. It's a deep kiss, not as passionate as what we shared downstairs, but still just as good. It's just

more controlled and over way too soon.

“Are you okay, Kitten?”

“Yeah. I promise. Sam wouldn’t physically hurt me, and it turns out I am much better at taking care of myself these days.”

“I did see your handiwork,” he says with a half-smile, making me feel warm and tingly all over. He’s proud of me and he’s not bothering to hide it.

“What he tried to do, I mean, by kissing me. Is that why you were beating Sam?”

“Hell, yes, but I was going to do it regardless because he tried to separate us. I won’t ever allow anyone to do that, baby.”

“Does this mean we can go home now?” I ask hopefully.

“Unfortunately, probably not today,” he says, pulling back to put more space between us. I don’t like it, but I sense we’re getting ready to have a serious conversation, so I guess it is needed. I can’t think at all when I’m near Victor.

“Why not? Sam’s crazy. You can’t listen to him. He’s overreacting about everything.”

“I don’t disagree to a certain point, but I think he’s right, baby.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “You can’t expect me to marry him, Victor. I won’t do it. I don’t love him. Right now, I’m not even sure I like him.”

His body goes rigid. “The only man you’ll be marrying is me, Kitten. You need to get that straight right fucking now,” he all but snarls.

I’m trying to wrap my mind around what he’s saying. I didn’t expect this from Victor. I thought he would agree with me. I am glad he at least doesn’t expect me to marry my stepbrother. I shake my head.

“We can’t get married, Victor.”

“Kitten, we can. If we had more time, I’d figure out another way to make this easier on you, but Samuil is right about a lot of things. Once he and his uncles make a move to overthrow Abram, that man will use you to get to him. When they kill him, their enemies will do the same. You’ll never be able to relax and rest easy. These men are power hungry. They won’t stop.”

“But married, Victor? We’re not ready for that.”

“Speak for yourself. I’ve been wanting to marry you since day one.”

“Victor, what if I make you miserable? I can’t marry you, not yet...not like this. If we get married, it should be special.”

He studies me. “There’s no way you could make me miserable. Being without you? That makes me miserable. Also, stop saying if. You *are* marrying me, Gia. The only thing in question is if we do it now or later.”

“You mean I get an option?” I laugh, the sound stilted as I’m starting to feel lost all over again.

“If you want to wait so our wedding is on your terms, then we can make sure this marriage has a fake minister. That way, if the wedding goes through and Abram doesn’t show, we won’t really be married.”

I’m a mess. If I needed further proof, the fact that my heart hurts with his response and I want to scream at him, *I want you to marry me now and claim me as your wife*, proves it to me. I swallow that down, though. Victor and I haven’t even made love. There are still too many unknowns. We need more time. With that in mind, I take a breath. No matter how much it hurts me, I nod my head.

“Fake would probably be the best. We need more time to work things out between us.”

I force myself to lift my gaze up to look at Victor. My stomach clenches when I can clearly see the disappointment written on his face. Shit. I just screwed up. Haven’t I learned anything? I don’t want to push him away. We’ve both been suffering without one another. We love each other. I want to

take it all back, but I need him to confirm that's what he wants.

"What are you thinking?" I ask, my heart pounding in my chest.

"I'm thinking it's about time my Kitten shows me how much she missed her man and how sorry she is for agreeing to go out with another man when I wasn't around."

*Yikes.* He's being super-hot and seductive, but there's an undercurrent of anger in his words, too. It's anger that he's entitled to have. I'm mad at myself. I take a shaky breath and bite my lip. "And just how would I do that?" I ask.

"I want your body, Gia. Give it to me and trust me to take care of you."

My heart runs away with me. I stare at the man that I love and somehow drum up the courage to stand. My legs are trembling. I have to lock my knees to keep from falling. Yet, when I look down at Victor, all I see is love. I can feel the heat on my face. I know it's beet red. I can't do anything about that. I try to hide the way my hands tremble as I lift my T-shirt over my head and throw it on the floor. I have on a plain white cotton bra. I wish it was something sexier, but I can't do anything to change it now. Victor's eyes are laser focused on me. They deepen in color, and I know he likes what he sees. I kick off the sandals I'm wearing while undoing my jeans. The heat of his gaze brands me and I lock my eyes on his and don't let them falter as I push my jeans down over my hips and let them fall. I kick them out of the way. My moves aren't sexy at all, but from the look on his face, I don't think he cares. My panties are white to match the bra. I'm praying he can't see just how wet they are.

"I...uh...realized something while we were apart, Victor."

He rises up off the bed, coming to stand in front of me. His hands brush down my arms, sending goose bumps over my body. I want to fall into him, but I manage to keep from it—barely.

“What’s that, my beautiful Gia?” he asks, his voice thick with desire and so soft it wraps around me, seducing me almost as much as his touch.

“Not once in all the time that I’ve spent with you have I ever felt like I was in danger. *Not once*. I’ve never had that. Not since the accident and to a certain extent even before it. I’ve always known instinctively that I’m safe with you.”

“Gia,” he groans, but I keep going.

“It may just be a small part of the reason I love you, but it shouldn’t be overlooked how hugely important it is. When Sam tried to kiss me—”

He lets out an inhuman growl.

I step into him, pressing my body against his, trying to calm him. “When he did that, I felt repulsion, fear, and that familiar panic. Those are things I’ve never felt around you. From day one, all I felt when I was around you was safe.”

“That’s because you are, baby. You always will be.”

“I know, but that day in Sam’s office, even feeling all of those negative emotions, I knew that I wouldn’t be a victim any longer. I knew it because I was absolutely positive that you would always come to rescue me.”

“Fuck,” he hisses, holding me tighter. His lips drop down so there’s just a small still breath between us. “I will, Gia. I swear to you right now. I will always come for you. You’re my world, woman. I’ll always come for you.”

“Victor.”

“I will baby, I always will,” he vows before his lips touch mine and I completely surrender.

# victor

...

When Gia said she wanted our marriage to be fake, I was gutted. I want her tied to me. Plus, as stupid as Samuil Levkin is, I know that a public show of our power and taking revenge for my woman so everyone can see she's off limits is indeed needed. If it ever came out that the two of us weren't actually married, it could undermine everything. If there is one thing I know about secrets, they always have a way of getting out and seeing the light of day. I will have to think about how to convince her, but for now, I'm just going to be grateful that she told me she loves and trusts me.

I have my woman in my arms in nothing but her underwear and right now, that feels like a miracle. I'm going to enjoy it and deal with the rest after I remind her that she belongs to me.

*And I belong to her.*

I'm so proud of her, but what makes it better is that she's proud of herself. I could tell her that the reason she wasn't totally afraid might have been more to do with the source of

the threat. I may not like it, but she likes and trusts Sam—even if he undermined that with his stunt. Still, I keep my mouth shut because it doesn't matter. I like that she's feeling more confident, and I'm never going to allow another man to get near her. Gia will go nowhere unless I'm there, or someone I trust is in place and that person is trained to protect her.

For now, however, my only job is to concentrate on the beautiful woman in front of me and completely making her mine. I believe the only way to prove what we are to one another is to show her she can crave and enjoy me sexually. In her mind, that's our biggest stumbling block. It's time I put that irrational fear to rest.

I step back and her gaze is shy, but slowly moves upward so she's looking me in the eyes. I trace my fingers over the straps of her bra. "You still have too many clothes on, sweetheart."

"Not as many as you," she breathes, biting her lip as she watches me.

I grin at her as I step back. I gather my shirt in my hands, swooping it upwards, pulling it off with relative ease. I watch as she stares at me, her eyes eating me up.

"You've seen me without a shirt before, Kitten."

"Can I..."

"Can you what?"

"Touch you."

Her words are soft, as if she's barely breathing. She's nervous, but she's not backing down. I still don't see how this gorgeous woman before me could think she's weak. Gia is strong as hell—and mine. *She's all mine.*

"You can do anything you want to me, Kitten. I'm completely yours."

She looks up at me, giving me the sweetest smile. "You really are."

"Always have been. It just took you a while to figure it out," I add with a grin.

One of her eyebrow cocks up in response. “Maybe I would have figured it out sooner if you hadn’t made your speech about how we weren’t friends.”

I groan. I’m never going to live that down. “I was frustrated and trying not to scare you.”

She giggles. “For future reference, Victor, I’d prefer you scare me.”

“Mm...” is the only reply I can make because she slides her hands over my abdomen. The heat of her skin on mine is potent. It is all I can do not to throw her on the bed and take what belongs to me. Instead, I force myself to be still and let her learn my body. My Gia surprises me when she kisses the crook of my neck, while her fingers continue to graze against my abs. I hiss from the pleasure of her lips on me. It feels so fucking good. If the rest of the night goes like I plan, I may not survive.

When I look down at her, she’s watching me with an unspoken question in her eyes. “Your lips feel fucking good on me, Gia.”

She seems to glow with my praise, letting it make her braver, slowly kissing an imaginary path to the front of my neck. Her sweet tongue comes out to lick against my Adam’s apple, and I swear to God, my knees almost buckle. After waiting for nearly a fucking year, I’m already about to explode. She has no idea of her effect on me as she continues kissing along my collarbone, then across my pecs. I grab her hips, bringing her body even closer. My fingers bite into her soft skin, making her release a sweet meow of pleasure.

“Fuck, baby,” I moan as her tongue slides against my right nipple.

I watch her as she slides her fingers against the left one. She suckles and I use my hold on her to grind her against my aching cock. I bring my other hand up to curl my fingers into her hair, holding her tighter. I don’t want her to stop. It feels too good. Gia shocks the hell out of me when I feel her capture the hard nub between her teeth and flick it with her tongue. The sensations vibrate through my body. My control is a



tightly pulled bow string. It's all I can do to keep from taking over.

I palm her ass, picking her up. Gia wraps her legs around me, her fingers biting into my sides. She looks up at me confused. "Did I do something wrong?"

"It feels too good. You're about to make me lose control," I explain. Her wet glossy lips move into a smile, making her eyes glisten. The emerald green deepens in color and my heart stalls in my chest. *She's breathtaking.* "I don't want this to be over too soon, Kitten."

