



*A Tattered Curtain
novel*

DREADFUL

GREER RIVERS

Breadful

A TATTERED CURTAIN NOVEL

GREER RIVERS

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BGP Dark World

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Awful

Fifteen years ago, a girl sacrificed her life for mine. Ever since, justice is all I've wanted.

Then Talia entered the stage.

I'm the barber's son. The Boss' nephew.
A prince without a throne and only revenge to fuel me.

She's the bakers' granddaughter. Sweet Tallie.
Their *dolce nipotina*. My *vipera*.

My desires have always stopped at vengeance. She's made me want more.
But my vendetta will destroy everything in my path, and I won't risk bringing her into my world.

I never suspected she'd snake her way in on her own.

I craved a bite of her sugar and spice, but my little *vipera* is fangs and venom.
Now all I want is to be bitten.

Playlist

- “How Villains Are Made” by Madalen Duke
- “Little Girl Gone” by CHINCHILLA
- “Killer” By Valerie Broussard
- “Just Pretend” by Bad Omens
- “I’m a Sucker for a Liar in a Red Dress” by Adam Jensen
- “New Bad Habit” by Adam Jensen
- “I Feel Like A God” by DeathbyRomy
- “Vicious” by Bohnes
- “Throne” by Saint Mesa
- “Trouble” by Valerie Broussard
- “Monsters in My Mind” by Cloudy June
- “When You Say My Name” by Chandler Leighton
- “You” by Keaton Henson
- “Seven Devils” by Florence + The Machine
- “Dead To Me” by Chloe Adams
- “AMERICAN HORROR SHOW” by SNOW WIFE
- “Daylight” by David Kushner
- “Monster” by Ely Eira
- “The Kids Are All Rebels” by Lenii
- “Mastermind” By Taylor Swift

[Get the full playlist here!](#)

A Note From The Author

In writing this book, I was lucky enough to work with consultants in the Italian language and culture, and in BDSM. Their insight was invaluable and I couldn't have done this without them.

These characters' colloquialisms, mannerisms, and speech are different than their Italian cousins, and certain words and phrases have been used metaphorically in order to tell their story. Additionally, creative license was used regarding Italian *mafiosi* references, nomenclature, and structure to benefit the story.

There is also a scene late in this novel that features shibari style binding and inverted suspension. While both of these can be found and align with similar practices in the BDSM/Kink community, this scene does NOT represent a proper BDSM relationship or practice. These activities are not meant to be accurate or representative reflections of real kink, and should not be used as inspiration for any real-life experiences. If these things interest you, please find a community near you to learn more from experienced mentors. This book should in no way be used as research or a how-to guide for the kinks portrayed herein.

The Tattered Curtain series can be read in any order and is a series of complete standalones inspired by classic stories and stage productions with tragic ends. *Dreadful* is a dark, modern-day, spicy reimagining transforming classic tragedies such as *The Tale of Sweeney Todd* (as published in the Penny Dreadfuls in the late 1700s), *Hamlet*, and the myth of Medusa, into dark and twisty HEAs.

TRIGGER/ CONTENT/ TROPE WARNING

Dreadful is a dark romance. It should only be read by mature readers (18+).
Seriously, read this trigger warning.

[Full list of triggers/content warnings and tropes can be found here.](#)

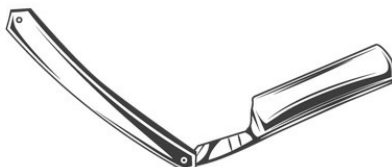
Protect your heart, friends. Reader discretion is advised.

*To everyone with a Medusa tattoo.
I believe you.*

“...at the bottom of her heart there lay some grief which had not yet been spoken...”

Thomas Peckett Prest
Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street

Prologue



Sever

Fifteen years ago

“The butler, the maids, and gardener... The driver, capo, and priest... The judge, godmother-and-father, to them I beg to leave. To them I beg to leave.”

There she goes again.

The girl’s silly song wakes me from my post-lunch nap. When I sit up too quickly, I swallow back a groan. The bruises from the capo’s fists aren’t as bad today, but they still suck.

I should be used to all of this by now. Every day has been the same since I was shoved into this tiny room by one of my father’s men.

No...one of my *uncle’s* men.

The capo was supposed to be loyal, but no one devoted to my father would kidnap and beat his ten-year-old son. They’d die for their Boss before betraying him. Which means my uncle is gaining supporters and his feud with my father has somehow gotten worse.

My mother thinks I’m too young to learn the business, but there’s no escaping it when I’m torn in the middle. The rivalry between my father and his half brother runs deep. From the moment my uncle was born, they’ve had to pretend not to hate each other “for the good of the Family.” My father tries to keep their arguments private to avoid being seen as weak. That secrecy and

his stubborn need to win are probably why no one's rescued me yet. My uncle wants something, and he's threatening my life to get it. But this is Family business, and Family business is always kept quiet, even when someone gets hurt.

Especially when someone gets hurt.

While the girl keeps singing, I rub my eyes, still blurry from a nap that's made me more tired than before. Once my vision clears, I glance at the basement's small bulletproof window to figure out what time it is. The window is high up the wall and level with the garden outside. But even through the bushes and flowers, the setting sun's pink sky beams against my aunt's flowery wallpaper.

It's plastered on every wall throughout the Vincelli brownstone, and my mom hates it. She says one of Boston's oldest and nicest homes on Beacon Hill should always be in style. I'm surprised *zia Antonella* bothered wallpapering this room at all. It's not like they let guests come down here, so I don't know why she tried to make the underboss's jail cell look pretty.

I've been to this house plenty of times for Sunday dinner, but never as a prisoner. I always thought my *zia* was a good woman like my mother, only caught up in our messed-up world like we all are. I was wrong, though. She knows exactly what's going on in this house, and she's letting it happen.

My eyes pinch closed at the thought.

The girl's odd melody seeps through the wall and into my mind. If our plan works tonight, this will be the last time I hear it. The thought weirdly makes my chest hurt.

Even after being stuck next door to each other for days, this song is pretty much all I know about her. Every time the guards hear us we get punished, so we always wait until they're gone to talk about anything and everything besides ourselves. I think she's younger than me, maybe seven? I don't care, since she's still wicked cool and way smarter than any of the kids in my class at St. Catherine's.

The words she's made up are to a familiar tune, "Three Blind Mice." I hear it all the time during recess while the girls jump rope, but her lyrics are somehow even creepier than the original. I think she's trying to make herself feel better before the strange man comes by again.

She stops mid-song with a sharp inhale. Heavy footsteps grow louder as they come toward us down the hallway, and I hold my breath with her. My fingers hurt as they squeeze the sheets beneath me, but I'm prepared if I need

to make a break for it.

The fading light flickers through the window, dancing shadows on the walls. When the leaves outside wave in the wind, they trick me into thinking the door is opening, and all my muscles try to jolt out of my skin and flee.

It's not dark enough yet, which means it's too early for what we had planned. What if she's not ready?

I swallow the need to throw up as the steps come closer. There's no way I'm looking away from the door, not even to hurl up my late lunch.

"Fucking gardener," the capo grumbles. "I'll call in a replacement tomorrow. *Quell'idiota* stepped on garden shears and nearly cut his toe off. Antonella saw the whole thing."

He passes by our rooms, and relief slows my racing heart. I want to get the hell out of here, but this plan the girl has made up is missing major parts that she won't tell me. It makes me nervous that I don't know what she has in mind, and if she gets hurt because of me, I'll never forgive myself.

Once the capo's voice completely disappears down the hallway, I release the mattress from my death grip and collapse to my side. I'm facing the wall between me and the girl when I hear a slight rustling. Three small knocks thump against the wall next to my head, and I smile.

"Boy?" Her whisper hisses through the vent at the head of my bed. I return the knocks without hesitation and roll onto my stomach so I can answer.

"I'm here, *girl*."

"You always make fun of me for calling you that." Her melodic giggle makes my grin widen. "It's our last night. Will you finally tell me your name?"

I sigh. "I can't. But maybe if you tell me yours—"

"Yeah, right." She snorts. "If you don't give me your name, I'm not giving you mine."

She's trying to play it off, but I can tell I've hurt her feelings. Once we've escaped, it'll be safer if she doesn't know that the Boss's son was used in some twisted revenge plot by his own uncle. And if she's down here, her family has already betrayed the Mafia in some way.

At that last thought, my curiosity gets the best of me, and I can't let it go. "Okay then, what if you at least tell me why you're here?"

"Um...my parents died. There's no one left for me, so I'm here."

My brow furrows. With what she's going through, there's got to be more

to it than that. I open my mouth to ask more questions, but she interrupts me.

“What about you? I told you why I’m here. Now you go.”

Crap. I should’ve known she’d ask me the same. I search for a way to explain while still keeping her safe.

“I think...Claudio wants my dad’s business. If I’m not, um...*around*, it’ll be easier to take over. He’s always been jealous.”

That last part might be too much, but I’m grateful when she answers back with more information.

“Someone took my dad’s business, too. Why are people so mean?”

I shrug even though she can’t see me. “I don’t know. That’s my world.”

Is it your world, too?

“Antonella let me play in the garden today.” She’s changing the subject, but I’m afraid to push her more so I let her. “She showed me her favorite flower, the Queen of Night tulip. I also got to help her in her greenhouse.”

My mom and *zia* Antonella love that garden. Mom used to study plants before she gave up her job to be a Boss’s wife, and I think she misses it. I don’t care about flowers, but I’d give anything to go outside right now.

“Ugh. No fair. She always takes you outside.”

She giggles again. “Well, at least *you* didn’t have to go to confession yesterday.”

“Confession? What do *you* have to confess? You’re just a kid.”

“I don’t know.” Her voice gets low and soft like she’s embarrassed. “The priest says I’m a liar.”

“A liar?” My fists ball up. “Which priest was it? Tell me, and I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” she grumbles. “He’s a grown-up. There’s nothing we can do, especially not down here.”

I huff and shake my head. “Fine. Tell me the plan again.”

“Ooh, I figured out the rest of it today.” Her excitement makes her talk fast, but it’s nice to hear her happy again. “We’ll sneak up to the kitchen and go out the dog door into the garden. There’s a bunch of black and purple flowers that hide holes where the wall is broken.”

“You were able to find all that while Antonella was babysitting you?” My brows furrow, and I narrow my eyes at the wallpaper, trying to imagine the girl on the other side.

“Psh. Once she has her gossip magazine, she doesn’t pay attention to me. Tonight, we’ll use those holes and get out of here.”

“Okay, sounds good. But, before all that, with the man, how are you

going to get past—”

“The butler. The maids. The gardener—”

The lyrics begin in a hurry this time, and I sigh as her footsteps pad away from the vent. The girl’s stubborn. Once she decides she doesn’t want to talk anymore, nothing I say will change her mind.

As always, she’s refusing to talk about this huge part of the plan. The one I have nothing to do with, and I’ve had nightmares imagining her going through alone.

“—The driver, capo, and priest... The judge, godmother-and-father, to them I beg to leave. To them I beg to leave.”

We’ll get out of here. I swear it.

She never stops singing as nighttime darkens my room. Eventually her nerves seem to get the best of her, making the words all run together the faster she goes.

“...drivercapoandpriest. Thejudge—”

“Princess...I’ve missed you.” Her song cuts off with a whimper. The door creaks open and I hold my breath. “I had to work on a Sunday, so don’t give me a hard time now. Come take your medicine.” His gravelly voice grates at my nerves as his words slur through the walls.

I don’t understand exactly what goes on in that room, but I don’t need to. The sounds alone feel wrong as they crawl underneath my skin, keeping me up hours after it’s all over. I’d rather chop my ears off than listen, but I have to know the girl is okay. Even after he’s gone, we sit in silence together, separated by the wall between us. I hate her almost-silent sniffles the rest of the night, but at least I know she’s alive.

My ears ring to hear her now, to find out some clue about how she’s going to stop him. But it’s like every other night he’s been here this past week, and she doesn’t say a word. My stomach flips, and I slam my eyes shut in prayer.

Please let this be the last time, God. Please let us go.

Before long, I hear the dreaded noises that make me want to claw my eardrums out. I wrap my arms around my bent knees and will myself to get through it with her, wishing I could save her instead. My eyes won’t stop burning, and shame flushes my skin.

She’s not crying right now, so I won’t either.

I won’t cry.

I won’t. I won’t. I won’t.

Her quiet lyrics break into my mind.

Great...now she's got them stuck in my head—

My heartbeat stops.

She's singing them out loud.

The girl has never once made a peep while my uncle's friend is in there, but she's singing now.

Is this my signal? What am I supposed to do? Does she need me?

“Shut up.” The man's gruff words tumble through the vent. They're slower than before and harder to understand.

What's going on?

My ears perk as her song turns tearful, her voice watery like she's choking back a sob.

I hop up from the bed and slip into the shoes I had on when the capo took me. After I lace them up, I pace the room, my fists at my sides while I look around to see if there's anything I need. One of my father's favorite curse words slips under my breath.

I should've figured all this out already. I should've packed. I should be right at the door. Whatever she's doing in there is for *our* escape, and I've been crying like a baby while she suffers.

After a few moments, the song becomes a low wail, and all the noises seem to echo against my brain. I scream at the top of my lungs and bang against the wall between us.

“Stop it! Stop! You're hurting her! Stop! Stop! Stop!”

I trip away from the wall and slam my hands over my ears, unable to take it anymore.

Coward, coward, coward. I'm such a coward.

What would my father do if he saw me like this? Why isn't he here already, saving me? Saving *her* from what's happening?

My tears are cool as they fall freely down my burning cheeks. Honestly, I don't have to wonder what my father would say to me. The answer is nothing, but if he found me now, he'd box my ears off. The sides of my head already hurt from how hard my hands are trying to block everything out. My heartbeat whooshes loud in my ears, and my pacing footsteps get faster and faster until a hand wraps around my wrist.

I stutter step away from it. My eyes widen in the darkness to see the girl who's kept me from going crazy since I got here.

“It's you. You're...you're okay—”

She suddenly squeezes me so tight I can barely breathe. I'm too shocked to return the hug, but she lets go too quickly anyway. When she steps back, she smooths down her nightgown and gives me a big, toothy grin. Her fair hair is in a messy braid, and her eyes shimmer in the dim light as she looks me over, too.

Does she see the boy who let her sacrifice herself to save us both? That I'm a coward for letting her get hurt? Because that's how I feel right now, and I can't help but wonder why she's bothering to save me at all. It'd be safer for her to run away alone.

"Come on." She takes my hand. "This way."

I fasten mine around hers instinctively, letting her guide me into the hallway. It's only after I step onto the thick rug that my heart skips for a different reason.

This is the first time I've held a girl's hand.

The realization makes me trip, and she grips tighter to catch me. My cheeks heat with embarrassment, but I don't let go as I take the lead.

"I know the way," I mumble. Her lips purse, and her brow furrows.

"Oh, I thought..." She shakes her head. "Okay, I'll follow you."

I lead her just past her room before pausing. My teeth clench with anger at whoever's behind that closed door. I'm tempted to push it open to see who he is, but I'm afraid to risk it. Her eyes dart around the hallway, more vigilant than I am. We need to get out of here, but I have to know.

"Where is the man? Do you know who he was?"

"No." She swipes at her shiny cheeks. "But I...I think he's dead."

My eyes widen. "Did *you* kill him?"

She tries to pull her hand away, but I don't let her go. Her chin lifts, and she stands as tall as she can, still only coming up to my shoulder.

"I hope so," she says matter-of-factly, almost like she's taunting me to see how I'll react.

"How did you do it?"

"I wanted to make him hurt, but I could only trick him. His medicine makes me tired, so instead of taking it, I dumped the whole bottle into his drink."

A smile creeps over my face.

"Good. Let's go."

Her grin is a cute kind of evil, and her hand grips mine even harder as she races us both up the stairs. I'm shocked when the basement door is unlocked,

turning easily in her small hand.

“Guess they didn’t think we’d try to escape,” she whispers.

Or they know we can’t...

I shake my head and push the thought aside so I don’t jinx us.

The old brownstone’s wooden floors normally creak, but she knows which boards are silent and which could get us killed.

She turns us down a servant’s hallway that takes us directly to the kitchen. We drop to all fours in the dark room and crawl around the island countertop toward the large doggy door.

When she climbs through without a problem, hope flutters in my chest. I stumble through behind her, and she holds up the plastic flap to keep it from slapping down when I fall out. Once we’re free, I stand up, but she yanks me down by the hem of my T-shirt.

“The emergency lights! You’ll make them go off if we don’t go slow.”

“Oh, crap, sorry.”

The girl scowls at me, and I try my best not to snort out a laugh. She’s little, but she’s sassy, a fighter, and way braver than I am. My dad would love her if she was a boy.

“The tulips are the dark purple flowers between those light purple ones.” She points across the private backyard to the corner farthest away from us. “We have to go around the shrubs outlining the maze. Got it?”

I nod once and let her slink ahead of me. It’s slow-going at first, but the closer we get, the harder it is for both of us to keep from sprinting.

When we’re only yards away, a noise from inside the house makes us freeze. After a few moments of silence, she continues on, but a thorny vine catches me, slicing at my arm.

“*Dammit.*” I try to pull away, but the plant has me by my sleeve. “I can’t get out. Keep going, I’ll catch up.”

“I’m not leaving without you.”

She rushes back to tug at the brambles, and we fight them for way too long. Sweat seeps down the back of my shirt until we finally both yank hard. The movement hurls me into the dark purple flowers across the path, triggering the motion sensor floodlights.

Angry barking from within the house stops my heart completely.

“Run!” I push off the ground at the sound of my uncle’s vicious guard dogs and grab the girl’s arm. My sweaty fingers slip as I race toward the hole in the wall that she told me about. When we get there, I push aside the

flowers covering the hole—

There's nothing but brick.

"Where is it? Where's the hole?"

"They're to the left. Behind the purple tulips and ivy!"

She pushes the flowers and vines aside, revealing small holes that pepper up the ten-foot garden wall.

"You said there was a hole to crawl out of!"

"No, I said there were *holes*. We have to climb it."

"I'm not letting you climb this thing." I shake my head. "It's way too high for you!"

"I'll be fine."

"But what if you fall?"

"Then catch me!"

Every instinct screams at me not to go first, but there's no other choice since she needs me to help her. And when my uncle's three Italian mastiffs escape through their door, we don't have time to argue about it anymore.

The dogs' yelps turn high-pitched as they sprint around, searching for us. They snarl and gnash their teeth, ready to tear us limb from limb. I've seen them do it, too, so when the girl pushes me to climb, I race up the brick.

"Faster!" she shouts at the top of her lungs. "Catch me on the other side!"

"Found her!" The gardener appears from behind the house and limps in our direction. "Oh, shit, he escaped, too!"

All three dogs turn their heads like one large creature following his movements. Once they find us, they immediately sprint after their prey.

"I'll be right behind you!" She pushes my feet. "*Please go!*"

I shove my shoes into the small holes so they'll fit as I climb. By the time I reach the top, the growling dogs thunder beneath me.

Using the fence's iron spikes that line the top, I haul myself up and straddle the brick. When I'm balanced over the sharp, jagged metal, I reach for the girl's hand.

But she's not there.

Her single, sharp shriek makes me jolt and lose my balance. As I tumble over, my leg tears on one of the spikes. The sidewalk comes up fast, and I land ankle-first hard on the concrete. An audible crunch and flash of blinding pain up my shin makes me choke back a scream.

I fight the waves of sick agony as I stand on my good leg. My bones feel like they're trying to stab through my skin, but I focus all my attention on

catching the girl when she jumps.

Her small hand shoves into one of the holes about six feet off the ground. My heartbeat pounds in my ears. The dogs' snarling grows louder until a bloodcurdling shriek silences the world around me.

Her hand disappears.

A single *thump* on the other side of the fence restarts my heart.

I look inside one of the holes, but I quickly have to turn away at the sight of the dogs ripping their prey apart.

"Boy! Help!"

I shove my hands into the holes, but as soon as I try to climb, pain shoots up my leg and into my head. It's so overwhelming I double over and throw up on the sidewalk.

"Please! Boy! Help me!"

Horror slices through me. I thought the noises in that room would be the worst thing I'd ever hear. But nothing compares to my friend begging me to save her life and not being able to do a damn thing about it.

"*Boy, plea—*"

Her final whimper cuts off.

Blood thunders in my ears, and I can barely hear my aunt shrieking at the dogs to heel. But I already know it's too late.

The animals whine to finish the job. The gardener gags. My *zia* Antonella muffles her scream so none of the fancy, rich people on Beacon Hill find out what's going on.

It's the girl's silence that rings loudest in my pounding head. My hands shake as I touch the brick between us. I'd give anything to hear her silly song, but only the gardener's whisper drifts through the holes in the wall.

"Mrs. Vincelli, is she...is she dead?"

After a moment, Antonella snaps with anger that I've never heard from her before.

"*Sì.*"

Yes.

My heart breaks.

No.

I shake my head. It can't be true. A heavy breath shudders from my throat. There's no way the girl risked her *life* helping me escape.

I didn't even know her name.

"Leave us," Antonella orders.

“But Mrs. Vincelli—”

“Now!”

She’s talking to the gardener, but I jolt at the rage in her voice. My ankle rolls, and my vision blurs. It takes all my strength to shuffle backward, away from the girl. As much as I hate to leave, there’s nothing I can do here to help. And if I stay, all this will have been for nothing.

I’m in a daze as I hobble nearly two miles back home. My leg is on fire, but my chest is numb. I don’t even realize I’m home until my mom is blubbering uncontrollably in front of me, crying about how worried sick she was.

My father is “displeased,” but otherwise shows no emotion. The boy that’s taken over my body is screaming at the top of his lungs, demanding to go back for the girl. My father refuses, and when I try to leave on my own, he and I come to blows. It’s a quick fight, one he wins easily with a slap to the side of my head that sends me to my knees, hurting my ankle more than I can bear.

Pain takes over, and I watch everything happen to the boy after that.

Mom forces two of her nightly pills down his throat and rushes him to bed. She fusses over his bloody, ripped-up leg ruining her brand-new sheets, but insists he can’t go to the hospital until all of this has blown over. The cops—but more importantly, my father’s men—can’t find out Claudio beat him in this game. The boy’s broken body will have to wait to be healed “for the good of the Family.”

The boy and I couldn’t care less about the “Family” and its politics, but my mother’s pills make everything foggy.

Claudio calls. My parents’ voices carry through our thin walls. They say everything I never wanted to hear.

The girl is dead. Claudio wants a truce. Whatever his motives were, it doesn’t matter now because my dad agrees to let it all go. Let bygones be bygones. Everything is smoothed over between our families with one phone call while my chest feels like I’ve been slashed up into jagged pieces from the inside out.

As I lay in bed, anger fights with the haze over my thoughts, and the longer I fight the medicine, the more my hatred burns under my skin.

It can’t happen now, and I don’t know when, but as soon as I’m strong and powerful enough, I *will* get revenge for the girl. *Everyone* will pay.

That promise hugs me like a blanket while I shiver from my wounds. I

hum her song to help me go to sleep. When I finally do, her cries fill my nightmares.

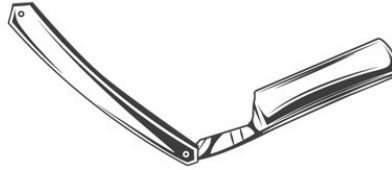
*“The butler, the maids, and gardener... The driver, capo, and priest...
The judge, godmother-and-father—”*

“Boy!”

Act 1

Scene 1

THE GARDENER



Talia

Present Day

Butler. Maids. Gardener. Driver. Capo. Priest. Judge. Godmother. Godfather

Dirt drifts into the air, interrupting my mantra. The traitorous little particles tickle my nose, threatening to make me sneeze. I keep my mouth closed and squint, refusing to let the rugged scent give my position away. Once the sneeze is gone, I go back to patting the mound of cold earth in front of my knees.

I won't be around to see the bulbs claw their way up to the surface. It's late in the season to plant them, but this past fall has been unseasonably warm. I only wore my jacket today because its bulkiness provides me a sense of security.

Gardening usually sets my mind at ease. At least, it does when I tend to my potted plants at home. But right now, my heart thunders in my chest and drowns out the chant in my head.

It's been a while since I've been inside the Vincelli's garden. Before college, I was too intimidated to come near this place, and for the past four years I've been too busy studying to keep my scholarship. I was tempted to start this project years ago, but I bided my time, waiting until I graduated before putting my plans in motion. Today will be my biggest task yet.

Thanks to the Vincellis, I've designed costumes to become a maid, a dry-

cleaning assistant, and a mechanic. Today, I get to be a gardener, wearing the same Victorian-style that the Boss's wife is so fond of her staff wearing. Even if I wasn't dressed up, I doubt anyone would notice me. The Vincellis are partying it up at a wedding in Vegas, and the brownstone is down to its skeleton crew. Only the rare few who live on the grounds are still here.

Like the gardener.

Beside me, glittering dew clings to the garden shears' blades. I've positioned them just like I did fifteen years ago, but I won't fuck up like I did last time.

Don't think like that. It'll only stress you out.

I ball my hands into fists to stop their anxious shaking. This name on my list has been a long time coming, and I can't let trembling fingers stop me. I've worked hard for this. In college, I took every on-set fight coordination, self-defense, and stunt-actor elective that the school offered. They've given me confidence, but I've never had to actually *use* my skills for self-defense. I'm about to put the non-performative aspects of my training to the test, and I pray my nerves don't get the best of me.

Before continuing to bury the tulip, I take a deep, centering breath. It releases from my chest in a cloud of warm air that mixes with autumn's morning chill. Thank goodness my *nonni*, Gio and Tony, taught me to be an early riser. I've been getting up at the crack of dawn to help them in the bakery for years. Doing this any later in the day might've made me lose my courage, and I can't get off track now.

If I go through my list too quickly, my motivation will become obvious. But if I don't go fast enough, I won't be able to take down all the names before getting caught. I need them to think they're picking themselves off from the inside before they look to blame an outsider.

Uneven footsteps pad down the path toward me, and I glance at my watch.

Right on time.

"Hey! Who're you?"

I don't lift my head at the man's gruff question. Instead, I peek through the shrub in front of me. Familiar worn boots crunch up the gravel walkway before stopping right next to me.

"Hey, I asked you a question. What are you deaf—"

I swing my hand rake upward, and a wild smile crests my lips. The small, clawed tool fits as perfectly as I thought it would, cupping his balls with the

jagged prongs. If he makes one wrong move, the sharpened rake could easily pierce his khakis and castrate him.

When I meet his wide brown eyes, I shift my chin so he sees the scar I refused to cover this morning. Confusion and recognition mix with sheer terror, and he turns as still as stone.

“*You...* I thought... Antonella said you were dead!”

“I got better.” My voice grates out so low and ragged with anger that I hardly recognize it. I tug him forward by the balls and enjoy his squealing. “Ah, ah, ah. Don’t scream, or this could end very badly for you.”

He grimaces and stands stick-straight, not moving a muscle. His ruddy complexion has paled with fear, but otherwise, time hasn’t changed him much on the outside. That realization only angers me further. Abusers shouldn’t get to stay the same while survivors are forced to change forever.

“I’d never forget your face, but I guess the tinted glass hid all the ugly.”

“A-a window? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I scoff. “It baffles me that no one questioned why the injured gardener was roaming around that night and how he knew so quickly that I was out of bed. But what *I* wonder is, did you see what I did to that man that night? Or were you too busy coming in your dirty hands at the sight of what he did to *me*? Don’t try to play it off, I saw you through my window every time he was there!”

“I...” He shakes his head. Beads of sweat run down his wrinkled face. “I minded my business. I never saw anything. M-maybe you have the wrong guy. My name is—”

“You don’t get a name,” I hiss. “People like you don’t deserve the privilege. My name was Chiara, but you treated that girl like a nameless thing. And that’s what you’ve become to me.”

“He was the one who did it, though. Not me! I-I wasn’t even in there!”

I shove the rake farther up until he whimpers.

“You think I didn’t realize you were a peeping Tom all those years ago? You got off on what he did to me, you fucking pervert.”

His face blanches. “No. No. Not me.”

“Even with your balls at my mercy, you *still* won’t admit what you did. Un-fucking-believable.” I drag the rake, careful not to pierce his khakis yet. “This will be the last time you can pretend you’re innocent. I refuse to be the only one to suffer from what happened to me.”