"I'm not going anywhere," she quips.

"Damn straight you're not," I growl, taking her mouth in a kiss that skirts the line of desperation. I ravish her mouth, getting drunk on the taste of her. I kiss her until we're forced to pull apart just to breathe. I lay her on the bed, watching as she licks her lips. Her gaze locked on me.

"Victor," she beckons.

"Are you still doing okay, Kitten?"

"I would be if you were on the bed with me."

"I want to taste you, Gia. Will you let me do that?"

I worry I'm making a mistake. I don't want her passion to cool to the point that she lets her fear take over. I still need to make sure she's comfortable with everything I do. We've come too far to go backwards now.

She nods her head, giving me permission. I can tell she's worried, but my woman will not let it stop her.

"You're safe with me, Gia."

"I know that, honey," she puffs, biting down on her lip as she watches me.

"If I do something you don't like, all you need to do is tell me and I'll stop. I swear it."

She nods.

Reassured, I go to the foot of the bed. After kicking off my shoes, I'm left in nothing but my pants. My cock is dying to be free, but I'm trying not to scare her. I'm harder than I've ever been in my life.

"I'll go as slow as you want me to, Kitten," I pledge—hoping like hell I'll find enough control to do it.

I carefully get on the bed while she pulls her legs apart enough to make room for me. I grab her foot, forcing her to bend her knee, as I give her a quick massage, pressing my thumbs into the bottom of her foot, leaning down to nip at her ankle. I'm rewarded with Gia's giggle. I bring my gaze up to take in her smile, committing it to memory.

"You're crazy," she exhales.

"Over you," I add automatically.

"That's so corny."

Her words end in a moan as I kiss up her leg, letting my tongue tease her soft flesh as I go. I do the other leg the same way. It's killing me to go this slow with her, but I want tonight to be special for my woman. We have a lifetime of making love together ahead of us. I need her to know nothing but beauty tonight.

When I reach her thigh, I nibble on the inside of them, raking my teeth against her skin, then letting my tongue soothe. The scent of her arousal surrounds me, making my cock weep.

I hook my fingers in her panties. I look into her face, searching for a sign she wants me to stop. When I see nothing, I send up a small prayer of thanks. I bring them down, removing them from her body and forcing myself to look at her once more for approval.

I can tell her nerves are getting worse. It's my job to make sure she gets lost in her passion again, and that's a task I'm more than up for. I spread her legs wider, bending her knees and positioning her so that sweet pussy is open for display. The sweet juices of her arousal coat the lips of her pussy, making it shine. I lean in, flattening my tongue to lick them in

praise. The taste of her cream explodes on my tastebuds in a sweet rush.

“Victor...”

“You’re so beautiful, Gia. Fuck, baby. I wish I could tell you how it makes me feel to know that you chose me to give yourself to. It’s a gift that I’m never going to take for granted, baby. Not ever.”

Her body jerks slightly when I slide my tongue between her lips. I hold her steady, not letting her retreat from something I know will bring her pleasure.

“Oh God,” she whimpers as I move my tongue around her entrance. I feel her tremble as I use my tongue to lick her from there all the way up to her clit.

I reach under her legs, curling my hands around her thighs, giving a little tug to bring her pussy closer—so fucking close that my nose pushes against her clit. I feel the heels of her feet settle against my back and smile before sucking her tender hood in my mouth.

“Mm...” I moan, letting my voice vibrate against her delicate folds.

“Victor!” she cries as I twirl my tongue around her clit, before moving it back down to dart inside of her.

I fuck her with my tongue, working her pussy hard, and getting rewarded with her fresh juices. She’s so wet, I could happily drown in her. I slide my finger against her clit, her body trembling. I gather her cream, soaking my digit easily. She’s so primed that my cock is trying to rip through my pants. I’m not going to be able to hold off much longer.

Bringing my mouth back to her clit, I insert my finger inside of her. I pull back enough to watch her face as I push inside her tight walls. Her lips fall open and a whimper escapes as her hips rock towards me.

“You like that, baby?” My voice is hoarse and drugged with a hunger that only she can appease.

“Yes. God, yes.”

Her body is quaking beneath me as I add a second finger. She's so fucking tight. I close my eyes and imagine just how fucking good it will feel when she's squeezing my cock like that. I fuck her slowly with both fingers, pulling them apart to stretch her, readying her for my possession. Her hips begin to move in rhythm with my strokes. I can feel her walls fluttering now. I know she'll climax soon. When she does, I want her to fall apart with so much pleasure I'll be inside of her before she gets a chance to be afraid.

With that thought in mind, I wrap my lips around her throbbing clit and suck her like a dying man wanting one more taste before he goes.

"Victor!" she screams, as my fingers fuck her relentlessly. I keep at it, refusing to stop. "More," she commands. "Don't stop. Oh God, please don't stop."

I'd tell her that is the last thing she needs to worry about, but my mouth is too full of her clit as I torture it. Her honeyed juices are sliding down my throat and branding me as hers from the inside.

"Come for me, Kitten. Come for me," I order roughly as pull back to watch her shatter when I flatten my thumb against her clit and grind it.

"Victor," she shouts, as she splinters apart in ecstasy.

I continue giving her what she needs, lapping at her cream and drinking it down, until I feel her body begin to relax. Then, I hurriedly take off my pants. I have no idea how I manage it or where I throw them. I just know I have my cock in my hand, pumping it once as precum runs from the head down my shaft and over my fingers. I'm not going to last as long as I want, but my woman will be sore by morning because I'm going to take her as many times tonight as our bodies will allow.

I shift my position, watching the lips of her pussy hug me as my thick, fat cock separates them. Her hot, sticky cream surrounds my shaft, bathing it in her sweetness. I roll my hips, loving how it feels when she tries to tighten around me, needing more. I encircle my hand at the base of my cock, pull

back out and slap the head against her clit, spanking it. Gia's entire body quivers and I love the reaction so much that I do it again—*and again*.

Finally, unable to hold back any longer, I lock eyes with the woman who owns me heart and soul. I position myself at her entrance and call her name.

“Gia.”

She looks at me, her eyes dazed. I press so just the tip is inside her.

“I love you,” she whispers.

“From this moment on, Kitten. There's no going back. There's just forward, together. Are you with me?”

“Always,” she answers, making me smile.

With that, I push inside her. I need her to feel me, before I attempt what will be the hardest thing to overcome for my woman. I don't stop until I'm all the way inside of her. Then I stop, letting her get accustomed to the feel of me inside of her, stretching her. She's so tight I damn near come the moment I get inside. If it wasn't for being worried about what happens next, I would have.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“You're inside me,” she responds, her sweet voice full of wonder.

I shift so I'm hovering over her body, now that I know she's not scared. I take her mouth with mine in a kiss meant to show her just how much I love her. I know she can taste herself on me and I like that. I let her take control of the kiss as I begin to rock in and out of her slowly. Nothing like what either of us need, mostly getting her ready, and building the passion inside her once more. I gently unhook the front clasp of her bra, but I don't pull the cups apart just yet. I know she's self-conscious about her breasts—more so than her face. I feel her body shudder beneath me and when I bring my gaze up, I see fear in her eyes for the first time.

“Victor...”

“Trust me, Gia. I need you to trust me,” I implore.

She looks indecisive and I prepare myself for this going an entirely different direction tonight. I don't like it, but I'll accept it. I know that regardless, we'll get her free of the past eventually.

“It's okay, sweetheart,” I tell her with a sad smile. I start to pull back and just take what she's comfortable giving me. I can at least make sure we both find pleasure.

My woman stops me by reaching out and locking her hand on my hip. She squeezes me there while tightening her inner muscles against my cock at the same time.

“Only forward,” she breathes.

I look at her with pride. “Fuck woman, I love you.”

“I love you,” she replies, but I know. I've always known.

I pull the bra from her body. She helps me but I can feel the way her movements become slightly stilted.

There are scars all over her breasts where her attacker tortured her. They're not that dark anymore, mostly just faded white, jagged areas imbedded in otherwise flawless skin. I cup one of her breasts. It's big enough to overfill my hand. Her nipples are close to the size of a dime and right now, they definitely need to be sucked. I twirl my tongue around one before kissing it and sucking it into my mouth. I pull back, releasing it with a wet pop. I don't move my hips, just keeping my cock inside her, letting her heat surround me.

“They're ugly,” she says as if she's telling a horrible secret. I can see the tears shining in her eyes and I hate them. One day soon, I'm going to make the bastard that did this pay.

“There's not a fucking thing about you that is ugly, Gia.”

“I bring two fingers up and lick them and then latch onto her other nipple with them. Using two fingers from my other hand to tease the one I just licked.

“They're scarred...”

“They’re beautiful. Feel me, woman,” I practically beg her as I flex my hips and move in and out of her hot depths once more. “Do you feel how hard I am? Can’t you see how much I need you?”

“Victor...”

“You’re every dream I’ve ever held in my heart, Gia. When I look at you, all I see is perfection. Perfection that is mine, just mine.”

“Honey...”

“Perfection that belongs to me. That’s who you are, Gia. You were made for me and only me.”

“God, Victor...”

“And I was made for you, Kitten. You are my world. I love you.”

I lean down to take her lips, tasting the saltiness of her tears on them as our tongues collide.

As our kiss intensifies, I continue moving in and out of her body, my thrusts getting harder and faster. Her pussy milks my cock, begging for my cum. I leave her lips to bury my face in her neck, kissing her there. I feel her lips on my ear as her warm breath fans against me.

“I love you, Victor. I’ll always love you,” she gasps. I groan, going back to kissing on one of her nipples, wanting to ravish every inch of her.

“Oh God,” she cries.

Her nails are biting into my skin as she holds onto me.

“Mine,” I growl, switching to her other breast, my cock still plundering her pussy, slow and steady. I can feel my balls tighten with the need to come, but I’m trying to fight it. I need her to know how much she turns me on.

“Victor,” she sobs. Her grip intensifying so much that I think her nails pierce my skin. “I need you to fuck me, honey.”

Her plea is urgent and loud. Hearing it, I snap. There’s no way I can hold back.