His knees knock together, and he reaches down to cup his crotch as if

that'll protect him.

I let the metal prongs finally pierce through the fabric of his pants. Tears mix with the sweat trailing his cheeks. The rest of his body freezes when the rake catches on skin.

"I just watched, okay? It wasn't like I was the one who hurt you. Just let me go. I won't tell anyone about this. I won't tell anyone you're even alive."

"Hmm, I don't think I heard an apology in there."

"I'm sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry!"

Well, at least that's something.

My therapist would be proud that I'm confronting my demons and getting results. According to her, people rarely get closure in these situations. Granted, she has no idea the type of closure I have in mind.

"And what're you sorry for, exactly?"

"F-for...for watching you?" The question at the end of his confession pumps venom into my veins.

I cut into his skin until he cries out. "If you scream, I'll chop your balls off without a second thought."

His chin wobbles as he bites his lip, but he obeys.

I keep the weapon positioned underneath his testicles and scoot backward. The motion forces him to come along with me behind the bushes. When I lessen the rake's pressure, he visibly relaxes. A laugh huffs from my chest, sending delicious fear back into his eyes.

"Wh-what's so funny?"

"All men are the same. You're so worried about the state of your precious 'family jewels' when they should be the least of your concern."

I wrench the rake at an angle that forces him off-balance. He lands on the ground right where I need him, completely hidden by the bushes and within a foot of the glittering shears. I straddle his waist and grab their handle before stabbing him in the chest. The blades slip in easily, one wrong breath away from his heart, just like I wanted.

He gasps and blinks in shock. Some of my chestnut hair escapes from my braid in snaking curls, creating a thick curtain around us. All he can see is the savage scar that mars my face and the glee sparkling in my eyes.

I couldn't have planned this better. Granted, I had fifteen years to make it perfect. The anxiety I've suffered all this time eases more and more with every inch of metal that digs into his chest.

Soft gurgles wheeze blood out of his mouth and down the sides of his

cheeks like a gruesome smile. He tries to scream, but the fluid filling his lungs only makes him choke more. His life is in my hands, and I revel in this powerful rush.

Brief relief always follows my revenge, but this time, I need it to last as long as possible. The next few names won't be easy, and I don't know when I'll get to them. I have to savor this feeling of peace while I can.

"I tried setting a trap for you once before," I remind him. "All you did was hurt your foot." Realization lights his eyes, and I keep going. "I was happy with that outcome...until I realized that not even a nearly severed toe would stop you from staring into my window."

"I didn't—"

"And you know what? I might've forgiven you if you'd let me escape. But you were the first one to make sure I could never be free. The one thing that's kept you from being higher on my list is that you weren't the one who brought me here. You only reaped the 'benefit.' Well, you reap what you sow, motherfucker."

"I-I'm sorry," he rasps and reaches for the shears. I let him slither them out a fraction. It gives him the same hope I had. One brief moment where he thinks he'll survive this and return to life as he knew it.

When there's an inch of blade still embedded in his chest, I tsk and wrap my hands around his. Hopelessness fills his dull eyes as I sink the shears back in, and he realizes he never had a chance.

"Please...help me."

I shake my head. "You watched. Now so will I."

He tries to scream, but only a cowardly whimper leaks from his mouth.

Before today, I was afraid that murder would be too much for me to handle. That I'd chicken out after the gardener and be unable to complete the rest of my list.

But his dying breaths are an overture. The beginning of a musical with a lovely, exhilarating symphony full of promise. I'd listen all day if I could.

Once the light in his eyes finally blinks out, I stumble off of him and onto the ground. Blood soaks his crotch, and the dirt around him glistens with crimson. I watch his chest to see if it rises and falls with a breath. It doesn't.

He's dead.

The sounds of the city filter back into my ears. Everyone is waking up and getting ready for their day, not knowing the gardener next door took his last breath moments ago. Beacon Hill is quiet compared to the rest of Boston,

but a car alarm jolts me to life. Everything comes *whooshing* into the forefront of my mind, and I swallow.

He's dead, and it's time for me to fucking go.

I leave the weapon and gather my things. It barely takes a minute to erase any trace of me from the garden.

Years ago, I couldn't escape the Vincellis to save my life, thanks in part to the gardener. Now, dressed as his assistant, I walk right out of their front gate undetected.

My mind is quiet for the first time in weeks, but I'm a glutton for punishment. I take the long way back to the bakery, and as I travel down the opposite end of Fleet Street, my relief evaporates like the dew on the shears I left behind. Rage replaces it, and I mentally tick off names to make myself feel better.

Butler. Maids. Gardener. Driver. Capo. Priest. Judge. Godmother. Godfather...

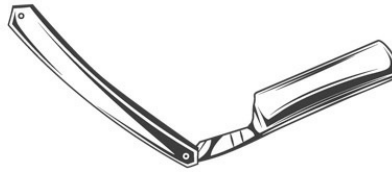
And then there's the one I added last. When I have him within striking distance, karma will greet him, too, and my revenge will finally be complete.

Butler. Maids. Gardener. Driver. Capo. Priest. Judge. Godmother. Godfather...

...the boy.

Scene 2

BURNT CARAMEL



Talia

My fingers still shake as I bear down on the sketchbook I've propped up on my knees. Shading the design would be easier if I wasn't also tackling a purple-iced sugar cookie with my other hand. Then again, my priorities have never been very logical.

I stretch my fingers and peek out from behind my worn, black hoodie to check if Sweet Tallie's has any customers. The hoodie is double my size and was part of a grunge phrase I grew out of. After this morning, though, I had to go back to my comfort zone. The extra fabric is soft, and I crave the sense of protection its bulkiness gives me. The warmth is also welcome today as a cold late-fall rain began drizzling right after I left the Vincellis.

As long as I curl up with my feet on the seat, the tall, oversized chair has just enough room to fit my entire body. For years, I've been pulling my hoodie over my knees and using my thighs as a table to draw on. The position got harder to pull off once I hit my growth spurt, but I'm nothing if not determined.

Perched in my corner, I can monitor everything inside the shop. The register and glass display are centered in the back of the room, so I'm able to get around either side of the counter and attend to seated customers if necessary. All I see now, though, are the shop's empty pastel chairs and cream tables. The only movement is the gentle rain splattering the tinted window. I'm alone.

Grazie a Dio.

That's not usually the case around this time. Pick-ups bring in the most

money. Customers line up outside the door before they go to work, making sure they're here to get one of my grandfathers' prized *cannoli al pistacchio*. I baked tulip-shaped sugar cookies just in case we ran out. It's been slow today, though, and we still have a few cannoli left.

My *nonni* need all the help they can get, thanks to the Vincellis. While I hate it for my grandfathers that business isn't booming at the moment, I'm thankful that I get some time to unwind. I need a breather before my appointment, and then going to work at the Revere Theater tonight.

Happy with the silence, I settle back in my chair. The huddled position and the bakery's familiar aroma normally relax me enough to fixate on my sketches, but I'm still full of energy. A clear sprinkle drops from my trembling sugar cookie onto the page, and I glare at it. Not even the flower-shaped dessert can calm me down.

This morning feels like a fever dream. My reality has split again, like my life has now become three acts in a play.

Act I: Before my parents were killed.

Act II: Living with my *nonni*.

Act III: After my first...murder.

But this isn't a musical. There won't be a happy ever after for me in the end, especially after what I've done. I'll take a happy for right now, though.

My lips twitch into a smile. There's beauty in finally becoming the person you're meant to be...even if that person is a killer.

I've obsessed over the names on my list for years. Only within the last few months have I been able to tick them off one by one. Before this morning, I hadn't killed anyone yet. Now only the serious jobs are left.

The butler was my first success. Back when I was trapped in the Vincellis' basement, he was the one who didn't feed me when I acted out. I know now he only did it because his boss ordered it. Vincelli might've just been the second-in-command back then, but he's always kept his people on a tight leash. The butler had his own life to worry about. I'm nothing if not fair, though, and getting him fired was enough for me.

Vincelli is a creature of habit, and the butler picked up the dry-cleaning every Saturday while he went to confession with Father Lucas. The dry-cleaning staff wore itchy red polos that were simple to replicate. Management was hardly ever there, so slipping in undetected was easy. Acting like you belong is half the battle when you're trying to fit in. All I had to do was switch the clothes and hand them to the butler.

Mob news travels fast in the North End, and my *nonni* hear everything. Something about their kind, wrinkled smiles make people spill gossip like powdered sugar. Those whispers were how I found out the butler had been fired. I was a little shocked that one measly mix-up was all it took considering the Mafia rarely lets people leave, even the staff. It's why my targets are still there for me to pick off after all these years. But I took the good fortune for what it was, a sign that I should keep going.

The first few names on my list were a piece of cake compared to what the rest will be, though. I was afraid that I'd chicken out with the big jobs or that I'd kill the gardener and then never want to get to the rest, but it's quite the opposite. Marking names off my list brings peace to a mind that's been ravaged by nightmares, ruminating thoughts, and hate. When I'm playing my role as karmic retribution, I'm calm, cool, and collected. But the whispers that I'm running out of time are already slithering back in.

With my nerves vibrating through me, I don't know how I'm going to survive work tonight. I love being a costume designer, and most of the cast is great. But if Percy decides to be a handsy *testa di cazzo* again during dress rehearsal, I might not-so-accidentally draw blood with a sewing needle.

A pan clatters to the ground in the kitchen, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

"*Mi dispiace*, Tallie!" my grandfather, Tony, apologizes from behind the swinging door.

"*Non preoccuparti, nonno.*" I return a "no worries," even though my skin buzzes like I've been electrocuted.

Despite trying to brush it off, my *nonni* can always tell when I'm lying. Tony's tall form pokes out through the door. His wisps of hair are stark white against his olive skin, and when he finds me immediately, he winces at the sight of me.

"Oh, *dolce nipotina*. Are you okay? Giovanni and I will try not to be so..." He makes movements with his hands to fill in the missing word.

My *nonni's* nickname, "sweet granddaughter," settles me, and I can answer honestly this time. "Really, I'm fine, *nonno*. I promise. I'm just glad I don't have to work on that wedding cake."

He chuckles and smooths out his crisp white apron. "Gio is being nice today. It is fun."

"Fun? Antonio, this is not *fun*," Gio scoffs behind Tony before letting off a string of Italian curse words.

“It is better than the Navy.” Tony chuckles before slipping back into the kitchen.

“Of course, it is better than the Navy,” Gio grumbles loud enough for me to hear him behind the wall.

I snort and put on headphones to drown out their playful bickering. If I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard them lament about their military experience, they’d be retired in Italy by now.

Gio and Tony were both chefs in the Italian Navy where they fell head over heels for each other in secret. When they left for America to finally enjoy their lives together and start their own bakery, that saying became their favorite catchphrase. The fact that, for Gio, working on wedding cakes rivals his time in the military just goes to show how much he really, really, *really* hates them.

The multiple tiers, intricate designs, and his desire to please the customer stress him out enough to transform into a bridezilla himself. I’ve loved baking with them since I was seven, and I’d still rather spend a thousand busy mornings running the register over modeling an edible bride and groom beside Gio.

“Tallie!”

I look up to see his short, round form filling the door. His medium-brown skin glistens with perspiration, and his bushy gray eyebrows form one single frustrated line. He’s scowling at me, but try as he might, there’s no way my cute little *nonno* could ever be intimidating. Too many smile and laugh lines etch his face for anyone to take him seriously, but he sure gives it one hell of a shot.

I tug a headphone away from my ear to hear him yelling in Italian. Flour and icing already cover his apron, and small clouds of dust waft into the air with his wild hand movements.

Poor thing. He really does get so flustered on wedding cake days.

“Tallie! I’ve been calling for you.”

“*Mi dispiace*. What do you need?”

“Does the dessert case need to be filled?”

I glance at the glass display cooler that I restocked right in front of him less than thirty minutes ago. It’s still full of gorgeous cakes, pies, cannoli, and cookies.

“Looks like we’re stocked, Gio. No more procrastinating.”

“I’m not procrastinating!” he huffs in Italian. “It was a very important

question! Tony and I will be setting the ribbon of spun sugar around the four tiers, and we can't be distracted. No headphones and no nose in your sketchbook."

"*Amore mio*, be nice," Tony chides in Italian from inside the kitchen.

"It's okay, I know how Gio gets," I yell back and smirk.

Gio's harrumphs. "You know, I was cutting up the fruit today and realized you stole the good knife again."

I roll my eyes. "Gio, that's *my* knife. You and Tony gave it to *me* when I graduated college."

"But it's the good knife! You have to tell me if you're going to take it."

"Ugh, fine, it's in there." I nod to the canvas messenger bag tucked away underneath the counter.

Gio sputters as he runs to my bag like he's rescuing the blade from danger. "You keep a three-hundred-dollar knife with a gorgeous pearl handle in *this*? It's the same pocket you use for a water bottle! Now I know I need to wash it."

"It's my knife, Gio," I reply in a sing-songy voice before making a show of putting my headphone back in my ear.

"When was the last time you even used it, huh? What're you going to go and use it for in your bag?"

I shrug. "Nothing, yet. I just like having it around. You know, for safekeeping."

He grumbles at my smirk and waves it at me as he leaves through the swinging door. I turn up my music, but I can still hear him shouting a few choice Italian curses. I one hundred percent get my attitude from him.

He and Tony have loved me unconditionally from the moment Antonella dropped me off on their doorstep, barely alive. According to official records, Chiara died in the same car "accident" that killed her parents. No one knew I was alive, so no one cared when I almost died. No one except Antonella, Gio, and Tony.

My *nonni* unofficially adopted a child that had to stay "dead" to the public. They safely kept me that way, giving me a new name and homeschooling me until my scars healed. Once I was ready, they put me in public school, well away from St. Catherine's, where all the children of malavitosi, the made men of the Family, go. By the time I left for college down south, everyone had forgotten about poor little Chiara. But it won't be until I'm finished with my list that she'll be able to finally rest.

I turn up the music on my phone, inviting Florence + The Machine to croon into my soul. After settling into my seat, I take another bite of my cookie and get back to my sketch.

This costume doesn't have a deadline on it, but with everything that happened this morning, the urge to create it burns in my veins. It should be fairly straightforward, and I already have all the fabric upstairs in my apartment.

Gio and Tony have a one-room apartment and a studio apartment on the second floor. Before I came around, they used to rent the studio out, but once I hit my unruly teenage years, they gave it to me. They're not big spaces, but they work for us. Plus, my new job now lets me relieve the pressure of their mortgage by paying my own rent.

With the bakery's success, they should've been able to pay the building off years ago. In fact, they should be *retired* and living their best life vacationing in Tuscany. They would be if Vincelli and his thugs didn't "protect" this part of the neighborhood out of fucking house and home.

The mob has been shaking my *nonni* down for decades, but the boss before Claudio didn't have nearly as high a rate. The price has been steeper than ever since I got back from college. I can't wait to mark that Vincelli bastard off my list.

"Arrogant *figlio di puttana*," I mutter under my breath.

"Excuse me?"

I jolt so hard at the sound of the man's voice that I tumble from my seat. My sketchbook plops onto the ground, but strong hands catch me around the waist before I land with it.

The world is a dizzy whirlwind as I'm placed back on my feet. I grip the broad chest of the man in front of me, strangling his soft black cotton shirt to steady myself. His large embrace easily envelops my five foot nine frame, and his black leather jacket makes him look even bigger than he is. I have to lean back to meet his eyes so I can yell at him for surprising and manhandling me. The last time I even hugged anyone besides my *nonni* was fifteen years ago.

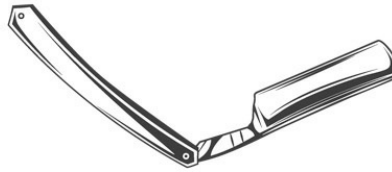
But shock makes me choke on angry retort.

His wavy black hair is brushed back, though a short curl has escaped. It hangs over eyes the same shade as burnt caramel—with just as much heat. I swallow down my objections as he opens his mouth.

"You okay, Tallie?"

Scene 3

SWEET TALLIE



Talia

He breaks our stare to glance over me as if he needs to examine me for himself before letting me go. My stomach flips as his fingers grip my soft waist, and I can't stop staring at the Greek god-like man in front of me.

The warm undertones in his medium olive skin make the gold in his dark eyes pop. His short, black beard is perfectly manicured like he's just had a shave recently. Sandalwood aftershave fills my senses, and the urge to bask in him tingles in my chest. But when his hands tighten around my hips, panic shoots through me. I shove him away without thinking, and he stumbles backward.

His right foot slides awkwardly, but he grabs a table to keep from falling. I leave him to fend for himself and snatch my sketchbook up before hustling behind the counter. The meager few feet still put much-needed space between us.

"How do you know my name?" I hiss.

"Calm down, *vipera*. Your name's right here." He tweaks the name tag just above my breast. My nipples perk in response. Before I can pretend I hate it and swat his hand away, he points with his thumb to the front of the bakery. "Not to mention it's on the sign, too."

"Oh...right."

He shakes his head and huffs. "I guess there's no thanks to the stranger

that kept you from colliding face-first onto the ground?”

“Thanks,” I mumble automatically. There’s a menu slightly askew, and I fix it with the utmost care. “So, what can I—”

“What’s this?” His voice is deep and buttery smooth, sending tantalizing—*annoying*—ripples of pleasure over my skin. But it isn’t until papers shuffle around that I lift my gaze.

My eyes widen as he snoops through my sketchbook. The pages are mostly filled with work, but there are a few sheets that I’ve treated more as a journal than design pieces.

“That’s *private*.” I reach over the countertop to grab the book.

He calmly backs out of range, still looking. “As the customer who’s been trying to get your attention, I think I deserve to know what held you captive for so long.”

I could round the counter and try to yank it away from him, but I’m not willing to risk touching him again. Besides, the most damning entries are the ones in my collection upstairs. I used those sketchbooks to calm my mind in college when I couldn’t be back in Boston to do it myself. I rack my brain, trying to remember whether anything inside is worth tackling this huge six-foot-five monster.

“Damn, you’re talented.” I blush at his words, wondering which costume he’s looking at. “A little macabre. But talented.”

He lays the sketchbook on the counter, and I’m momentarily distracted by how large his hand is...until I realize it’s half-covering one of the few pieces that isn’t work-related. It’s a pencil sketch of a church graveyard with an open hole ready for a grave.

Fuck.

His brow furrows. “This place looks familiar...”

I snatch the sketchbook and toss it onto my chair.

“What can I do for you, sir?”

His eyes flare at the question before nodding to my hand.

“Glad you and the cookie are okay,” he answers, apparently unfazed by my attitude.

“The cookie...” I drift off, confused, before following his gaze to my hand.

The heat in my cheeks explodes with embarrassment at the sugar cookie that’s still glued to my fingers. I fell into a man’s arms, dropped my sketchbook, and risked bodily harm, but apparently none of that matters to

my subconscious because at least I saved my dessert.

Jesus.

“Oh, yeah...” I try to laugh. “I guess you can see where my priorities are.”

I take another bite before setting it aside on a piece of parchment paper. “So...was there a dessert you wanted? Or are you just going to stand here and watch me make a fool of myself all day?”

His lips part, and blatant desire darkens his eyes. I watch in slow motion as his thumb gently swipes my bottom lip. My stomach drops, flips, and flutters all at once, and I fucking lean *into* his hand.

Mamma mia, what’s wrong with me?

This morning, I literally killed a man with ice in my veins. But with *this* man right in front of me, I’m so flushed with nerves that it’s impossible for me to focus.

His magma-hot gaze never wavers from mine as his fingertip leaves my mouth. He tucks it into his own, and I watch, totally entranced, as he sucks the purple icing off his finger.

“Delicious.”

When I finally find my voice, it comes out husky and hoarse. “Do you, um, do you want one of those then?”

His smile is sinful as he nods. “Definitely.”

“Tallie! *Cosa fai?*” Gio’s voice snaps me out of my trance as he emerges from the bakery. “Were you paying attention? I heard a customer yell for you!”

I switch to Italian and meet his volume. “I’m up and attending to him, aren’t I?”

“*Fai la brava*, Tallie.” Tony appears behind Gio, towering over him. “We have a guest.”

His soft voice smooths over our squabble instantly. Gio turns on his charismatic charm like a light switch.

“*Oh, mio Dio, mi dispiace signore.* I’m sorry, sir. I would have come out to help sooner, but I was in the middle of a cake.” Gio’s apology is still thick with his Italian accent. He’s just as loud as before, but that volume is his default setting. “Please, *signore*. A cookie. On the house. Our Tallie baked them herself this early morning.”

“You baked them?” he asks. A shadow of a grin passes over his face. “Why am I not surprised?”

Gio scans the newcomer up and down until a sparkle lights his brown eyes.

Merda, I know that twinkle. It's been the bane of my existence since I turned eighteen. That was when my *nonni* got it into their heads that I needed to get married as soon as possible or I'd die a grouchy old maid. Hell, we all know I'm already halfway there.

Gio grabs me by the arm before I can stop him and drags me around the glass-encased desserts.

"*Nonno!* What're you—"

With strength no one would expect from him at his age, he shoves me toward the customer. It takes every fiber of my being not to fall into the guy's arms again.

"Our *nipotina* is a great baker, a good cook, just came back from the university with a good job—"

"And *single*," Tony butts in, cutting to the chase.

"Is she now?" The guy mocks me with a smirk, and I swear I'd crawl into an oven and bake myself to avoid this conversation if I could. The only thing stopping me is my *nonno*'s grip on my arm.

"*Madonna mia*, Tony, Gio..." I shake my head and pinch my nose as I complain in Italian. "Please stop with all this nonsense, already."

"It is not nonsense!" Gio snaps at me and switches back into Italian. "You are smart, you have a job at the theater, and you bake. What is not to love? You've always been such an angry thing and so stubborn. Go out and have some fun. You deserve it after all you've been through. You never like the boys we pick for you, but this one dresses well, and he has nice eyes. Invite him to your show this weekend. He is perfect—"

"*Nonno*," I growl. While I'm immensely grateful that little speech was in Italian, I need to stop this before he decides to use my three-hundred-dollar knife as a dowry.

I shrug his grip before shooing them to the bakery door. "Just go back in there, the both of you. I'll take care of the customer."

"Ask his name!" Gio yells in Italian. "If it's a good one, I'm baking another wedding cake!"

"*Basta!*" I snap. "Enough!"

Tony bursts into laughter as Gio curses about how he wouldn't have to interfere if I would go on a date every now and then.

"Jesus." I wince. Hot mortification burns the back of my neck as I slowly

face our all-too-captive audience. “Please tell me you’re not fluent in Italian.”

He continues to analyze the pictures of dessert on the walls and shrugs. “I’m afraid I slept through Italian in elementary school.”

“Bah! Nevermind!” Gio groans in Italian through the crack in the door. “Only a good Italian boy for our granddaughter, or no one at all!”

“*Smettila! Per favore!*” I shout with a laugh, but I keep my eyes on the man in front of me.

When he meets my gaze again, his face is smooth, devoid of emotion. I can’t read him to see if he’s telling the truth. In this neighborhood, many of my *nonni*’s generation are fluent, but not their kids. My parents weren’t, but they still knew enough to talk to the elderly customers at their shop. Even if this guy doesn’t know the language perfectly, he might know the basics.

I push the mortifying thought aside and blank my own expression. “A cookie, right? Anything else for you?”

On autopilot, I open the glass case and retrieve one of the sweets before placing it in a small parchment bag.

“Uh, the request was for a dozen chocolate raspberry cupcakes and...four pistachio cannoli.”

I repeat the order to him and place the desserts in the box. “You’re in luck. Those are usually gone by this time.”

“So, I’ve heard.” He chuckles. “My cousin won’t shut up about this place. But if the frosting on that cookie is any indication, I can see why.”

I pray we both ignore the fever creeping up my cheeks as I grab the cannoli with the tongs.

“Wait.” He reaches over the counter to lightly graze my hand before giving me an apologetic wince. “Do you know who made the cannoli?”

The realization that I didn’t flinch at his touch stuns me for a second. But then his question registers, and I burst into a laugh.

“Orazio sent you, didn’t he? Is he the cousin who won’t shut up about the shop?”

The customer’s brows furrow, and his hand pulls back almost as if I’ve burned him. “Yeah, Raze is the one who asked me to stop by. Do you know him?”

I shake my head. “No, not really. Granted, he comes in all the time. The guy has a bigger sweet tooth than I do, and I’m hard to beat. He’s obsessed with the *cannoli al pistacchio*, but he always requests my *nonni* make them. You can tell him not to worry. I didn’t touch this batch. Although, the

cookies are all mine, so good luck. They're edible, but I can't promise how good they taste."

His smile returns. "I already love the taste."

I refuse to dignify that with a response. After positioning the desserts into two boxes, I place them on the counter and go to ring him up.

"Here ya go."

Sweat pricks along my spine thanks to the intense way this *bastardo* is studying me. I push back my hood to lift my curls up and over the neckline, letting the air conditioning cool my nape. When I glance up to tell him the price, I notice his gaze catching on my jawline. Apprehension banishes my smile, and I quickly untuck my hair from my ear.

I barely had enough time to shower this morning, and all I could manage was applying my color-correcting makeup to conceal the marks on my jaw and neck. My hair mostly covers the scar, but as I hide it, my sleeve slides down my elbow, nearly revealing my tattoo. I shove it down before he can see.

"What was that?"

"A tattoo," I snap. "Never seen one before or something?"

People are always so interested in tattoos. Even total strangers get insulted if you don't want to explain their meaning. Tattoos are like most things people feel entitled to. The ink is on your body, so you must have wanted them to ask, right? They can't comprehend that you made a choice about *your* body without having *them* in mind.

Throughout the years, I've made up shit just for fun to teach them a lesson. I don't know how I'll explain the design to this guy, though.

The part of me that's still full of rage from this morning wants to show it to him and lay it all out without sparing any of the gruesome details. The shock on his face would be worth it.

He remains quiet, and an almost nostalgic look softens his hard edges.

"Were those tulips?" he whispers.

"You know flowers?" My heart pounds. He obviously didn't see the rest of it, but I'm surprised he could identify the purple petals.

He shakes his head. "My mother loves to garden. Foxgloves are her favorite, but those...those have always been mine."

The reminiscent smile makes my heart flutter, and I struggle to finally come up with a stuttered response.

"It's, um, good you got a tulip cookie, then."

“That and the taste are why I wanted it. And because you made them, of course.”

My mind ignores his cheeky smile as it tries to compute what he just said.

He bought a tulip-shaped dessert because he likes flowers. He laughs through my sarcastic, dry humor. And he indulges the sass that always got me in trouble growing up.

Did I get this guy all wrong? I’m usually a good judge of character. At first glance, though, I would never have expected this guy to be a gentleman. A cocky *figlio di puttana* that runs with Vincelli’s ruthless mobsters, sure. He’s intimidating and just the type that my dad had to deal with. Now my *nonni* have to do the same. I would’ve assumed I’d been found out if he hadn’t literally caught me off guard.

“Your grandfather said you work for the theater?” he asks, breaking me from my thoughts. Something about the question tickles my mind, but I answer despite the feeling.

“Yup.”

“Is it the Revere? What do you do there?”

“I’m a costume designer.” I rattle out the total and push the box forward on the counter.

He pulls out a card from his wallet, and I reach to take it. The question I ask everyone rolls off my tongue.

“Do you have a name for a customer loyalty card? I could also use Orazio’s if you’d like. I think I have his number by heart.”

His fingers tighten on his card, and his brow furrows. “You have Raze’s phone number?”

“No...his *customer* number.” I tug the card, but he snatches it away. “I need a customer number or a name to enter if you want credit.”

“And you don’t know mine?”

The pointed question takes me aback. I raise a brow to point out how conceited that sounds, and he shakes his head.

“On second thought, I’ll use cash.”

“Suit yourself.”

He hands me the bills, and I drop the change into his hand. His fingers envelop mine and give me a squeeze.

“My name’s Sev.”

“Sev?” *Interesting*. “Is that a nickname?”

He shrugs. “It’s what I go by.”

“Okay, then. Do you have a customer loyalty card, Sev?”

“No...” He smiles, and I swear my heart stops. “I just wanted the famous sweet Tallie to know my name.”

“Oh...” At this rate, Gio and Tony could melt their sugar right on my damn face. “Well, I’m clearly not as sweet as advertised.”