I pull back with a growl that sounds more animal than human. I grab onto her hips and begin plunging in and out of my woman, using my hold on her to meet my thrusts.

“Your sweet cunt is squeezing my cock so tight, baby. It feels so fucking good,” I huff out as I drill her. “Nothing better in this world.”

“More,” she demands.

“Fuck, baby. I’m going to give you more. I’ll give you anything you want.” I lift my gaze to look down at her. “Christ. Look at you, so fucking perfect taking my cock. Your gorgeous tits bouncing up and down. Every inch of you is mine now, Gia. I’m never fucking giving you up. Never.”

“Harder, Victor. I need...”

“What do you need? Tell me, Gia. Give me the words.”

“I need to come,” she cries. “Please, honey.”

I reach between us and search out her clit as I piston into her. She lets out a loud moan as I grind her clit with my fingers, cock slamming into her depths, only to withdraw and do it again.

“That’s it, Gia. Use that pussy of yours to suck my cock dry. That’s such a good girl. Such a good, fucking hot girl. You love my dick, don’t you, baby?” I croon. Hell, at this point I’m lost. *Completely fucking lost in her.*

“Yes, I love it. I love you,” she gasps. “I’m going to come, Victor. I’m going to come.”

She didn’t have to tell me. She’s squeezing my cock so tightly that it is a wonder she doesn’t break it in two.

“Come, baby. Come and take me with you,” I urge. She yells out my name again as she goes over the edge.

I feel her coming and I manage to hold on for a few more seconds—just long enough to memorize how beautiful she is as she orgasms for me. Then, my Gia takes me with her, just like I demanded her to.



“I love you,” I breathe as I surrender completely to her and the pleasure that only she can give me.

As she drains the last of my come, I hold her tightly, flipping us so that she’s on top of me, my back to the mattress and my cock still inside of her. She angles her head up to look at me.

“That was...”

“Indescribable?” I offer.

“Exactly,” she agrees with a very satisfied smile. You’re still inside me,” she points out, moving just enough to make me moan. “And you’re still hard.”

“Not quite like I was. I just need a minute. Your sweet pussy can keep me warm while I recover.”

She giggles, burying her head in my chest. I wouldn’t have thought it, but the sound of her laughter makes me even happier than I already was.

“As long as you don’t take too long. I find that I definitely want a round two.”

“I think it’d be round three for you, greedy girl.”

She kisses the pulse point in the crook of my neck. “We can only count the orgasms you give me when you’re inside of me from here on. The others are just warm up for the big show.”

I chuckle, giving my woman a lazy grin as I curl my fingers into her hair, enjoying the softness. “The big show?”

She looks me in the eyes, her face full of mischief. “Oh yeah. The very *big* show.”

She takes my breath away and since I don’t have the words to tell her what she does to me exactly, I do the only thing I can. I kiss her and set about making her next orgasm better than the last one.

# angelina

...

“Are you ready for dinner, sweetheart?”

I look up at the man who owns me, body and soul. He’s been gone since our shower together this morning. I know he had a lot of work, but I’ve missed him. I was allowed out of this room today. Zane was my bodyguard, but I didn’t venture out much. If I were honest, I wanted Victor to come back to my room and make love to me again. I was disappointed because he didn’t. Didn’t he want me as much as I did him? Couldn’t he feel this draw between us? God, there’s no way he could ache for me like I did him. If he did, he couldn’t have stayed gone all day.

The questions were never ending, and they led way to doubts.

Did I suck at sex? Didn’t he like it as much as I did? Did I disappoint him?

I’m a mess. When he stands there in front of me, wearing a suit and looking way too good, all I can think is that I reached

too high. A girl like me could never be enough for a man like Victor.

“I’m not feeling good. I think I’ll just stay in,” I whisper, avoiding his eyes.

“Hey, Kitten. What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

He pulls us down to sit on the bed and surprises me by laying back against the mattress and taking me in his arms. I lay on my side, my upper body crossed over on his chest and abdomen, while his arm goes around me, his fingers delving in my hair. His head turns, angling it down to bury his nose against my neck, breathing me in.

“God, I’ve missed you today, Kitten. It’s been so fucking hard trying to do what I needed to do and update Antonio and Niko. I could barely function. All I wanted was to be with you, your hot body taking me inside, and hearing your moans in my ear.”

“You really feel like that?” I ask, hoping against hope.

“Fuck yeah. How could you doubt it? Don’t you remember how hungry I was for you last night? That doesn’t just happen, Gia.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Could you imagine being that way with anyone but me?” he grumbles, and I know I’m on the verge of pissing him off. I sigh.

“No, of course not. I just thought that it was only me. I’m not exactly experienced at this kind of thing.”

“If I had you home, Gia, we wouldn’t have left this bed.”

“I want to be home. I was afraid, Victor.”

“Afraid of what?”

This is probably where I should pull back and not tell him. I don’t want to keep secrets from him, though.

“That maybe I wasn’t any good. I thought maybe you regretted—”

He kisses me, and I’m not able to finish my sentence. I don’t really care. The feel of Victor’s tongue in my mouth as he shifts our bodies so that I’m not on my back and he’s hovering over me is perfection. He moves so he’s over me completely, pressing me down into the mattress. I can feel the steel-hard outline of his cock against the most feminine part of me and gasp.

“Does that feel like I regret a fucking thing, Gia?”

“No,” I moan.

“I want you so much that I’ve had a raging hard on all fucking day. It’s made working a pain in my ass.”

“I know how we can fix that,” I suggest, rocking my hips against him.

“I want that more than you know, sweetheart. Your body needs a break, though. We’re going to eat dinner, before I bring you back up here. We’ll soak in that big ass tub in your bathroom. Then, if you’re a good girl, I’ll eat that perfect pussy of yours and make you come all over my face.”

“I’d rather you make me your dinner,” I grumble, and he laughs.

He rolls off of me and stands up. I whimper and bite down on my lip to keep from begging when he reaches his hand in his pants and adjusts his cock.

“I think giving you my cock might have been a mistake.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because being around you before was hell on me. I constantly wanted to fuck you. Now that I know you want the same thing, I’m not sure either of us will survive.”

“Victor!” I laugh, as he reaches down to pull me up. I stand beside him, and I see the happiness radiating from his face and I feel pride. I know I’m the one that put that glow in his eyes, the smile on his lips and the joy he’s feeling. I know it because he does the same for me.

“What? It’s the truth. Let’s go get this damn dinner over with so I can bring you back here and show you just how much I want you.”

“You better make it good because the last thing I want to do is go have dinner with Sam.”

“Mission accepted, Kitten,” he whispers in my ear as he walks us out of the room. “Tonight, I won’t stop until you pass out from pleasure.”

“Can you do that?” I ask, suddenly breathless. I didn’t even know something like that was possible.

“Oh, yeah. I promise you I can,” he purrs, causing me to quake with an all over body shiver to run through me and settle right in my clit—making me ache.

“Maybe we should change the subject before we end up making love on Sam’s fancy dining room table.”

“Now there’s a thought. You naked on the table, me in my chair, your legs spread for me, your pussy exposed and waiting...”

“Victor...” I beg, feeling proof of how excited I am coating not only my pussy, but along my thighs. I’m pretty sure that I could orgasm if all he did was hold his hand against my pussy right now and order me to come.

“Control it until we’re alone, Kitten. We’re being watched,” he advises.

“I’m going to make you pay for that. You wound me up on purpose.”

“I wanted him to smell how much you wanted me and know it would never be for him.”

“You what?” I squeak.

In response, he slaps my ass and then pulls out a chair for me. I give him a bitchy look but sit down. He leans down and places a kiss on my bare shoulder. “Love you, Gia.”

Just like that, my anger is gone. I figure he knows that, too. *The big dummy.*

Sam clears his throat and I force myself to look at him. He's sitting there with an eyebrow raised. I give him a dirty look and stick my tongue out.

Victor laughs and Sam gives a tired sigh.

"Why are we doing this again?" I ask to no one in particular.

"What?" Sam asks.

"This formal dinner. You had your staff lay out a dress for me to wear. *Who does that?*"

"You could have worn anything you wanted," Sam says defensively. "But we always eat like this here—even when it's just me."

"You can't be serious."

"Of course I am."

"You eat at this big table all by yourself?"

Sam shrugs.

"That's just sad and just another reason you should have known your grand scheme would have never worked," I huff.

"What do you mean?" he asks. I look up at Victor to see what he's thinking, but he's just grinning at me. When our gazes meet, he winks at me. I blink. He's happy? I thought he wanted to kill Sam. I may never understand men. I shake my head and turn my attention back to Sam.

"You really are an idiot, brother dear," I mock.

Victor laughs out loud at that. His head is thrown back and he just lets it go in a way that I've never seen before, but realize I want to see more of it. *A lot more.*

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?" Sam complains to Victor.

"Yeah," Victor confirms. "Almost as much as knowing you could hear Gia screaming for more of my cock last night so loud that it echoed all through this mausoleum of a house you live in."

“Victor! I did not!” I cry, completely mortified. If I could somehow make the ground swallow me up right now, I’d be happy.

“I’m afraid you did, Angie. My staff is still talking about it.”

“You’re lying,” I pant, struggling for breath as I look up at Sam in disbelief.

“Afraid not,” he says, making Victor laugh again. I decide I don’t want to hear him ever laugh again and proceed to kick him under the table. Sadly, that doesn’t seem to faze him.

“Don’t we have important matters to discuss like this whole fake wedding so Victor and I can return home? I miss my house and very informal dining room.”

“Angie, you don’t have a dining room. Hell, you don’t even have a table. You have a breakfast bar and still eat while sitting on the couch.”

I look at Sam and smile. “Exactly.”

I feel Victor’s gaze on me and brave a look. All I see is approval. It makes my heart squeeze in my chest. This man is going to kill me.

“Speaking of the wedding. I think if we’re going this far to prove that you are under the DeLuca family, you need to move to my house when we return home. Don’t worry, I don’t have a formal dining room either, Kitten.”