“Now, I wouldn’t say that.”

My jaw drops, and he smirks as he turns to leave. I stare at his practiced swagger until he backs into the glass and tilts his head.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Seems you’re going to, so why not?”

He keeps going despite my surly attitude. “Why theater? You’re an excellent artist. It seems you could just do that.”

I almost lie, just like I would if he’d asked me about my tattoo. But the truth comes out instead.

“Sometimes I like helping people pretend to be someone else for a night.”

“And other times?”

“Other times...” I huff a small laugh. “I don’t know.”

“Keep thinking about it.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know the answer.” He nods to me and pushes through the door. “Be sweet, Tallie.”

My heart flutters, and as soon as he enters the rain and passes the picture window, all the loud thoughts in my head come roaring back. They’d been relatively quiet around him, but they’re back in full force as I ruminate over the whole interaction. My mind breaks down each word and sentence, overanalyzing them as if I’m watching it replay over and over on a screen.

As my mind mulls over everything, it finally catches on to the small snippets that bugged me during the conversation. I pull the threads like I’m unraveling a bad stitch until I finally find the problem.

“*Your grandfather said you work at the theater?*”

Gio *did* say that I worked at the theater...but he said it in Italian. And what did Sev call me when he first came in?

Vipera...viper. In Italian.

“*Be sweet, Tallie.*”

Tony has been telling me “*fai la brava*” since I was a kid, and he said it in front of Sev today...

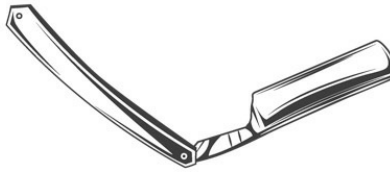
Sev understood everything, which means he knows too much. Now that

I've gotten further into my list, it's more important than ever to fly under the radar.

If I'm not careful, Sev could unravel my entire world.

Scene 4

HAUNTED



Sever

The sidewalk is slippery thanks to the light rain that the evening chill will freeze later on. It makes me even more careful of the cracks than normal as I fire off a text while walking. Sweet Tallie’s Bakery isn’t too far from Luciano’s Cuts on Fleet Street, but I should’ve driven. The journey would’ve been fine had I not lunged to catch the bakers’ granddaughter.

I don’t know why I did it. A spur-of-the-moment move like that always has the potential to tweak my ankle. When I saw her going down, though, I didn’t think at all, I just dove. Every decision I make is deliberate to help me overcome all pain, but everything back in the bakery caught me off guard. Of course, that little shove she gave me after didn’t help.

Despite the ache in my leg, I smile at the memory of how perfectly she fit in my arms. Her full figure had been hidden beneath her baggy hoodie, but I felt every one of her curves beneath my hands. It was instinct to squeeze her closer, and it shocked the hell out of me when she pushed me away.

Later, when she’d taken her hood off, the warm recessed lighting had caught the reddish-gold tint in her chestnut curls, as if there was fire in each strand. The spirals kissed her light olive skin, flirting with the dimples in her cheeks. Her jawline had a slight redness—maybe a birthmark—that was covered by makeup. I’d been mesmerized by her, while she’d been self-conscious. If only she could’ve known that I’d give one of my brownstones in the Back Bay just to kiss along the edge of that mark.

“Talia,” I whisper, puffing a cloud of warm air into the freezing rain. Her

name tastes good on my tongue, maybe even better than her sugar cookies.

Even though she was skittish and awkward, rebellion simmered in her golden-green hazel eyes. Every time she stopped spitting venom at me, I wanted to give her more ammunition.

I shake my head, still confused by the heat in my chest and the tingle down my spine. Women don't make me feel this way. They've only ever been a means to an end to me, because that's all I've ever been to them.

That's what I've tried to remind myself with every step away from the bakery. But my phone is still warm in my hand from the message I just sent, and it's taking all my willpower not to see if I've got a text back yet.

By the time I finally reach the barbershop, a plan is already forming in my mind, but I've got work to do first.

The hours on the window warn that I have very little time to get this *merda* over with before people start coming in for a cut and shave. I dawdled too long at the bakery, but I hated leaving that little vixen behind.

After unlocking the door, I push into my father's shop. It's been in my name for months, but it'll always be his. The air pressure slams the door closed behind me, assailing my senses with the scent of his aftershave and cigarettes. The formidable Leto Luciano didn't give a shit about Boston's no smoking laws. I stopped allowing the habit after he died, but the smell still haunts this place.

Even now, wisps of memory flicker at the edges of my vision. He's shaving a customer with one hand and tapping the cherry of his cigarette into an ashtray with the other. The look of disdain on his tan and weathered face as he appraises me is just as obvious as it was back then.

I try to shove the image away to free myself from him, but it's never that easy.

My father loved exactly three things: his business, his wine, and the Family. But not *his* family.

He loved *the* Family.

Before he died, he was the Boss, the leader of the Vincelli-Luciano crime family in the Boston outfit. As a child, all I wanted was to work in his shop and walk in his footsteps when he stepped down. But in his eyes, I was too much like my mother to fill his shoes, too emotional to be logical, and not man enough to lead the family. Soft. Weak.

I might've gone my whole life believing him if my uncle had never kidnapped me and shown my father's true colors. Claudio stole me right

under the boss's nose using people my father thought he could trust.

After I escaped, my father claimed the whole thing was a test that I'd failed. According to him, getting bested by an adult was something a ten-year-old should be ashamed of.

Even back then, I knew he was full of shit, but I realized too late that my kidnapping was the beginning of a long series of calculated steps my uncle made to steal my father's throne.

My throne. Not that I give a damn about that. I have more important goals.

Kidnapping me wasn't meant to prove how strong I was—or wasn't—to my father. It was meant to prove to *everyone* how much weaker he was than his younger half brother and how much more power, money, and influence the underboss had over the boss and his heir.

Soon, I'll change that perception. I've been waiting for all the pieces to fall into place so I could make my move. Today I'm taking the first of my own calculated steps so I can give Claudio everything he deserves, a thousandfold.

I try to ignore the twinge in my ankle as I head to the back door. Without the public's prying eyes, pain comes with a vengeance, knifing up my shin like a bitch. Once I'm at the exit that's designed to look like an office door, I maneuver the boxes in my hold. They block the door's mirror, helping me avoid the ghost I know I'll see in the reflection.

Once the boxes are balanced, I unlock the door to reveal the antique-style elevator I installed. All the leases for the residences in this building have run their course. Should I ever rent it out again, there's another modern elevator on the other side of this wall for residents to use. It would carry them from the parking spaces in the alleyway up to their apartments, but not the basement or the barbershop. That's where this one comes in, for just me and my purposes.

Inside it, my dark purpleheart cane still rests in the corner where I left it, and I take it in hand. Balancing everything on one side, I close the wooden door before sliding closed the elevator's copper scissor gate. The diamond openings allow me to see through the barbershop door's one-way mirror. Everything is as it should be, no haunting in sight, and I know my plans are on the right track. I nod to myself and press the button to take me down to the basement, where it stops in front of the old meat aging room.

The business floors in this building haven't been a butcher shop since my

father took over years ago. The walk-in fridge and the tools left behind were perfect for the Family's purposes, so he kept the setup. What we do here is one of the reasons why I still haven't rented out the apartments upstairs, and the main reason I likely never will.

While my father focused on the shop, street deals, and shakedowns, I focused on stocks and real estate. I was just seventeen when I bought out the owners of this building and leased it to my father and the residents above the barbershop. It pissed him off that he essentially worked for me. I only added insult to injury when I took the top-floor apartment just so the bastard could feel me always watching him.

No one knows the extent of my wealth. It fit both our agendas to keep it quiet from the Family, but I thoroughly enjoyed rubbing it in his face whenever I could. At least I did up until six months ago when he died from a "heart attack" in his sleep.

My *zio* Claudio was the underboss at the time and immediately tried to have me killed. When my mother found out his plans, she offered herself up as the bargaining chip for a truce. Claudio's first wife, my *zia* Antonella, died of a stroke over a decade ago, and my uncle had no problem marrying his half brother's widow before he was cold in the ground. Despite my father having truly loved my mother at one point in their lives, it didn't seem to bother her that she married his half brother, either.

Claudio thinks he made an enemy out of me when he stole my rightful place in the Family. But all my enemies were made long ago by a heartbroken boy and the dead girl who saved him. After my father died, I thought I had my chance at revenge. Unfortunately, lack of evidence and my mother's marriage to Claudio both made it impossible for me to fight back without a bloody coup.

My father appointed me as an enforcer to mete out his punishments. But with Claudio in charge, I've been demoted to a soldier. He's enjoyed ordering me around like one of his Italian mastiffs ever since. My plan was at a stalemate until this past month when *un idiota* gave me the opening I needed.

I've been waiting for the perfect time to strike. But I also have a real estate empire that I have to run right under Claudio's nose. If the man finds out I'm buying up Boston, one property at a time, I'll be swimming in the Charles River with cement shoes.

I asked Orazio to take over the barbershop while I pursued my own

endeavors and continued my father's less legal ones. As children of malavitosi, Raze and I grew up together, and he's a better brother to me than my father and uncle ever were to each other. I trust him with my life, so I knew I could trust him with my father's pride and joy. He's my first and only pick as my second-in-command when the time comes.

Raze usually does a job without complaint, but this time he required a sweet consolation prize. He's rightfully annoyed that he had to do my dirty work while I attended a wedding in Vegas. I left early to handle business here, but he's been watching over the pig in our meat locker for too long. Cannoli will go a long way to put him in a better mood.

Inside the refrigerator, whirring fans slap gusts of freezing air into my face, and chains clink gently from the ceiling. Raze sits on the far side, leaning back in his chair, his feet resting on an unused, low-hanging meat hook.

He's one of my cousins on the Luciano side of my family, but with our similar features, he looks more like my brother than his own. His light eyes are where we differ most, and right now they're nearly glazed over with boredom as he lazily scrolls through his phone. Our prey is already chained up and unconscious, just as I asked.

The door squeaks shut, and I lock it behind me. If we ever sell the place, the new owners are going to have a field day trying to answer why there are so many damn locks, let alone ones on the outside *and* inside of a meat locker.

Raze looks up, and excitement lights his eyes. "Fuck yes. Give 'em here."
"Don't say I never gave you anything, *scansafatiche*."

I toss him both boxes, and he scrambles upright in his seat to keep them from falling off his lap.

"*Cazzo!*" He snatches open the top of one box and groans. "Come on, Sever, you can't treat the goods so disrespectfully. Now all the cupcake frosting is ruined."

I roll my eyes. "What're you going to do with a dozen cupcakes anyway? Oh, and save the cookie. That one's mine."

He examines the boxes with a pout. "I was going to stop by Roman and T's shop for more ink after this. They're booked, so I wanted to convince them to squeeze me in with these. But now they're ruined."

My mind flickers back to Tallie's tulip tattoos on her forearm. I blink the thought away to stay in the present. "Your teeth are going to fall out, you

know.”

“Yeah, because they’re going to chatter out of my head if we don’t leave this locker soon. Let’s get on with it. You promised if I snagged him early this morning, we’d be done with him before he pisses and shit everywhere.”

“Don’t worry. You know I keep my promises.” I study the unconscious man lying on the polished concrete floor. “And this one will be a pleasure to follow through with.”

My uncle doesn’t think he needs an official advisor. He was my father’s underboss, and I suspect his downfall, so I can see why Claudio would be wary. His capo, Vinnie Flores, is the closest thing he has to a second-in-command...and he’s now chained up in my basement.

Once Claudio finds out, I’ll have officially started a war. But I’m ready, and the information this *bastardo* has inside his thick skull will help me win it by swaying the Family to my side.

“*Il figlio di puttana* has been out for a few hours already. When he wakes, he should sing like a canary.” Raze smirks. “I gave him the same *merda* Claudio has him sell around here. Found it in his pockets like you suspected.”

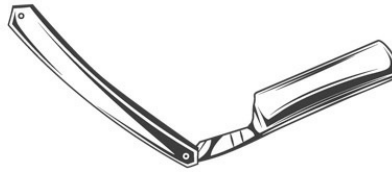
Anger surges through me. The Family isn’t above pushing drugs, but we don’t do it in our own backyard. My father had his flaws, but using the Family’s position to poison our neighborhood wasn’t one of them.

“Let’s wake him up then, shall we? Ready?”

He wiggles his phone at me. “Hell yeah. Let’s make a movie.”

Scene 5

IL PORCO SQUEALS



Sever

Vinnie's oily combover sticks to the damp ground, his cheeks are pale, and he's in his signature tracksuit. Chains encircle his waist, binding his hands behind him, while his feet are tethered to the meat hook line that extends from the ceiling. The only reason the meat hook is secured on the chain links and not embedded in his back is because I still need the man alive for answers. One of his palms has an infected wound from an incident a few weeks ago, and his nose is recently bloodied.

"I see you started without me. Was he hard to take down?"

"Nah." Raze shrugs. "He was half-high when I found him. I just ran out of shit to scroll through and got bored."

I chuckle with approval and use the tip of my cane to press the button that controls the meat hooks hanging from the ceiling. The loud, clanging sound rattles Vinnie awake. By the time he figures out what's happening, though, the pulley system has already yanked him upside down.

"Wait, no! No! Stop!"

"Shout all you want. I like it," I taunt.

Raze's barber shop isn't open yet, and even if it was, no one could hear him beyond the insulated walls of the aging room.

"Severino, please. Let me down. I'm your cousin, for Chrissake, and your uncle's capo! Show some fucking resp—"

I swing my oak cane like a baseball bat straight into his stomach, making

him shriek in pain.

“You’re my *uncle*’s cousin. Not mine. I don’t know what the fuck that makes us on our family tree, but after the way you behaved in front of the Vegas families, you’re no relation of mine.”

Claudio sent Vinnie and me to Vegas a few weeks ago to “check out the competition.” My uncle’s been trying for years to expand the Vincelli influence beyond Boston. He even opened up one of his restaurants on the Vegas Strip. But Vegas works differently than we do. They respect the heads of true families, not just the Mafia boss. Since my father was the only son and I’m the last Luciano in his line, Claudio sent me under the guise that Vinnie is *my capo*.