I curl up my nose in dislike. “Um... Victor, you live in an open loft downtown. Only the bathroom is closed off.”

“So?” he asks, not understanding me at all.

“I hate your place. I’m not living there.”

“We could always go back to my original plan,” Sam states cheerfully. “You can marry me and live here.”

“Fuck no,” Victor growls.

“I’d rather die,” I snipe.

“Well, that seems a little dramatic,” Sam pouts.

“I don’t agree,” I huff.

Victor reaches over and squeezes my hand, grinning like an idiot. I roll my eyes.

“We’ll house shop when we get back to Florida. We have to anyway because I’ll be moving into my new position in the family. I’ll want a place closer to the office building.”

I stare at him. “House shop?”

“Of course. That way, you can find a house you like.”

“I don’t need to like where you live, Victor.”

“We’ll be living together,” he reminds me.

“Okay, but shouldn’t *you* like your house, too? That means your needs for a place should come first.”

“Kitten, if we’re in bed together every night, I will love it.”

I shouldn’t be swayed so easily, but I’m just too joyful to do anything other than grin at him like a loon. Still, I need to be cautious. “Are you sure it’s not too soon for us to live together?”

Victor does that laugh again, the one that makes my tummy feel weird. “Gia, we’ve been fucking living together practically since the day I moved you into where you live now.”

“Oh, yeah,” I admit. He squeezes my hand again and I squeeze his back.

When I look up at Sam, he’s watching the two of us closely. “Sam? What are you thinking?”

“Angie, I realize I made a mistake and that our relationship was never meant to be romantic, but seeing this interaction and the way you yelled all night for another man when you are essentially my little sister is a little disturbing.”

“Ask me if I care, Sam,” I respond.

“Wait till tonight, Samuil. I’ll make sure she’s even louder,” Victor chimes in, making my eyes go round as dinner



plates.

“I have suddenly developed a case of laryngitis,” I squeak.

“I’ve got a cure for that. A special medicine if you will,” Victor counters, cutting into his chicken. He looks up at me and gives me a wink. “It’s very creamy.”

My mouth drops open and Sam groans.

“Okay, let’s stop torturing Sam and get back to this house business. If we’re going to do this, I’d like it to be as close to Emmie as possible.”

“Anything you want, sweetheart,” Victor agrees immediately. “I already have a list started to tell the realtor.”

“You do?”

“I’ve mentally added, close to Em and Callan’s home and now a large kitchen, so you can use a table if you desire, but no formal dining room.”

“Oh, okay,” I laugh, thinking he meant he already had a list created.

“I’ve added that to the one I’ve been compiling since the moment I knew you were going to be mine—which is from the moment I looked into your sparkling green eyes.”

I can’t catch my breath. I look at him, completely dumbfounded. “You couldn’t have made a list. We never discussed moving in together, Victor.”

“You told me what your perfect home would be. I committed it to memory. I made a list of needs to give to whoever we hired as a realtor. I did this before this grand scheme of Samuil’s ever came into play. The moment I agreed to a promotion, I made the list because I knew I wasn’t going to move without you by my side.”

“What’s on the list?” I breathe, my heart pounding.

He looks at me with a genuine smile and never falters. “A tall fence around the yard, but one you can see out of, so you don’t feel like you’re a prisoner. The house needs to be all one level with a basement beneath with big rooms. It should feel

airy and spacious without being a home you get lost in. You want a big kitchen with a huge island. You want seats around it and a top where you can roll out cookies and decorate them with your babies. There should be an outdoor area big enough for family gatherings, a playground for at least five children, because you want three, but it's best to be prepared. You want a designated nursery that you can change into an office once the babies are all grown, but you want them close when they're born. You would like six bedrooms so—"

"So my children will always have their own space and never have to give it up no matter who is visiting," I whisper, as tears run down my face.

"I've listened, Kitten. Even when you were deep in your misery. All those times I told you how beautiful you were, and you couldn't see beyond your scar. The truth is I never saw it. All I've ever seen is the woman who owns my soul. You've always been it for me. I don't have any doubts. I never have."

I start to respond, but I have to close my mouth and gather myself before I try again.

"Victor?"

"Yeah, Gia?"

"Take me upstairs. I suddenly feel the need to be very, very loud."

Victor immediately shoves his seat back and comes to me. He picks me up before I even have a chance to stand. I just hold on to him. I don't look at Sam. This isn't about him. This is about me and my soon-to-be fake husband. A husband that I suddenly wished wasn't going to be fake, but very, *very* real.

# angelina

...

I look in the mirror one last time, admiring my sleeveless silk wedding dress with a heart scooped top that accentuates my waist perfectly. It's everything I've always wanted with a modest train in the back but shorter up front. It's modern, but with a flair that screams vintage. I didn't want a veil, so I have my hair in an updo that curls my red hair in perfect coiffed waves and a shining tiara to cap it off. My makeup is understated, and whereas, once upon a time, I would have tried to hide my scar, today I ignore it. My husband-to-be thinks I'm beautiful. Everything is perfect—if you don't count that the priest isn't really a priest, so I'll be wearing Victorio's ring on my finger, but it won't really mean I'm his wife. Oh, and also forget about the fact that Abram, my former stepfather who had one of his men rape and maim me, plans on killing everyone I love today. I sigh.

In the week I've spent here with Victor, I discovered that harsh truth quite by accident. Sam and Victor were discussing how they were going to tell me. Victor felt I needed to know.

Sam never wanted me to know. That way, they wouldn't have to drudge it all back up and hurt me all over again.

I couldn't quite believe it, but it explained why Sam went so crazy trying to protect me and why he also stayed away for so long. He said when he showed back up, he tried to make it off like he didn't know, but really what I saw when he looked at me was just a mixture of fury and guilt because it was all his fault—not being mad at me because I hadn't reached out. Seems I gave him a perfect excuse to hide behind and didn't even know it. At first, I was mad, but Sam was dealing with a lot. I understand. He should have never blamed himself, but I can't convince him of that. I doubt I ever will.

Victor, on the other hand, has been warned he better never keep things from me again and his reply rocked me. He said he would probably keep things from me that didn't pertain to our life together. Sometimes he is going to protect me, and I'd just have to accept that he will do what he needs to do to make me happy. I'm not delicate. I haven't been for a while. I don't want to be treated like that any longer. Victor points out he was always going to tell me about Abram. He knows I could take it.

During this conversation, he said something that sunk into my heart in a way that I know I will always carry it. I close my eyes and smile because I immediately see his face and hear the words he spoke that day.

*“Gia, there's a difference between protecting someone because they are weak and protecting someone because they are precious. You are precious to me. You're the one thing I can't live without. After having you in my life, living without you is impossible. That's why I am your protector. I will do whatever it takes—with whatever force necessary—just to keep you safe.”*

I let it go after that, because really, what could you say to that? Other than I love you, I mean, because that's how I responded.

My head jerks up as the door opens. Antonio comes in with a grin.

“You look beautiful, Angelina,” he says, my name rolling off his tongue.

“Yeah, right,” I laugh, feeling self-conscious.

“I’m serious,” he insists. He reaches out and touches the outline of my scar. “Scars are badges of honor for a survivor. It shows that nothing can stop us. We are strong enough to rise from the ashes and hold our heads proudly. We appreciate the value in life and in love, and we use that knowledge to create beauty. Which is exactly what you’ve done, Angelina.”

“Antonio—”

“Do you really think Vic cares about your scar? All he sees is your courage. That’s all he’s seen from the beginning, little one. If you doubt it, imagine if the roles were reversed. Would it matter to you if he came home with scars, or anything that alters the way he looks? Would it really matter?”

“Not in the least,” I answer honestly.

“I rest my case,” he says with a grin. “Don’t belittle the love that Vic has for you and the love you have for him by worrying about something that is a part of you. It is something that, no matter the dark place it came from, has helped to form you into the special and unique woman you are today. A woman who has the respect of some of the best men I know and the undying love of one of my best friends and trusted member of my family.”

I try to catch my tears before they ruin the light foundation I have on. “Don’t mess up my makeup, Antonio, or I’ll tell Melina on you.”

He laughs and bends down to kiss my forehead. “Be happy, Angelina. Be happy.”

“I will,” I promise.

I never thought I would have this feeling of family in my life. That’s another thing that Victor gave me. This crazy DeLuca family. Emmie might be my cousin, but until Victor barged into my life, I wasn’t truly close to her or uncle Max. I never let myself be open with them. That takes courage I

didn't have back then. How could they care about me when my own parents didn't?

I'm done with that life. I didn't even invite my mother. I will never go out of my way to speak to her again. Racine was never much of a mother to begin with. I'll work hard every day to be much better with my children.

"I was on FaceTime with Emmie and Melina earlier. I'm sorry for taking you away from your wife and little Izzy."

"Nonsense. If I hadn't been here for you, Lina would have never spoken to me again."

I nod. Antonio will stand up as Victor's best man and I know that he's who Victor would have asked, regardless. He's also here for another reason, though. He's here to show the guests that I will be a DeLuca from today on. I also know he's set to give a speech at the reception to say just that.

Victor has assured me he's confident the wedding will go off fine, but that the reception is when Abram and the others will try to attack. He took me to where I'll be staying during the attack and explained to me that I won't see all the men they have, but I will be protected at all times. He needn't have worried about that. I've seen the number of men that have been arriving quietly in the dead of the night, and it still astounds me. I just want him to be safe. That's where all my worry comes from.

"Have you spoken to Victor?" I ask.

"Yes. He's just waiting to say I do. He really loves you."

"I know. This just isn't how I imagined saying I do," I laugh.

"Just let Victor take care of you. It is what he has wanted since the moment he first saw you. All will be well. You'll see."

"I will," I agree.

We say our goodbyes as Sam enters the room. Sam and Antonio are still a little tense around one another, but I see respect in both of them when they talk. That makes me feel

good. Since learning exactly what my stepfather has done, I've learned to forgive Sam for everything he did. He wouldn't tell me everything his father made him do over the years, but what he did tell me was enough to make my heart break. He cried when he spoke about my attack. I tried to make him let that go. What Abram did, had nothing to do with Sam as much as the evil inside the man he was forced to call father. I find myself hoping someday Sam can forgive himself and realize everything was out of his control as much as it was out of mine.