The whole thing was one of Claudio’s mind tricks to get under my skin. Vinnie was my father’s capo before he became Claudio’s. Going to Vegas might have been for recon, but the fact that Claudio sent me with the man I suspect had a hand in my father’s death was solely meant to taunt me.

“Is that what this is about? Me cheating at cards? Who cares? Claudio would tell those families to *vaffanculo* if he could. He just wants their money.”

“You think I care what *Claudio* thinks? You tried to steal from the family we were reconning, you *idiot*. We were at that casino in *my* name, not Vincelli’s. You respect no one, especially not the Lucianos.”

“Why the hell would I respect *you*? You’re just a soldier and the son of a dead boss. No power. No influence. Your uncle should’ve killed you when he went after your—”

He slams his mouth shut, and my lips twitch.

Gotcha *porco*.

“Went after my...what, Vinnie?”

“Went after your nothing,” Vinnie sneers. “Let me go, *bastardo*. Claudio will be looking for me once he gets back from evaluating his restaurant in Vegas, and you know what he’ll do when he finds out about this.”

“Actually, Claudio thinks you’ve gone back on a bender in Atlantic City. Orazio?”

Raze retrieves Vinnie’s phone from his own leather jacket and shakes the blank screen in our direction. We won’t risk turning it on longer than to send text messages. As long as we keep it off, Claudio won’t be able to search the location.

Vinnie’s eyes pop out of his head, and he stutters his objections. But

upside down, he can't seem to form two sentences together and his face purples. I sigh and nod to Raze.

He hops up from his chair and presses a button on the wall, instantly loosening the chain from the ceiling. I use the end of my cane to shove Vinnie on his way down, forcing him to land on his back instead of cracking his skull on the ground. The air knocks out of him, and he wheezes a groan. While I give Vinnie time to recover, I drag Raze's chair closer and settle into it. Once I've propped my leg out, I steeple my fingers on top of the curved handle.

"Many people can't handle inverted suspension comfortably for longer than five minutes. Those with heart and lung problems are especially at risk and can die just as quickly," I inform him. "You've drugged and drank your heart nearly to death already, so who knows how long you'll last? If I don't get answers, up you go. The longer I don't get answers, the quicker I'll forget how much time has passed while you're up there, *hai capito?* Do you understand?"

He coughs and glares up at me. "Is this really because I cheated at that McKennon card game? I paid for that already!"

He twists to show me the hole in his hand where a member of one of the families stabbed him with a roulette rake. My lips twitch at the memory. Seeing Vinnie get his ass handed to him was a beautiful thing, but I couldn't let Kian McKennon have the pleasure of finishing the job.

"And the only reason you weren't killed that day was because of me, don't forget that."

"Thank Severino for his kindness, Vincenzo," Raze orders with a cheeky grin.

Vinnie scowls but forces out a halfhearted thanks.

"Oh, no need to thank me. I was betting you'd screw up. But doing it in front of the men who run Vegas was a fatal mistake. If I tell Claudio what happened, he'd have no choice but to get rid of you. I kept your indiscretion to myself, waiting for the right time. Claudio's out of Boston, so he can't save you, and I don't give a shit what he does to me later as long as I get answers now."

Vinnie's forehead prickles with sweat despite the chill in the room.

"It shouldn't be this way. I-I'm the capo...you're just a soldier, no better than one of his guard—"

"Guard dogs, yeah, I know. I've heard that one before. But you know

what came out of those meetings with the Vegas families? I've secured them to *my* side, which means I have allies and your thief of a boss doesn't. Whatever I do next, I'll have their support. And once I make my case, I'll have the support of the rest of our Boston syndicate, too."

"You want those Vegas Irishmen as allies?" Vinnie spits out the words. "You're just as weak as your father thought if you believe you have any power—"

I slam my cane into the fucker's stomach again, thrusting new squeals from his diaphragm.

"You want the tools?" Raze asks, flipping a knife from the old butchers' tray into the air.

Vinnie's eyes widen at the shiny weapon. "No! Please!"

"I think he's motivated now. Aren't you *porco schifoso*?" I use my cane to pat his flaccid cheeks, and he nods quickly. "Now...you're going to tell me what I want to know, or I'm going to use those tools Raze so helpfully offered."

Vinnie's bloodshot eyes widen. "I-I'll tell you anything!"

"*Bene*. Good." I lean back and tap the handle of my cane, deciding to test him with a question I already know the answer to. "Fifteen years ago, you took me so my uncle could lock me up. Why?"

Vinnie's black, bushy brows curve high up his forehead.

"Your father didn't tell you?" He barks a laugh. "That's rich."

Annoyance bristles under my skin.

"Orazio. Cleaver."

"It was over this place!" he rushes out, making Raze grumble over not getting to use the tools yet. "Your father wanted this location and ordered Bianchi the butcher to let us rough people up here in his meat locker. He was an associate, but after getting wifed up and having a kid, the *idiota* didn't want to play anymore and told us to stop."

My forehead wrinkles. This is the first I'm hearing of any of this. I thought my kidnapping was a simple squabble between brothers and that the butchery had been leased to my father, fair and square.

"This...Bianchi? He said no to the Family? Ballsy motherfucker."

"Claudio threatened his wife and kid, and Bianchi did what he had to do to make them happy. That was good enough for Leto, but not Claudio. He took the matter into his own hands."

"How?"

“The usual.” He shrugs. “Bianchi and his family had to go. What better way than a run-of-the-mill—”

“Accident,” I grit out. “But why not just harass them out of town? Why kill them? Had they threatened to report to the feds?”

“Ha! You know standing up to the Family is a death sentence all by itself, especially when he started to buck against paying a protection fee. In the end, he became a liability rather than an asset. The boss did what he had to do.”

“No, *Claudio* killed him. Not my father.”

Vinnie huffs. “Your father was no Mother Teresa, Severino. This is the business, boy. If you let one person refuse to pay, word gets around, and everyone wants out. You’ve never had the stomach to do what needs to be done. That’s why you’ll never be more than just one of *Claudio*’s soldiers.”

Instead of his king.

It’s what everyone thinks I want, but a crown isn’t what I’m after. Justice is all I’ve wanted, and now that I have the chance, I won’t let this *stronzo*’s bullshit trash talk sidetrack me from getting revenge.

“So, what happened after the butcher died? My father got the shop like they’d planned.”

“*Claudio* was supposed to get the shop. He did all the dirty work. Not your father. That’s why *Claudio* took you and held you for ransom, to punish your father and make him fork over the business in trade.”

“But he didn’t,” I answer. “I escaped.”

The truth shouldn’t hurt anymore after all this time. My father didn’t give a rat’s ass about me when it came to what was best for him. I’ve known that since I was a child, but the reminder always stings.

“*Claudio* should’ve known your father wouldn’t come for you. It would’ve caused trouble. Family business is too important to fight over one little boy.”

A snippet of the song that’s haunted my dreams slithers into my mind.

What about a girl? Why was she important?

Trauma and adrenaline have made the night we escaped somewhat of a blur for me. But I still remember her screams. I hear them at night, just as vividly as I see my father in the day. His role in the Family made it difficult to go after the men responsible. Not knowing her name made it impossible.

I lean forward in my chair to fill Vinnie’s vision.

“And the girl that was in the room next to me? Why was she made to suffer?”

His face blanks.

“What girl?”

I swing my cane down like an axe on his chest, not hard enough to kill him but enough to knock the wind out of him so effectively he can't even scream. Satisfying pops mean I broke a few ribs.

“Don't pretend like you don't know who I'm talking about. You stole me for Claudio. I know you were the one who kidnapped her, too. Why?”

“She wasn't important enough for me to remember—”

My cane slaps his nose before I can stop myself. The crunch is almost as loud as the screams that follow.

“Say one more bad thing about that girl, and I'll crack your skull next time.”

Blood leaks down the sides of his face and drips onto the slick floor. His breath rasps from his mouth. “Her parents died. The Vincellis were her godparents. She had nowhere else to go.”

“Godparents? *Vaffanculo, porco*. Fuck off. Who would want Claudio fucking Vincelli to take care of their child?”

“Her father did it to prove his loyalty to Claudio. When her parents died, Claudio took her in.”

“Took her in?” I growl. “He *used* her for his own purposes. Who was the man that—” I shake my head, still, after all these years, unable to say it. “Who hurt her?”

Vinnie shrugs. His flushed face, exhaustion, and sweaty forehead make it impossible to tell whether he's actually clueless or lying. Probably both.

I thought I knew all there was to my kidnapping. That it was a simple power play between siblings, but I didn't realize lives were lost before I ended up in that basement. So far, the disgusting pig in front of me has squealed plenty about my father and Claudio. If Vinnie is willing to risk bodily harm over the secrets about the girl, whoever is involved must have even more power than them both.

I stand and lay my cane on the seat of the chair. The walk to the rolling cart of tools is short, but I still have to mask my pain with the gait I've formed over the years. The near-daily ache is my small penance for leaving the girl behind. I failed her, and the injury is a constant ache for vengeance.

Vinnie begins to hyperventilate the closer I get to the cart, until I pick up the blunt sharpening steel rod. An audible sigh rushes out of him, but he otherwise remains silent. It takes me removing my favorite razor from my

pocket and honing it on the steel for him to realize he's still in danger.

"I don't know who it was, I swear," he gasps.

My hands freeze, stopping the harsh swipes of the blade.

"I don't believe you. But that name I can find out from someone else. There's another name I need right now. *La verità è bella*. The truth is beautiful, Vincenzo, so now's the time for your ugly ass to confess. *Someone* knows the girl's name, and I think you're that someone. So, what was it?"

"I-I don't remember."

"Really?" I grind out through clenched teeth. "How convenient."

I nod to Raze, and Vinnie yelps as he's yanked upside down once more.

Holding the razor by the wooden handle, I drag the tip of the blade along his sweat-covered cheek. Careful not to go too deep, I use just enough pressure for blood to blossom. It slowly trails down his face and into his eyes, but the carbon steel is so sharp he doesn't flinch.

"My father gave me this razor the day he opened the barbershop, but I've never used it to shave a single face. It's been my weapon. I vowed to use it on the man who kidnapped me. As you know, my father never let me kill that man." A red blood vessel bursts in Vinnie's eye, a pinprick of crimson spreading over the rheumy sclera. "Instead, they made you bring in some fall guy to 'keep the peace.' I don't even know what the *bastardo* did to deserve it. The man had been locked up for weeks, and he was already too beat up for answers. He was supposed to be my first kill, and I was supposed to use this razor to do it."

"But you couldn't," Vinnie sneers, a mix of false bravado, hope, and disgust. "You've always been weak."

"Hardly. I don't blindly follow orders like you do, Vincenzo. Although I was so angry, I almost did it just to feel relief. An innocent life was lost in all of this. That girl had nothing to do with it, and no one even knew her *name*." I swing the blade up, ready to slam it into his jugular.

"I d-don't know!" Vinnie stammers. "Claudio ordered me to forget about her, so I did. I swear!"

He's terrified, which means he truly doesn't remember. My heart grows heavy with defeat, and I shake my head.

"You know, I actually think you're dumb and callous enough to forget something like that. Which is unfortunate for us both."

"Forgetting the order after you've completed it is how we stay alive in this world, S-Severino. What's the saying? 'Once a bullet leaves the gun, you

never talk about it.’ The less we can tell the feds, the better. You know that, already.”

He’s right. It’s the reason why I know virtually nothing, even after all these years. I’d hoped to get answers from Vinnie, and while I’ve gotten several, they all dance around what I actually want. Anger flares through me again, but my last question wriggles in my mind.

“You’re worth nothing to me, then. Unless...”

“Unless what?” he croaks.

I pretend to think, even though this was the second part of my plan. “I have no use for you unless you can tell me how my father died. One day, his cold heart ticked along just fine. Then he had family dinner with you and Claudio. That night, he died in his sleep. Know anything about that?”

He shakes his head quickly. “I got nothing.”

“Very well, then.” I swing the blade up again—

“*Aspetta!* Okay! Okay! I might know something.”

I stop mid-air. Frustration and adrenaline race in my veins.

“What do you know?”

“Your...your—” Vinnie’s eyes bug out, and his breaths are labored as gravity finally has its way with him. I crouch down to his face and idly flick the razor with a fingernail so he can hear the low hum of death calling to him.

“It looks like your black heart and lungs are struggling, Vincenzo. Out with it.”

“Your f-father—” Vinnie gargles, the weight of being upside down crushing his chest.

“Sev, man, I don’t know if he can take much more.”

Raze’s assessment spurs me to pull Vinnie up by his bloody, sweat-covered collar with one hand to relieve the pressure on his lungs, but I press the razor’s edge against his carotid artery with the other. At this angle, his tears stream down his temples and land silently on the cold floor.

“What about my father? You’ve put this off long enough. This is your last chance. I’ve been *waiting* to use this razor on the man who *actually* deserves it.”

He chokes, and his voice is garbled as he fights gravity’s weight. “C-claudio. I-it w-was C-laudio. P-poison.”

“Claudio *poisoned* him? But that’s not his style. My uncle loves his guns and his car ‘accidents.’ Why would he change up his MO?”

“S-seriously that’s all I know.” Terror and pain flood his pale cheeks. If

he could get out of this, he would.

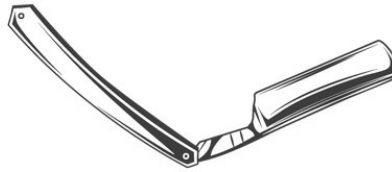
“*Cazzo*,” I whisper and shake my head before answering him. “I believe you.”

Relief makes his muscles sag, flattening his inverted face. “P-please l-let me dow—”

I drop him, but he only manages to get half another gasp out before I cut his throat down to his spinal cord.

Scene 6

SILENT SCREAMS STILL ECHO



Sever

Blood fountains from Vinnie's severed neck, pouring down his face and into his dimming eyes. It splatters onto the floor but misses my shoes.

I've done this enough to know exactly where to stand to avoid evidence splashing all over my clothes.

His head hangs at an odd angle, like a morbid clown's painted smile in the middle of his neck. The drain in the floor siphons the rivulets of blood away with a sputtering gurgle that matches Vinnie's.

When the room is silent, I wipe my razor on the dead man's tracksuit before stuffing the folded blade in my pocket. I snatch up my cane from the chair and plop into the seat, the weight of everything I just heard making me feel heavier.