"You look beautiful, Angie," Sam says.

"You don't look too bad yourself, big brother."

He laughs and holds out his arm. "Are you ready to get this show on the road?"

"More than. Hopefully, after today, Abram Levkin will never hurt either of us again."

He wraps me up in his arms, giving me a hug. He hands me my bouquet of white roses wrapped in a large silk lavender bow, right before the music outside starts. I put my hand on his arm, and together we begin walking down the aisle. It really is a beautiful wedding done in white and lavender accents. Large, beautiful bows in the accent color are at the back of the seats. Huge pots of live lavender hydrangeas are scattered about, and the archway is also adorned with fairy lights.

It's all perfection, but when my gaze lands on Victor, my heart stops. He's staring straight at me. When I see the way that he's looking at me, tears sting my eyes. I decide to ignore that this wedding is supposed to be fake. It's perfect, and I'm walking toward the man I love. That's all that matters because I know there's no way to top this. Victor and I could have a million weddings and they wouldn't be as perfect as this one—impending shootout or not.

As I make it to the end of the walkway and stand in front of Victor, my tears begin trailing down my cheeks. The music dies down and Victor's eyes hypnotize me. They're so intense.

“You are so beautiful, Kitten. I can’t believe how blessed I am to be the man you love.”

I take in my man, in his dark black tux, and know that I would never want anyone but him. He’s everything I dreamed about—everything I didn’t know I wanted. He’s perfect.

“I was just thinking that I’m the blessed one and every blessing in my life begins and ends with you, Victor.”

The priest begins speaking with an opening prayer. I know we’re supposed to bow our heads, but I can’t look away from Victor.

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” he finally asks, and my smile deepens because I know Victor hates this part. He’s made it clear ever since the impromptu wedding rehearsal yesterday.

Sam clears his throat. “I do as her brother,” he announces. He holds my hand, giving it a squeeze, before removing it from his arm and putting it over the top of Victor’s.

“Take care of her,” Sam murmurs to him.

Victor nods “Always.”

The priest’s voice is monotone and goes on and on, but really the ceremony passes in a blur except when Victor kisses me. It’s not a nice and sweet kiss. It’s one that has the people gathered talking and laughing.

When we pull away from each other, they all rise from their seats, clapping. Victor takes my hand as we walk down the aisle together.

“Is anything happening?” I whisper to him.

“Not yet, my wife, but don’t worry. You’re safe.”

“It’s not me I’m worrying about. You just take care of you. You’re important. I’ve discovered I like being a bride so much, I might want to do it again,” I answer him. I don’t add that I’d want it to be just a trip to a judge to make it legal.

“Anytime, anyplace. I love you, Gia.” We kiss again and I find I’m right. This is the perfect wedding. It’s untouchable.



# victorio

...

I look around the room briefly, scanning to see where everyone is sitting. I'm also admiring the strategic way that Antonio has our best men stationed. I eventually turn my attention back to my boss as he stands, holding up his gold-rimmed champagne glass, getting ready to make a toast to my beautiful bride. He taps a spoon, getting everyone's attention. Not that he wouldn't anyway, Antonio is a big man, muscular and covered in ink from his head to his toe. He's an imposing presence with short cropped black hair and a full beard.

"It is with a full heart that I welcome Angelina into the DeLuca family. I only apologize that my lovely wife, Lina and Angelina's cousin, Emilia couldn't be here. They both have just delivered two beautiful babies into our family. Something I hope to see Victorio and Angelina do soon."

There's clapping heard, mostly from our own allies, but filtered down through the others. EZ's men that are here yell out various comments like "Get her, Vic!" to just wolf calls. I

chuckle and pull Gia close to me because she's blushing bright red.

“Angelina may be Samuil Levkin's sister, but with her marriage to Victorio, she is also now my sister, too. Angelina, please know that as the leader of the DeLuca Family you are welcomed wholeheartedly. You are loved and will forever be cherished.” Loud cheers erupt and tears fall from my Kitten's eyes. I doubt she realizes the significance of Antonio's speech, but no one here does, which is the point. She is a DeLuca now—untouchable and highly favored—meaning she could call down the hounds of hell and they would be at her command. If there's one thing about Antonio, no one hurts a woman under his protection—no one. “Salute,” he finally toasts, holding his glass out as everyone else raises theirs.

Gia raises hers. “Salute,” she responds, smiling through her tears.

She takes a drink, and I reach out my hand, capturing hers as I do the same. “Salute,” I say loudly, giving my wife a smile before leaning in to kiss her.

Everyone joins in and I'm just about to relax when I hear Ghost through the earpiece I'm wearing. “They're here. Ten Jeeps are just now entering the drive. They tried setting off their explosives. Some left when it didn't go off, but the ones that already passed the open gates are now trapped. EZ's bunch went after the ones that tried to escape.”

I tense and my Kitten notices immediately.

“Victor?” she asks.

“They're here, sweetheart. It's time.”

I see fear written on her face and I hate that it's there. I also see steel determination entering her eyes and I smile. I kiss her while there's still time.

“Please be careful.”

“Always, Kitten,” I vow as I motion for Zane and Levi to come over. “Remember what we discussed.” She nods, but I hate the look of fear still written all over her features.

I hold her neck with both my hands, not letting her look anywhere but right at me. “I love you, Gia.” I kiss her, trying to tell her with one kiss everything I feel for her, but knowing it’s impossible.

“Come back to me.”

“Every damn time, sweetheart. Every damn time.”

I stand, watching her join the men assigned to protect her. “Protect her with your lives!” I order. They nod in agreement and take her to Samuil’s underground bunker that is located inside the garage. The doorway is on the floor. You wouldn’t know it was there unless you have the code to key into the security system. It’s rather ingenious and something Antonio and I have discussed setting up at home. There are other women, and some children present from allies. They’re being escorted along with my woman. Once they get to the bunker, they’re secure. The only way the door can be reopened is from the inside, and only my woman knows the code to do that. There’s one phone inside and when she gets the call, Gia will be the one to let everyone out.

I turn my attention to what we need to do to bring Abram Levkin and his soldiers down. Our men have already been in place and the ones left are doing it now. A signal jammer went up after Abram’s men got the call from him, saying all was good and he’d be there soon. They have no idea that we’re on to them and some were turned back. We want to keep it that way. Ivan knew who many of Abram’s men were, since he had been lulling his brother into thinking he was with him. Once Abram’s spy sent word that all was clear at the reception, Ivan slit his throat and left him to bleed out where Abram’s allies couldn’t see him. We outnumber their side by at least a hundred soldiers. Abram doesn’t know. The men here that have aligned with him have already been surrounded and secured. They will be forced to watch and see what happens when you cross the remaining Levkin brothers and the DeLuca family. This is a show of dominance and will send a message across the board.

I take my men, and along with Antonio, meet up with Ghost and EZ who are already shooting at the Jeeps that have

entered the property. My men fan out and join in the firefight. Some of Abram's men have jumped out of their vehicles and are trying to make it past the gates, but that's just a quicker way to die at this point. They are stuck with nowhere to go. All they can do is fight a losing battle and now they have no cover.

"You fuckers are late. Thought we were going to have to fight this all on our own," EZ growls. "You were about to miss all the fun."

"Which vehicle is Abram in?" I ask. He's my sole target. I'm going to make the motherfucker pay.

"The flashy yellow Jeep in the middle, currently waiting while all the others do the fighting," Ghost shouts, still shooting. Antonio and I have joined in as I scan the vehicle in question.

"That's about right," I mutter, disgusted by Abram's weakness. I'm actually surprised he hasn't taken off running by now. He has to know he's going to die.

I slowly begin to make my way to his vehicle. Antonio is flanking me as we hide by the ornate statues that litter the concrete and brick paved drive. Antonio sees a man in trouble and turns in a different direction. Immediately Ivan and Samuil take my back. "I get the man who hurt my Gia, but if you don't kill Abram, I will. He won't leave here breathing."

"Duh," Ivan says, and if I didn't need my attention on moving forward, I'd flip him off. Samuil is quiet but considering he's taking part in a plan to kill his father, I guess that's understandable.

We work together, making it through the men in front of us, shooting and clearing the way, but making good time. Gradually, we get to the vehicle that Ivan is in. His main men are lying everywhere around the Jeep, dead or bleeding in a way that they'll be dead soon. Ivan and Samuil put the few that do have a pulse out of their misery. I pull the passenger seat door of the Jeep open, gun at the ready. I'm not nervous. I am more than ready.

Disappointment floods me when the seat is empty. There are small pools of blood in the seat and floorboard but no sign of Ivan or his Underboss, Adam Dolan. *Motherfucker.*

“Spread Out!” I bark. “No one returns to the wedding area until these assholes are found.”

I start tracking the blood that’s puddling every so often and pray it leads me to Abram. I can’t let him get away. It’s not an option.

# victorio

...

I'm weaving my way through the dead bodies and vehicles that have clogged the long driveway to the Levkin home. I don't know how Ivan and the others are controlling the police presence here, but I'm glad they seem to have a handle on it. In Miami, we get away with a lot, but something of this magnitude would be deep shit. There are literally at least twenty dead bodies scattering the property and ten times that being subdued and/or injured. What the Levkin brothers intend to do with them all, I do not know. It's not really my problem. I'm only interested in Abram Levkin and his right-hand man, Adam Dolan. Samuil didn't know for sure, but he said whenever his father was involved in shit, Abram's main flunky was usually the one to carry them out. He was almost positive that Adam was the one who hurt Gia. He was going to get revenge himself, but I told him that was my job. I'm betting that if this fucker wasn't the one who carried out the attack on my woman, he definitely knows who did.

I've been tracking someone that was inside Abram's Jeep. I don't have proof it's Abram, but chances are damn good. I

found a trail of blood leading from inside the Jeep to the far side of the estate. I continue following the deep red drops through the grass until it leads me to a fancy courtyard. Jesus, there's a freaking maze made of well-manicured hedges.

Samuil definitely has too much money on his hands. He doesn't know my woman at all. If he did, he'd know that she'd never be truly happy in a home like this. The woman hates stairs. My Kitten always talked about owning a beautiful single level home that was close to the city but had privacy. She wanted a nice size yard, but nothing this huge. Gia wanted to be near the ocean but not right on it. Most of all, she wanted to be near family. This place didn't check even one of those boxes—neither did the antique furniture that looked like it came from a castle somewhere in Russia. My girl preferred minimal fuss and lots of comfort. Thoughts of her make me smile. I want this done so I can get back to celebrating my marriage.

I slow down as I find a man breathing heavily and sitting on the ground, leaning on one of the hedges. Blood is trailing from his groin, down his hips and leg. It looks like he's been shot in the stomach. I feel joy bubble up in me because this is clearly Abram Levkin, and he's in really bad shape.

I step out in front of him, watching as his almost glazed over eyes light on me. "I see the welcome committee beat me to thanking you for coming to my wedding," I taunt. I keep my gun pointed on the motherfucker, praying he'll give me an excuse.

"How did she con you into marrying her? She's just another slut and definitely damaged goods. You're as pathetic as my own son."

"That's odd. The only weak, damaged, pathetic excuse for a human here that I see, is you. You're a waste of space that will soon be dead."

"Go ahead, then. Kill me already."

I shake my head no, denying him what he wants. "Now, Abram, that would just be *too* easy."

“What are you waiting on?” he spits out.

“That would be us,” Sam says, as he and Ivan walk through the maze entrance.

“How fitting. If it isn’t my traitorous brother and sorry excuse for a son, Samuil. Did you come here to gloat? You’re both so pathetic that you had to let the DeLucas do what you couldn’t.”

“Sometimes, I can’t fathom how you could be my father,” Samuil says in disgust.

“That’s because your blood is weak because of your mother. I should have never made an American my wife, no matter her heritage. In the end, you killed her. That’s when I began to understand just how truly weak her blood was. She couldn’t even give me an heir without dying. It didn’t help that the one she did give me wasn’t worth licking my shoes.”

Sam apparently has heard enough. He brings his gun up and shoots Abram in the shoulders, one at a time. Abram grunts, his body vibrating with pain, but he doesn’t scream. I can almost respect that—*almost*.

“You can’t even finish killing me. See how weak you are, Samuil? First you give the woman you’ve always loved to the likes of this,” he scoffs, motioning towards me with a little tilt of his head. His hands are limp in his blood-soaked lap. “Now, you can’t even kill the man you hate.”

“I told you, I never loved Angie like that. She was always family, someone who was good to me when my own father was not,” Samuil denies.

His father closes his eyes. I can’t tell if it’s because of his injuries or if he knows he’s going to die and doesn’t care. Perhaps it is in annoyance that his son is arguing with him instead of helping him. I’m just not sure.

“That’s another problem with you, Samuil. You form emotional attachments. You’ll never be a leader because you can’t see beyond your own blindness.”

I ignore the father and son argument when Ivan Levkin enters my line of vision. He stands still, watching his brother



and his nephew, not really moving. He somehow looks impeccable, despite having been in a gunfight and running the vast estate to find Abram. His arms are behind his back as he keeps looking at his brother in disgust.

“Dear brother,” Abram mocks. “Have you come to shoot me? Then, do it and be done. It could hurt no worse than your betrayal.”

“Sorry, Abe. You’re not worth the bullets.”

“Use my full name,” Abram demands weakly. Ivan ignores him as he pulls out a sword from behind him.

I guess that explains why he hadn’t moved his hands. I don’t even want to know how he carried that damn thing all the way here. I don’t really get intimidated anymore. I’ve lived through and done too much. I can admit, however, that Ivan Levkin is an intimidating motherfucker. He has dirty blonde-mostly brown hair. He’s covered in ink and has the body of a street fighter, and that alone is in direct contrast to the dark pressed suit, white silk shirt, and expensive shoes he is wearing. The bastard looks cool and calm.

“I am going to kill you. I need your head. You gave me the idea, you know,” he says, as if this is an everyday conversation. “I’m going to take your head and use it to make sure everyone knows there’s a new era of leadership here in the US for the Bratva. Don’t worry, though, I’ll make sure all of your little lap dogs understand my message clearly.” He walks over to his brother then, sword in tow. He leans down so his mouth is near Abram’s ear and whispers something to him in Russian. I have no idea what he’s saying, but I can admit to being curious.

Ivan positions himself, then swings the sword violently. It slices through Abram’s neck like it was nothing more than hot butter. The head falls immediately, rolling to the ground in a bloody, gruesome mess. Abram’s ugly face is frozen in terror. I look at Samuil to see what his response is to seeing his father like that. He just turns and leaves. I guess a man like Abram did nothing to earn loyalty or care.

Ivan grabs his brother's head by the hair, carrying it and the now bloody sword. I follow behind, wondering if I will ever find Adam Dolan. He's the one I want to make suffer. When I exit the maze, Ivan is sitting in a golf cart, Abram's head at his feet. I guess that explains how they got here looking like they hadn't even sweated.

Samuil walks over to me, clearing his throat. "You drive, Victor. I'll sit on the back. I'd rather not even sit beside any piece of the scum that was supposed to be my father." I nod as I go around Sam, giving him my back as I shift to get in behind the wheel of the cart.

"Victor, watch out!" Sam yells from the back of the cart.

I turn just as a man steps out of the maze, gun aimed at me and smirking. There's no need to move. If he goes for my head, I'm already dead. Samuil has other plans, though. He lets out an unholy scream and tackles the man with a stone statue of a turtle—one of many that have been placed along the border of the maze. He slams it into the other man's head as he takes him down, knocking the gun so the shot is off kilter and I hear the bullet wizz over my head. I take my gun out as Sam rolls off the now unconscious—maybe dead—man with blood oozing from the side of his head.

Hope ignites inside of me. "Is this..."

Samuil nods, his voice hoarse. "It's Adam Dolan."

I finally smile. "Let's throw him in the back and you can keep your gun trained on him until I can get him tied up. I have plans for this bastard." Samuil works with me and then hops on the back seat. I pick up Adam's gun, before getting into the golf cart. "It seems I owe you one."

Sam shrugs. "Just make Angie happy. That's all the thanks I need. Besides, you would have done the same for me."

I pretend to think about it and shrug as I guide the golf cart back to the house. "I would have thought about it maybe," I allow. Ivan laughs and Sam does, too. They probably think I'm joking. They don't understand that I picture him trying to kiss my woman often. I probably wouldn't have saved him at all,

but I don't explain. "Before we get back to the house, I have to ask Ivan. What did you say to your brother before you killed him?"

Ivan smirks. "I told him in the end there could be only one."

"You did not quote Highlander," I laugh.

He shrugs with a grin still in place. "He loved that movie. Watched it a million fucking times. It's the only reason I carted this damn sword everywhere for the last three months, waiting for my opportunity."

I shake my head. When we get back to the house, Ivan tells me to drive around to the wedding venue. That's where all of our so-called allies which have been working with Abram are at the moment. Other allies are there too, but it's good for everyone to see what happens when you cross the Levkins, I suppose. Ivan gets out, snatching the hair of Abram's head in his grasp. He walks to the center of the room and drops his head down without care.

"It seems someone decided to end my brother's life tonight. Officially myself, Mikhail, Victor, and my nephew Samuil will be leading this family forward. I would hope you all realize what happens when someone crosses not only my family, but those who are family by marriage to our beloved Angelina. There is now a strong alliance between us and the DeLucas. You cross one, you cross all. He kicks Abram's head toward the ones that have aligned themselves with Abram. Meandering along the bloody path left in its wake until he makes it to where the head stopped. He picks it up, leaning into a few of the guests that are standing there. "Boo!" he yells in their face, shaking Abram's head at them, as the congealed blood splatters over their fine clothes. Then, with a laugh, he tosses the head to one of his security team. "Clean up, aisle seven," he yells, before walking out. Antonio is now standing beside me. Samuil is still in the golf cart, gun pointed at Adam. "I think I like him. I should send him a present for mentioning our family too. Hmm... What does he like, Sammy?" I glance over my shoulder at Sam as Antonio does the same.

“Women with big tits and a good ass. He’s not choosy about anything else they might have.”

Antonio chuckles, “Interesting.”

“I wouldn’t be too eager to send him a gift. You have a mole inside our organization that reports back to these assholes,” I tell him, making Antonio stiffen. Immediately there’s a pissed-off vibe coming from him.

Samuil has found some zip ties in the small console of the golf cart and is busy securing my prisoner’s hands. “They weren’t moles. They won’t be there when you return.”

“What does that mean?” Antonio growls.

Samuil shrugs. “From the moment we hired them, their job was to make sure Angelina stayed safe and nothing touched her. Anything else they did for you we didn’t ask about—unless it pertained to our operation. Which until Victorio headed our way with a war party—didn’t.”

“Then, how did Zervas Cirillo know about them?” Antonio asks, mentioning the man who had bragged to Marco’s wife that I had moles in my operation. “I don’t like people playing games in my organization. Those that do usually end up dead.”

“Cirillo knew because we needed him to believe Ivan was completely dark and had eyes on DeLucas’ Athens base. It got us what we wanted.”

“And what was that?” I find myself asking.

“Proof on who exactly Abram’s allies were. If you look closely over there, you’ll see some of Toban Cirillo’s people. He apparently *‘disappeared’*,” Sam says, making the air quotes. So, we couldn’t invite him, but we wanted that family to know their time is up.” With that, he walks off.

“What are you going to do when you find out who the plants were?” I ask, Antonio.

He shrugs. “I’m not sure. Depends on who it was. If it was minor players? Maybe nothing overt, but I’ll get a message

across. Who's this fucker?" he asks, motioning toward the golf cart.

"I'm pretty sure he's the one who attacked Gia. He's going home with me. I'm just not sure if it's in pieces or still breathing."

Antonio stares at him, contemplating something. "Finish him so he doesn't have to ride on the same plane as your woman. Make it hurt but get it over quick. You have a wife to fuck, and that's more important."