"Well, that was informative," Raze chimes in behind me as he presses the button to lower the body to the ground. "You think everything he said was true?"

I nod again. "He knew his life was in my hands. The man's always been a squealing pig, not a loyal one. Too bad for him, his answers just pissed me off more."

Raze grunts his assent. "So that girl...you still don't know her name. Will you be able to let it go if you never find out?"

My cousin doesn't get it, but I don't expect him to. I'll never be able to let her go. I don't remember much about that time, but I remember those days when she talked my ear off, keeping me sane. I remember those nights where she suffered a fate I couldn't understand that young, and I still can't stomach

as an adult. And I remember her calling for me, pleading for me to help, right up until those dogs silenced her forever.

“No.”

“You were just kids, man,” Raze tries to reassure me. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Doesn’t make it easier.”

Raze sighs. “Let’s focus on today, then. Where do you want this one? Same place as the others? After you’re done adding to your sick obsession, of course.”

I smirk at the reference to the macabre collection I have upstairs. It reminds me of Tallie’s cemetery sketch. Creepy, meticulous, and fucking perfect. I’d hang her artwork on my wall right above my sculpture if I could.

“A new row, this time. The bodies will be harder to find if they’re spread out, and I still have a few more questions I need answered before this comes to a head.” I nod toward Raze’s phone. “You recorded everything, right?”

Raze scoffs and flashes the screen. A video is paused with Vinnie lying on the ground during one of his confessions. “I may be your right-hand man, but you sure think I’m a *maledetto* amateur sometimes. Caught the whole thing. Those drugs made him sing just as pretty as advertised. I’ll have to do some editing work to delete the questions about the girl. If we have to show this to someone from the Family to prove you have the right to avenge your father, we don’t want people thinking you had other motives.”

“I don’t care if they know I have other motives.”

“Well, you may not care if you live or die, but *I* do. If the Family thinks you did this for your father, you’ll survive. For the girl? Not so much.”

The girl has always been in the back of my mind, but in our world, avenging my father’s death is a classic “*occhio per occhio*” or “eye for an eye” among loyal mafiosi. Going after the Boss in the name of an unaffiliated girl would never be honored by the Family. As long as I use my father’s death as a cover for my revenge, I’ll be able to get justice for her, too.

I twirl my cane in my hand before jabbing it in Raze’s direction.

“You’re the only one I trust with this, Raze. Don’t tell Roman or Tiero when you go to the tattoo shop.”

“Never, man. But I’m not going today, anyway.”

“Why not?”

He lifts his phone. “Got the text while all that was going on. Apparently the client wants a Medusa tattoo.”

“A Medusa tattoo? Sounds like cool ink, but what’s that got to do with anything?”

He squirms. “The girl might want some privacy or some shit. Lots of sexual assault victims get them as a symbol of their survival.”

The skin on my calloused knuckles gleams white from squeezing my cane so hard.

“*Cazzo.*”

It’s all I can say. After everything the girl went through, I can’t handle the thought of an innocent being hurt, especially not like that.

“Yeah, I know. It’s heavy.” His nod is quick, and he stands straighter. “But what we just did? That’s heavy too. You know we just started a war, right?”

We both stare at the capo’s corpse, and I shake my head. “My war began when the girl died. I’m just finally entering the battlefield. This was my opening salvo. By the time Claudio finds out, I’ll either be ruling with my crown or I’ll be in the fucking ground.”

“A dead girl’s worth dying over, then?”

“I should’ve been the one that died that night. She’s not just worth my life. She’s worth everything.” I swallow and try to hide the emotion in my voice, but there’s no hope for it.

“Damn. Well, maybe doing this will help you get some sleep. You look like *merda*, by the way. When was the last time you slept without nightmares?”

“Fifteen years ago,” I grumble and rub my eyes.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out to see a reply to the text I sent on the way back from Sweet Tallie’s.

GERTRUDE

A play this weekend sounds lovely! I’ve been dying to see that show. I’m returning from Vegas that morning, but I think I can make it work. You’re so thoughtful!

Before we go, though... I want to apologize for the tension lately—

I shove my phone back into my pocket without bothering to read the rest. When I look up, my cousin is scarfing down cannoli. It takes a lot of calories to maintain his workout regimen, which means he eats constantly, not caring that there’s a corpse still bleeding out in front of us. He’s trained me in every

fighting technique he knows, and he's a brick wall of muscle. Where I'm built like a quarterback, tall and lean, he's a linebacker, just as tall but wide. Despite Tallie's height, I loomed over her. Raze's frame would swallow her whole. My fists clench at the thought of him being anywhere near her.

"What do you know about the bakers' granddaughter?"

"Talia?" His brow raises, and a flake of fried pastry dough falls from his mouth. Pleasure fills my chest over the fact that he doesn't use her nickname. "Not much aside from the fact that she'll never make cannoli as good as her *nonni*. Goddamn, this shit is delicious. Why do you ask?"

My fingers relax. "No reason."

He nods and swallows the confection without chewing. If he wasn't so preoccupied, he'd be giving me the third degree right now. Instead, all he's got on his mind is sugar and the job at hand.

Most hate this part of wet work, but I love it. It's soothing to dispose of my victim and know that the man I killed will never come back. That certainty is a luxury I never had with my father or the girl, and it ensures I'm free of any other ghosts.

"So, we clean this up and dump it." He nods at the body. "Should take a day or two. Then what?"

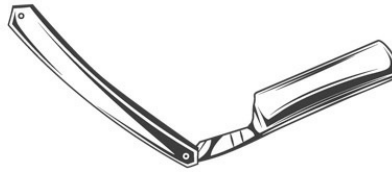
I grab the cookie from the box, peel down the parchment paper, and take a bite off of a purple tulip petal. It's sweet, rich, and sinful. Perfect.

"After that, Orazio, I'm going to see a show."

Act 2

Scene 7

CURTAIN CALL



Talia

I grew too fast for my age.

That thought's been on my mind a lot lately, and it's loud right now as I ready the dressing room for the actor's return from the stage.

When I was just a child, my body was used against my will. It was my enemy, and then it betrayed me further when it suddenly filled out in all the wrong places, making me look more like a woman than a middle schooler. Baggy clothes were my safety against prying eyes.

But then I got to college and realized just how powerful a woman's body can be.

Over the past four years, I've slowly honed myself into a weapon. My curves catch men's gazes, my lips tell lies that lure them in, and my hands spill their blood. Self-defense and fighting classes, not to mention learning how to dress for my curves, gave me the confidence to get just about anything I want, whenever I want. Now, every time I leave the comfort of the bakery to prepare for my list, I dress the part.

A few weeks ago, I did just that to strike the three maids off of my list.

After studying the Family, I learned the new Mrs. Vincelli insists that her staff's dress code match the aesthetic of her centuries' old brownstone. Even though I made a perfect recreation of the maids' uniform, the day I finally gathered the courage to slip into that dreadful house again, I was terrified I would get caught.

But no one batted an eye. I should've realized the Vincellis never notice "the help" until something goes wrong.

So virtually invisible, I snatched drapes from around the house, stuffed them in the oversized washing machine, and poured an entire bottle of bleach inside. I still smile whenever I imagine Mrs. Vincelli's screams of frustration over something as trivial as fancy curtains.

The maids were gone the next day.

While I was trapped for weeks, they silently cleaned my room, clothes, and sheets. Only the pity on their faces alleviated some of my hate for them. As an adult, I realize that they were just doing what they were told. Like the butler, getting them fired was all I needed for retribution. Karma may be a bitch, but she's a fair one. Hell, in my opinion, I did them a favor getting them away from a wretched family.

"Curtain call. Curtain call. All actors to the main stage."

The announcer's tinny voice buzzes into the dressing room, drawing me from my thoughts. It's time for the actors to receive their applause, meaning they'll be coming back to their dressing rooms soon. I've finished prepping this one, so I take a quick second and reapply the tinted concealer I keep in my messenger bag to counteract the ever-present redness along my jaw. My eye makeup still looks great. The liner, shadow, and lashes draw wandering eyes to focus on the intense hazel in my irises.

I'm pretty now. Some might even say beautiful. But growing up, I was the unintentional goth kid in the back of the classroom at Franklin Elementary. Other kids didn't want to get to know the quiet new girl who dyed her hair jet black and dressed in baggy clothes. It didn't help that they thought the heavy makeup I wore to cover my scar was weird. How could they know I only did all that because I had to hide in plain sight?

They thought I was an easy target, but I fought back. I never started anything, but I ended it. Sometimes even before it began, setting up traps to make sure the teacher noticed when a kid like one of the Flores cousins cheated. Of course, they never got in trouble thanks to who they were related to.

The capo. He and the driver have been on my list from the start.

The driver was the one who ran into our car fifteen years ago. At first, I thought it was an accident, but then Vinnie got out of the car, yanked me from my seat, and ordered the driver to take us back to Vincelli's, leaving my parents to die. The driver is next on my list and shouldn't be hard to find.

The only one I've lost track of is the capo. I've been learning everything I can about my future victims for months. Even these pricks in organized crime

are dumb enough to have social media. A few posts, selfies, and pictures show patterns and reveal more than the poster intends. The capo, however, has been off the radar for days. Once I do find him, though, I'll be ready.

I give myself a once-over in the mirror and nod.

"Good enough." I tuck the concealer into my costume apron and leave the room to watch the actors receive their applause.

I stand safely behind the act curtain as they proceed out onto the stage. The crowd goes increasingly wild, and a smile lifts my face.

The Secret Garden requires mid-nineteenth-century period pieces, and they went off without a hitch tonight. The makeup I taught my actors how to do themselves went perfectly, and the audience was completely immersed in the production. Seeing the work I put into the production executed so beautifully gives me a rush of accomplishment.

I don't know if anything can top that morning in the garden, though.

Since I left the Vincellis', that feeling has waned, so now I make sure to soak in all the hard work the cast, stagehands, and designers have put into this show. This costume design position is my first real job since graduating. I'd been sure that I would be relegated to an internship position to help the cast, but I'm getting paid to work alongside the costume director herself.

As the actors bow, the crowd applauds wildly, loving the funny dances and little touches the players perform when their name is called. I scan the theater, enjoying the satisfaction on all the faces...except one.

The man is front-row center and still sitting down. His fingers are steepled in front of him, propped up by his elbows on the armrests and he stares blankly at the stage. It's clear that he isn't the slightest bit interested and probably hasn't been since the opening scene. I stare for so long the actors begin to leave the stage. The overhead lighting in the theater turns on, and I can see him clear as day.

"Sev..." I whisper under my breath.

As soon as his name leaves my lips, I swear he looks right at me. There's no possible way he heard me, and I'm not even sure he can see me, but I duck farther behind the curtain just in case. My mind reels with questions and possibilities, and I don't dare peek around the drape again.

What's he doing here? Is he with someone? I'd totally forgotten that he heard Gio talk about the show, but he obviously wasn't interested in the play. So why is he here?

Is he here for me?

My lower belly flutters until my good sense weighs the butterflies like stones.

Of course not. Why would he care about me?

Unless...

Does he know what I did?

For the past few days, I've had the eeriest feeling that I'm being watched. Somehow I never got literal blood on my hands, but I glance down at my palms for the millionth time anyway to reassure myself they're not soaked in evidence.

"Stop it, Tallie. It's in your head." I shake my hands quickly before raking them through my snaking curls. My fingers snag on the spirals, pulling tightly and squeezing against the sides of my head. The painful pressure takes my mind off of my brief moment of insanity. I let go and ball my hands into fists before rushing back to the dressing rooms.

Shoving down my paranoia, I dive into work. There's an afterparty backstage for those who want to stay and mingle with the VIP audience. If they change beforehand and need my help, I'll be available, but many of them will want to remain in their costumes. Either way, as soon as the actors that have been assigned to me are done, I'm gone.

I return to the dressing room for the only actor who insists I cater to him directly, whether there's a problem or not. The rest of them are self-sufficient, but Percy can't let a moment go by without trying to get under my skin or in my pants. Apprehension fills my veins at the thought. Last night was a close call, but I can get through his advances tonight too, just like I have every other time.

The director, Deon, would put a stop to it instantly if I reported. Or at least I hope he would. He'd have to believe me first. In any case, I don't want to make waves. Not when I'm already trying to lay low in general.

Percy saunters into the room wearing the same gardener costume I used for my own purposes earlier this week. He smooths his already slicked-back brown hair, and his eyes rove up and down my body more obviously than usual.

Great. This again.

He's always behaved inappropriately around me, but his creepy vibes feel like they've been turned up a notch for some reason.

My hair is down, and I've got my comfy black V-neck sweater dress on, along with black leggings and knee-high boots. It's nothing glamorous and

even complete with a soft measuring tape hanging around my neck and a black costume apron. The ensemble helps me fade into the background, perfect to stay hidden in the shadows. I've worn something similar for every show, so the extra attention isn't for what I'm wearing. Not that my outfit has ever been to blame. But from Percy's hungry gaze, you'd think I was half-naked.

He must think this kind of undivided attention is sexy, however, I am certainly not the right audience for this show. All I feel is annoyance.

Percy snaps me out of the thought as he spreads out his arms in the small space and spins once dramatically.

"Ready to strip me, baby? We've got a party to get to."

I shake my head and turn around, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of thinking I'll watch more of his little performance.

"Hmm, hard pass, Percy. Your change of clothes is ready for you. I've set your suit out, and I trust you can handle the rest—"

I yelp as he hooks his arm around my waist. A jolting shock ripples underneath my skin, and I'm momentarily stunned into stillness. He's touched me without permission before. Last night was worse than this, actually. But now that he's closer, I can *smell* why he's being so bold tonight, and it changes everything.

The familiar stench of booze wafts from him. That sickening aroma, plus the grabby way he's pawing at me, makes me swallow back the urge to gag. He's tried to take liberties before. That was bad enough, and now I have to deal with him drunk as he does it? For the first time around him, a real frisson of fear shoots down my spine, and I take a deep breath through my mouth to try to get past the memories crashing into my mind.

"Smells like you've already started pre-gaming."

"Some of the stagehands had mini bottles. We downed them before curtain call. Sad I didn't share?"

"No. Just trying to do my job and get us both out of here."

I keep my voice emotionless to stop him from finding out he's having any effect on me. There's no way I can handle another night like last night if he's also drunk. He seems unfazed by my lack of reaction, though, and squeezes me tighter. I snatch a needle from the apron around my waist and prick the back of his hand hard enough to draw blood.