With that advice, he walks off, leaving me standing there.

# victorio

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I wanted to make this fucker's pain last, but Antonio's words kept ringing in my ear. He was right, I have a wife I need to fuck. When Samuil led me down to what he called the dungeon—which was basically a hidden cavern that had been cemented with drains and a jail cell—I stopped a minute to take in the dead bodies which the Levkins' men had packed in. Thankfully, people were searched before admittance for cellphones and listening devices upon entry to the wedding. If they had them, they were stripped from them and could only be retrieved when leaving. That was needed just in case anyone wanted to try to report the massacre that happened today, so there would be no evidence. The bodies would be gone before daybreak.

*The Levkin brothers were nothing, if not efficient.*

I've now been down here for a while, by myself, torturing Adam Dolan. I know I need to end it. The bodies around me were on ice, but they needed to be handled sooner rather than later. Plus, my Gia texted me she was going to bed. I told her

I'd be there soon and I'm not lying to her—especially on my wedding night. I'm done with this.

I look down at the naked Adam Dolan, bloody with dozens of crisscrossed stripes all over his body from a whip I found hanging on the wall. There was also one long jagged, deep cut that was still oozing blood that followed the same path as the one on Gia's face. I had also inflicted some knife wounds in various areas on his body, too. I got bored and did it to pass the time while the asshole tried to convince me that he wasn't the one to hurt my Kitten. Other than that, I haven't done much. Okay, I did shoot his kneecaps out. It looked like fun and it mostly was. I did that after he finally admitted that he was the one who touched my woman.

I didn't want to do anything to kill him, because when that time came, I wanted him to feel it all. He was stretched out on the cold, cement floor with a chain on each wrist, pulling him until his shoulders popped out of socket. His legs were done the same way, but sadly no popping, just his screams of pain and protest.

“Adam, I think our time is over. I just wanted to see what kind of sick fuck it took to try to destroy an innocent woman. Did it make you feel big to do that to her? Because I have to tell you motherfucker, looking at you, I don't see anything but putrid rot. Which, by the way, is what you'll be when this is done. I'm going to have my boys melt your body down to nothing but the slime you are. You see there's this big pig farm down the road. They have a homemade sewage plant and that's where you're going. I'm going to pour you into it to become one with the pig shit, because that's all you ever were.”

“Fuck you! She was just a girl. Abram had me do that to lots of them. He got off on it. She was worthless. Her own mother gave us the keys to get into the girl's house. She even told us to teach her a lesson.” He tried to laugh, but he was wheezing and too weak from pain. His words chill me to the bone. I silently vow that this is something that my Gia will never find out. I'm also going to make her mother pay.

“You’re doing all this over some pussy? What a joke. She wasn’t even the best I’ve had.”

I step on his groin then, wishing I had on my boots, but it doesn’t matter, it’s not like he can move. Then, I take my knife and look over my shoulder at him with a smile that I’m sure is sinister looking, because right now, the only pleasure I have is knowing I’m ending his sorry life. “My knife is pretty dull. I spent twenty minutes—while the men were getting you ready for me—throwing the sharp blade into one of those turtle statues around here.”

“Fuck you,” he mumbles, but I feel the terror that is trembling through him. It makes me happy.

“I did it so this would *really* hurt. In case you were wondering, *I’m* going to get off on that. You’re going to be the best kill I’ve ever had. I’m so fucking excited over killing you. I’m actually planning on celebrating it for a while.”

“J-just do it.”

“Come on. You *should* be asking how I’m going to commemorate your death. Oh, never mind. I’ll be nice and tell you. When I finally do end your miserable, stinking life, I’m going to cut your heart out and bring it back to Miami with me. I’m going to dig a hole and bury it just outside my fence line and then, every fucking morning and every fucking night, I’m going to yank out my dick, which—*spoiler alert*—is much bigger than your pitiful example of one, and piss all over the only part left of you to rot.”

“Just kill me already,” he snaps, but his voice is weak. He also pisses himself. Thankfully, I don’t have to touch that end. I grab his dick and begin sawing through it. The knife is definitely dull, so it’s making jagged cuts. Eventually, it makes it through, as I blot out the fucker’s screams. When I grab it by the sawn-off base, I turn, holding up the limp-ass thing, looking down at him. “Oh, God, oh, God,” he cries, panicking and making me laugh.

“I’m not a religious man, but I really doubt God is listening to you.” I push the head of his cock against his mouth. It kind of folds in half, but the bastard keeps his mouth



closed. I sigh. “I knew you were going to make this hard. Which is ironic since your dick will never be that way again.”

“You need some help?” Antonio asks from across the room, his eyes sparkling with laughter.

I nod. “Open his mouth for me. That way I don’t have to touch anymore of his junk than I am now.”

Antonio comes down and slaps Adam on the side of his mouth. “Open wide, asshole,” he laughs, shaking his head as he watches me. “Well, maybe not that wide. You sure didn’t have much to work with, did you?”

The man clamps his mouth shut, causing both me and Antonio to exhale in irritation. “They never make it easy,” I mutter.

“Nope, but sometimes that’s fun,” Antonio says, pulling his gun from the back of his pants. He uses the butt of his gun to shove it against the man’s teeth. Antonio doesn’t take no for an answer. He shoves harder and I’m pretty sure some of the bastard’s teeth break—not that I care. Then Antonio uses his hands to pull Adam’s bleeding mouth apart. “Do it quick,” he orders. “And I get to hit you every time I feel that man’s dick touching my fingers.”

I laugh and stuff the limp appendage into our victim’s mouth, gagging him with it.

“Look at that. He deep throats like a natural,” I joke.

“He’s probably done it a million times for old Abram,” Antonio points out.

I nod in agreement as I bring up my knife to make sure Adam sees it. It’s covered in his blood and the man’s eyes go round with fear or hell, maybe it’s the pain and loss of the blood—either way I enjoy the look. I let the pointed end of my blade drag against my victim’s chest, making the shape of a heart just because. “I’m afraid this is going to hurt, but hey, when I finally get it cut out, you won’t feel anything anymore. You also won’t be breathing the same air as my wife. I think we could both agree this will be a win-win for both of us. Mine will just be happier.” The bastard says something in

response, but it comes off muffled because he's busy trying to swallow down his limp, pencil dick just to breathe. I get to work, sawing into his chest to cut out his heart. Antonio hums while I do it. I look over at him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm just thinking you were made to be my Capo. I never realized how much alike we are. Plus, we're both too damn pretty for our own good." I roll my eyes and go back to work.

"Shut up and leave me alone. I got a wife to go fuck." Antonio laughs harder and hell, I join in.

# angelina

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## *One Month Later*

“Victor! Guess what—wait, what are you doing?”

“Pissing.”

“Outside the fence?” I ask, as he turns around to zip up his pants.

He shrugs. “What were you going to tell me?”

“What?” I ask, before I remember what I came out to tell him. “Oh, I was looking on my phone at the daily news and do you remember that documentary we watched a while back about the man who killed his pregnant wife?”

“Vaguely rings a bell,” he responds.

“Karma crept up on him yesterday. Apparently, he was killed in a prison riot. Someone shanked him. I know it makes me horrible, but I like that he won’t be free and living a good life—especially since his wife and child didn’t get that same option.”

He grins and then leans down to kiss me. The kiss is way too sweet and quick. “I’m glad you’re happy, Kitten,” he replies gently, kissing me once more.

“Well, I am, except you really shouldn’t be peeing outside the property line,” I admonish.

“Would you rather I did it in the yard, Kitten?” he asks innocently.

“You don’t own this place yet. You just put an offer in. Besides, you’re allowed to pee inside. The water is on, you know.”

He smirks. It’s a look I love so much that my knees get weak. “*We* don’t own this place yet, but *we* will. I told the realtor to pay whatever it took to get the place. I don’t give a fuck.”

“No, *you*. It’s not ours. We’re not really married,” I remind him. “You seem to be forgetting that. You even went so far as to hang our fake marriage license on your wall.”

He puts his arms around me, pulling me in closer. “I told you to start planning the wedding you want, Gia. You’re the one dragging your feet. You’re also the one that picked this house out and therefore it’s *ours*.”

His words make my heart skip a beat. I do love this house. It’s a huge, one-story mid-century home. The architecture was much like that of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian designs, which mean there are brick, wood, and lots of windows. I adored it at once. I’m not sure that Victor did, but he watched me as I ecstatically described the place to him and called his realtor, meaning he put in the offer to buy sight unseen. He seems to like it now though—now being his first walk through of the place. Or maybe not since he’s peeing outside the fence. I shake my head and turn my attention back to the conversation that we seem to have more and more. “Honey, aren’t you afraid we need time together? I want you to be sure you are comfortable with marriage. I never want you to feel like you were forced into it by Sam’s crazy family,” I explain.

He cups my neck, his hold solid and sure. I love it when he holds me like that. “Jesus, woman. We have lived together longer than some marriages last,” he says, and I nod, admitting that he had a good point.

“True, but those marriages should have never happened. When I say I do, I want it to be forever.”

“You already said I do, and it will be forever. I’m not letting you go. Is this *your* way of telling me you don’t want to be married to me? That you are *unsure*?”

“No. I’m saying I want you to be positive.”

“What happens when you turn up pregnant, Gia? Are we going to keep waiting until you think I’m really going to stay married to you? What will finally make you believe what I’ve been saying since day one—which is that you are it for me? You’re everything to me.”

“I’m not going to get pregnant,” I grumble, but suddenly I’m not so sure. I haven’t been taking birth control. I haven’t even thought about it. Plus, we’ve been going at it like rabbits. “Oh God, what if I am pregnant?” I whine with my very next breath.

Victor laughs. “Then I’ll stop wearing my dick out to get you that way.”

“*What?*” I cry.

“Baby, I’ve been fucking you so much that my dick and balls are starting to hurt. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Well, it did seem like a lot, but it’s not like I’m experienced at these kinds of things.”

“You use that excuse often, but I’d say you’ve been getting quite a bit of experience,” he jokes, making me shake my head at him.

“Okay fine, but still marriage is a big step.”

“One we’ve already taken.”

“Not truly.”

“I’m afraid so, baby.”

“Honey, just because you hang a fake marriage certificate on a wall doesn’t make it real.”

“True,” he allows with a nod.

“Then—”

“Unless, I made sure that despite the circumstances, we were actually married, and the license *is* binding and legal.”

“I—*What* did you say?”

“I said I lied when I told you we’d go for a fake wedding if you weren’t sure.”

“You lied.”

“Yep,” he says, looking proud.

“Why on earth would you do that? Tell me you’re joking, Victor.”

“I did it because I knew if I left it up to you, we might never get married. You’ve got it in your head that I’m somehow shortchanging myself by marrying you, and where the fuck you get that from, I don’t have a clue.”

His words score a hit so deep that I stumble backwards—or I would have if he wasn’t holding me. “Victor...”

“Honest to God woman, if anyone is getting the bad end of the stick here, it’s you. We both know what I do for a living. My hours are anything but normal and you have to go around with security guards all the time. I’m possessive as hell and I can’t keep my hands off of you.”

“I thought you said you were only trying to get me pregnant,” I grumble.

“Well, I won’t lie. I know if we have a baby that’s another tie you can’t break. I want you tied to me every way I can get you, Kitten.”

“Vic—”

“But if you want me to be honest, my balls and cock might be sore, but I still want to fuck you right now. I want to take you into our new house, bend you over that kitchen island

you're so crazy about, and fuck you so hard that we can't move."

"That might be a very bad thing to do," I whisper, feeling warm all over.

"I think it would be a very good thing to do," he counters, his eyes getting darker with hunger as he moves the tip of his index finger down my cheek.

My breathing speeds up as my heart beats harder. I can feel the inside of my thighs get damp. My attraction to Victor is just that potent. There's no way I can even begin to hide it—mostly because I don't even want to try. "What if the realtor fails and it ends up not being our house?"

He grins at my use of 'our', and I just smile and let him know I'm not going to fight with him about our marriage. He knows me well. I probably would have driven him crazy. Plus, I've regretted telling him we should make the marriage fake from the moment I said it.

"Won't happen. My woman loves this house. She wants it and what my Kitten wants, she gets."

"Well, considering there's a chance I'm not pregnant, it would probably make sense to try out that kitchen island," I reason.

He picks me up, cradling me in his arms. "Fuck, I love you."

"I love you, too, although I am wondering how I can talk to you about not peeing outside our fence—or inside it unless you're in the bathroom."

"You probably aren't going to be able to talk me out of it. I'm actually thinking of getting one of those turtle statues that your stepbrother is so in love with and putting it on that spot."

"Like the ones he has all over his grounds? Are you crazy?"

"I'm crazy about you."

"What if someone sees you, peeing? I have to be honest, since we're married, your dick belongs to me and only me

now. I don't want anyone else seeing it.”

He leans down and kisses my lips as we walk into the house. “We’re against private property filled with brush and palm trees, sweetheart. It’s also land we own—or will when we get the papers signed. That means no one will see my dick. You’re safe. Just let me away with it. It’s a family tradition to bring us good luck.”

I narrow my eyes and stare at him. “You just made that up.”

“Hush up, woman,” he admonishes as he lets me down. I stand in front of him, unable to do anything but smile up at the man I love—the man I’m *married* to. “You need to undress so I can fuck you.”

“Okay, baby,” I respond and then I do as he orders, because this man is everything to me and I know he always will be.



# epilogue

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Victorio

## *Four Months Later*

I finish putting the turtle over the hole I just filled in. I always keep my promises. I know Gia thinks I'm insane, but thankfully she hasn't questioned me about it. I whip my dick out and piss on the only thing left of the bastard. Once done, I zip and turn back to our new house and let myself in the side gate.

I go to the end of the house and let myself through the French doors. I quietly shut it back and stare down at my gorgeous wife in our bed. She's still asleep and the sight of her glossy auburn hair lying on her pillow takes my breath away. The sheet has fallen to her hips, revealing her stomach and I smile, thinking that my child is growing inside of her.

She never planned a new wedding. My Gia said as weird as it sounded, she felt the wedding was perfect. The only thing she wished was different, would have been having Emilia and Melina there. To her, it wasn't worth replacing the joy she had that day. As for the stuff after the wedding, she reasoned that she wasn't involved, so it didn't change her mind.

That sums my woman up perfectly. She's nothing if not gorgeous and practical. *She's perfection.* Every single day with her just gets better. I don't know what I did to deserve ever having her in my life, but I'm thankful, just the same.

I lean down and pull the sheet up to cover her beautiful body. She murmurs in her sleep. "Victor..."

My heart squeezes in my chest. I can't resist gently pressing my lips against her forehead. Thankfully, that doesn't wake her. It's only six in the morning. My Kitten needs her sleep as her body nourishes our child, helping him to grow. That thought just fuels my happiness. It could be a girl and I'll be thankful either way.

I move through our house with ease. I have to admit, I didn't give a shit about this house when Gia found it. I would have been happy living in a damn tent if she was with me. Still, the longer we're here and my woman puts her touches in the place, the more I like it. It suits us perfectly. When we first moved in, I wasn't entirely happy with so many windows and glass doors. I decided to change all the old glass with new bullet proof panels. I also made sure that it was the type where it was only reflective if you looked through it from the outside. That allows us to see fine on the inside, but no one can spy on us. It's probably not needed, and Gia kept telling me that, but it made me feel better. As did the guards at the end of our driveway and the new guard shack. Gia fought me a little, but she let me have my way. When it comes to my family, I'm taking no chances. When a man has everything, he can also lose it and I'm doing everything I can to make sure that doesn't happen.

I get to my office and sit down at my desk. I would have liked to sleep a little longer today, but Antonio will be calling any time. I've moved into the position of Capo with relative ease. I have to say, I like my new job. Niko has helped with the transition, but truthfully, he and Antonio weren't wrong. I had learned enough by being in their inner circle that it wasn't that big of a change for me. I now have men I trust surrounding me and if I give an order, they all make sure it's carried out.

Antonio is still pissed over Zane and Lodi. It turns out they were the men working for the Levkin brothers. Zane didn't bother him as much. He was never involved in the inner workings of the DeLuca organization, but Lodi? He definitely was. He had been working for Antonio a long time—hell, he worked for Antonio's father as a young kid. Maxwell brought him into the DeLuca organization, and he worked his way up

the ladder so far that he knew way too much to be a plant. He left a note for Antonio that he and Samuil had apparently been like brothers growing up. When Sam contacted him to see if he would agree to watch over Angelina, he decided he wanted to return home and help Samuil and his uncles rebuild. He said all the DeLuca secrets were safe, he would never divulge them. I'm pretty fucking positive that didn't pacify Antonio. In fact, I'm sure of it. I don't know what it means for the alliance between us and the Levkins, but if Antonio finds a way to end Lodi, I'm positive he will.

My phone rings, pulling me from my thoughts as I answer. "Mornin' Boss."

"Tell me you have some good news for me," he mumbles. "It's too early for bad news."

Antonio's grouchy voice makes me smile. He hates early mornings since his daughter was born. Apparently, little Izzy has her days and nights mixed up and keeps them awake until the wee hours of morning.

"You're the one that set up the phone conference this early," I remind him.

"That's because after we hang up, I'm taking my woman and daughter to Greece to visit Marco and Helena, and I want this little issue wrapped up and done."

"It seems Racine decided to go with option A."

"Fucking bitch," Antonio laughs.

My first order of business as a DeLuca Capo was a job that I did for myself. I made it a mission to find Angelina's mother, Racine, and make her life a living hell. That began with me hacking her credit accounts and canceling her cards. For fun, I had her electric disconnected and cleaned out her bank accounts. The fact I put her cell number on as many call lists as I could find was just for shits and giggles. I especially loved that most of the lists were for products for elderly care. That had to be a blow for someone so concerned with staying young. The woman had spent a mint on plastic surgery. That's one reason it was so effortless to cancel her credit cards. She

was overextended on most of them. Next, I pulled strings and by that, I mean I bought a chain of banks, and called in her mortgage. She was behind a couple of payments, so that made it easy, too.

Racine, ever the clever whore, had some fancy doctor lined up in her sights. They were planning on getting married next month. Racine had already spent a fortune on the wedding. I decided to put a stop to that. I did that by having Sloan stake out her house and film Ms. Racine taking it up the ass by her gardener. I then sent those pictures to her prospective groom. That had been particularly satisfying, except the image made it so I couldn't enjoy anal with my wife for weeks. Thankfully, once I bury myself in my woman, my mind stops functioning, and I was able to overcome that, eventually.

Finally, knowing Racine was completely broke, no groom in sight, and forced to live in a friend's home, I approached her and let her know who was behind all of her recent misfortunes. Then, I gave her a choice. She refused to make a choice and ordered me to leave. I did, but I wasn't finished. Yesterday, I had two of my most trusted men drag her into an abandoned building and tie her up in the same manner Angelina was years ago. I left her like that for hours and threatened to do to her exactly what she let happen to her own daughter. Then, because I'm a sadistic fuck, I carved through her Botoxed and silicone perfection to give her a scar in the same manner that Angelina had.

Eventually I grew bored with her tears and cries for mercy and told her she could either return to Russia to mooch off her family there—with the caveat that she would never contact Gia again—*or* she could live here. I cautioned her that if she chose that option, I would make it my life's mission to continue fucking with her life and anyone that helped her.

Racine, being true to her mercenary ways, chose to return to Russia. Of course, she didn't know that once she was there, Samuil was going to take over. Old Racine wasn't going to have an easy life in Russia. In fact, she will probably live her life in a jail cell for some trumped up charge that she can't defend.

“Is there anything else I need to know before I head out?” Antonio asks, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“I don’t think so. Things are going pretty calm.”

“That’s good after the whirlwind we’ve been going through since Maxwell’s death.”

“You’ve got that right,” I agree.

“Check in with me and keep me updated,” he says, before hanging up.

“Will do.”

Once our conversation is over. I get up and make my way back to the bedroom, to my woman, my world, and my reason to keep going.

*My everything.*

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