"Son of a—*fuck*." He shoves me away. The needle falls to the ground as I try to catch myself on the clothes hanging from a rod on the back wall. "You

stabbed me with a needle *again*? You've been clumsy as shit all week. What gives?"

You've been getting more handsy all week, stronzo.

"Oops, sorry." I shrug. Inside, I'm praying that he'll calm down now that I've poked the shit out of him. It's worked every other night this week, so far, and I don't know how much longer I can keep playing nice.

"You probably got more blood on it," he grumbles and checks his shirt. "There's already some blood here."

"What? Where?" My brows furrow.

"See?" He holds up his lower sleeve to show the dark, crimson dots peppering the pale fabric. "You should be more careful. Your little stunts could cost you your job one day if I have anything to say about it."

My face blanks even as panic slams into my chest.

Che stupida! I was so stupid. So, so stupid.

Years of planning and my cocky ass almost screwed it all up by using the show's costume. I thought it'd be easier, less time consuming and expensive than making another piece. If I'm honest with myself, though, I mostly liked the poetry of it all.

Fifteen years ago, I defied the odds, and in spite of everything, I even survived long enough to get a job in a career I love. It felt like karmic retribution to be able to wear part of my life's success story as I murdered the man who almost kept me from living at all. But poetic or not, it was stupid and careless. If I'm going to finish my list, I have to be smarter.

"I'll send it out to the cleaners tomorrow," I mutter, uncertainty swirling in my mind. Questions that have plagued me since I left yesterday come back with a vengeance.

If I missed this, what else did I miss? Was I careless anywhere else? What if I lead Vincelli and his men straight to my door—

"Tallie," Percy snaps.

"It's Talia," I hiss back just harshly.

Percy's blue eyes flare at my attitude, and I don't blame him. When the world isn't watching, I'm the heroine in my story and the villain in everyone else's. With eyes on me, though, I have to play the supporting role, the side character to everyone else's lead. The longer I can remain in the background, the quicker I can get away with my list.

That's one of the reasons my encounter with Sev was so jarring. I'm usually passed over, the way I like it, but his attention was so intense it felt

like he saw right through me. Which is *terrifying*.

Percy watches me with suspicion before a cocky smile curls his lips.

“Talia, huh? Deciding to show your teeth in one of the last shows of the season? Well, I think I like it when you fight back.”

He tugs at the collar of his white linen shirt, and his gaze heats. My own eyes widen as he works to take off his shirt.

“Wh-what are you doing? At least let me leave first.”

I wouldn't care with other actors. Costume designers give everyone privacy when we can, but sometimes during a quick set change there's an inevitable rogue butt cheek here and a nip-slip there. Percy doesn't need me to help him, though. He's just trying to make me uncomfortable, and I hate that it's working.

I back away, but he steps forward, centering himself between me and my only exit. His smirk and the dwindling space between us makes the dinner in my stomach turn into lead. We don't have much room in here, and before I know it, the back of my thighs hit the small sewing table. Percy doesn't stop, though. He's leaner than I am but taller and well-muscled. The closer he gets, the more I can smell the alcohol on his breath. My air catches in my lungs as he pulls one of my curls around his finger.

“What's wrong, Tallie? Can't handle a man undressing in front of you? Getting this *close* to you?”

“N-nothing's wrong. You just don't need me.”

“Oh, I don't think that's true.” He pushes his erection into my hips.

Flares of panic prick sweat on my brow. My hand blindly searches behind me as my breaths come in quick spurts. The scent of alcohol is stronger by the word, and I know my memories have begun to leak into the present, taking over my body and my sense of smell, making everything worse.

I take a risk and glance at the door. It's ajar, so it's unlikely that anyone will come in unless I cry out. I beg my legs to move, my arms to punch him, my mouth to scream. Fight back, move, flee, *anything*. But I'm paralyzed.

Just like back then.

I was drugged every time up until the night I escaped. All my training, my hate, my planning, I thought I would be able to kick ass if a moment like this came again. But here I am, a victim all over again.

No.

Fuck. That.

“Leave me alone, Percy,” I hiss.

Pushing all my courage to the forefront of my mind, I will my trembling fingers to search around for whatever object I can grab behind my back.

He ignores me and tugs my hair again. I swat his hand, but he yanks me closer by my curls. “Ah, come on, now, Tallie. Don’t play hard-to-get.”

I grip his wrist and press the tender spot one of my self-defense trainers taught me. He releases my hair with a curse, and I finally convince my body to move. I shift to the side toward the door, prepared to run if needed.

“It’s not playing hard-to-get if I’m just not interested, Percy. I’ve told you a hundred times. Let me do my job, and just leave me alone.”

“No. You’ve been playing mind games for weeks. If you really didn’t like it, you would’ve told the director by now. You should be grateful I’m even interested in you with that hideous scar.”

He reaches for me, and I back up, ready to flee.

“Percy, no. Stop—”

“Don’t be so fucking dramatic—”

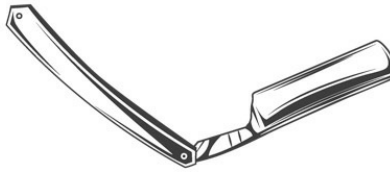
His gaze darts past me just as a large hand envelops mine. I squeeze it on instinct as it swiftly tugs me away from the pervert harassing me. My savior barely fits inside this small dressing room, and he blocks my view. Still holding one of his hands, I peer around his large frame and move with him as he steps forward and uses a cane to shove Percy against the wall.

Sev’s rough growl hits me right in my core.

“She *said*...leave. Her. *Alone*.”

Scene 3

HE IS HER SHIELD



Sever

“**S**ev, wh-what are you doing here?” Tallie’s breathless whisper makes my cock twitch. I ignore it and focus on the rage flooding my veins. The razor in my pocket burns to be used on the motherfucker who dared to touch her, but my cane will do for now.

“L-let go of me, man. Shit, I didn’t realize she had a boyfriend.”

I don’t correct him, and pleasure warms my chest when Tallie doesn’t either.

“How many times has he touched you after you said no, Tallie?”

She huffs. “Too many times.”

“Once is too many times. Tell me how many times you really think it is, but don’t let him hear. I have a theory.”

“Why? What’re you going to do?”

Behind me, I squeeze her hand. On the outside, I’m furious, but inside, I’m also preening that she hasn’t pulled away from me yet. The fury and longing are a heady cocktail running through me.

“Just give me a ballpark, *dolcezza*. His life depends on it. If you don’t answer me, I’ll just take him out right here anyway.”

I push my cane against his throat for emphasis, making him squeal. She doesn’t beg me to let him go. Instead, she pauses.

Whether her hesitation is because she needs to think about her answer or because she wants to see if I’m bluffing, I don’t know. Pride fills my chest the longer she waits, though. It’s as if she knows that this guy’s life is in her hands, but she wants to sit back and enjoy the show.

My victim's pale skin is white along the edges of my cane's shaft. The rest of him is a darkening red, and he struggles to get a word out thanks to the crushing pressure on his windpipe. His eyes plead with hers, clearly not knowing her as well as he thinks.

A strained plea struggles from his throat. "Talia, please. Don't tell him ___"

His sniveling objection spurs her into action, and she stands on her toes to give me what I want. *Cazzo*, if I wasn't interested in her before, her bloodthirsty submission would do it for me all on its own.

Still holding my hand, she uses her other to grip my shoulder for balance. Her lips brush the shell of my ear, and that same sugary, sweet scent I thought was just the bakery's aroma fills my lungs now. My mouth waters as her warm breath whispers over my skin.

"At least ten."

At least ten? Ten fucking times she had to tell this *figlio di puttana* to take his hands off of her. It's unacceptable.

"Wh-what'd she say? She's lying, whatever it is! I swear—"

"What's your name, *stronzo*?" I relieve the pressure so he can squeak out an answer without rasping.

"Percy."

"Well, Percy. I don't like the number she gave me, but I'm curious. What do you think she said?"

He shakes his head, and I tighten my hold again. "I-I don't know! She had to have been lying. It was just this once—"

"Come on, Percy. What do you think she said?"

I don't recognize my own voice—rough and low, full of pure hate. When I work in the meat locker, I'm cold and calculated. It's the way I've trained myself to be ever since my father wrote me off because I let my emotions get the best of me growing up. And here I am, riding them like a violent wave, and goddamn, does it feel good.

"Answer me, Per—"

"Two!"

"Two? You sure?"

Talia grumbles something behind me. I stroke her knuckles with my thumb before glancing over my shoulder.

"Don't worry, I believe you."

"No, wait! I-I don't know the number, okay? Those are the only times I

can remember!”

Cristo, first it was Vinnie conveniently not being able to divulge the crucial information I needed, and now this fucker?

“Lots of memory problems among *gli idioti*, lately,” I mutter.

“Wh-what?”

“It seems you and my girlfriend don’t see eye to eye. I’m going to let you go, for now. But I want you to remember the number *you* gave me, and I want you to try very hard to rack your tiny little brain to figure out what number Tallie gave me. *Hai capito?*”

He nods quickly, ready to agree to anything in order to escape the worst of my wrath.

“*Perfetto*. Now go to that afterparty down the hall. Mingle. Have a grand fucking time. Forget this happened, for now. But don’t forget my instructions.”

“Yeah, yeah, you got it, I swear. Just please don’t hurt me.”

A dark chuckle escapes my lips. “I can’t promise that.”

His eyes widen, but I won’t act on my threat just yet. I shift backward, closer to Tallie, so that I can keep shielding her. One good crack of my cane against his temple would take him out, but I don’t want to take any chances with her safety. When she’s fully protected, I remove my cane from his neck to release him.

He gulps audibly and doesn’t waste a second before sprinting out of the room.

“You nearly made it onto my list, *bastardo*,” Tallie mumbles under her breath.

“Don’t worry, *vipera*, I’ll take care of him.”

She jolts against my back as if she’s forgotten I’m still in front of her. Unlike the bakery, this time I’m prepared for her reaction. I let go of her hand and position my cane to lean on again. Today is a good day for my ankle, but my cane still helps for balance. Not to mention it’s incredibly useful for situations like we just had.

I step out of her reach and face her before she can push me away. Her forehead wrinkles as she assesses me, and I lean back against the wall to do the same. If she’s hurt, I’ll skip my plan and go take the motherfucker out in an alley right now.

A baggy hoodie no longer hides her stunning frame. Instead, her tight sweater dress highlights her curvy figure, and black leggings and knee-high

black boots accentuate her thighs and long legs. My hands twitch, begging to pull her against my cock, but I don't dare touch her. When I finally meet her gaze again, her eyes are narrowed with distrust.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No. He didn't hurt me. But what are you doing here, Sev? Are you following me?"

"A little presumptuous, don't you think?" I'm wholly enthralled by the venom in her voice, but I hide my awe with a tsk. "We only just met. Why would I follow you?"

"I saw you in the audience. It's obvious you didn't come to watch. So, if you're not here for the show, why *are* you here?"

Why, indeed?

I have no idea what kind of hold this woman has on me, but as soon as I left the bakery, I knew that couldn't be the last time I saw her. Thanks to the security cams I've set up all over the city, tonight isn't the second time I've seen her either. Hell, if dreams count, I've been spending every recent night with her.

For the first time in over a decade, I haven't had a single nightmare, but I still haven't gotten any sleep. In my mind, I've given Tallie pleasure in every way imaginable. The only thing I've hated about my visions of us together is the fact that every time I wake up, I've had to come in my hand rather than inside the woman of my dreams. I've been looking forward to tonight all week so that I could see her in person and maybe quench some of that thirst.

I wasn't sure whether I'd see Tallie or not, but I made sure to get both me and Gertrude backstage passes to the afterparty just in case. The only security I've seen was one bouncer who checked our VIP tickets. All I had to do was wander around and glance inside the open, empty dressing rooms until I found her. I nearly passed this room because the door was only cracked. But once I heard her voice and its tremor, I couldn't help but barge in. Seeing that *bastardo's* hand in her hair was enough to make me murderous.

Now it's just me and her, the way it ought to be. She's just as fiery as she was at the bakery, and getting under her skin is quickly becoming my favorite pastime. I lean against the wall and pretend to lazily take in our surroundings.

"I'm here with someone."

"Who?"

A slow smile spreads across my face at her accusatory tone. "*Sei gelosa? Jealous, vipera?*"

“No, of course not,” she hisses. She spins away from me to organize her sewing desk. “And whatever you say, it’s not like I’d believe you anyway.”

“And why’s that?”

“*Capisci l’italiano.*” *You know Italian.* It’s the language my *nonna* refused to let me forget, and I translate it so easily that it takes my mind a second to register that she’s still using it as she continues to accuse me. “*Vipera?* You knew that ‘*fai la brava*’ means ‘be sweet.’ And you understood my *nonno* Gio when he talked about me working at the theater.”

“*Colpevole,*” I admit with a grin. “Guilty.”

I push off the wall and step toward the sewing desk she’s pretending to focus on. Everything is already in its place, something I realized after she picked items up and moved them around a little bit before putting them right back where they were. One sewing kit has been “organized” by length at least twice.

She’s nervous around me for some reason...but not like she was with Percy. I watch her for a moment longer when a needle with a curved and tapered point catches my eye and I pick it up.

“What kind of needle is this? It looks painful.”

“It probably is. Want to find out?” She snatches it out of my hand before I can answer and points the curved metal at me like a finger. “It’s a surgical needle, and they’re good for leather if you must know. Quit changing the subject. Why would you hide that you know Italian?”

Because I don’t want you to figure out who I am.

It’s why I paid in cash and not a card. I’m not a high-ranking member of the Vincelli crime family, but her family is in Claudio’s territory. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve been shaken down for protection money before. Having to pay people to stop harassment tends to leave a bad taste in most people’s mouths.

The thought of them being on the wrong side of one of my uncle’s men makes my jaw tic. I have to shake my head free of the image before answering her question.

“I didn’t admit that I’m fluent because your *nonni* weren’t exactly subtle. I thought feigning ignorance would keep you from blushing. Although...” I step closer. “I missed it when it was gone.”

She scowls at the sewing kit in front of her, as if it’s the needle’s fault that a rosy tint shades her cheekbones again.

“Oh, look. It’s back.” My voice is reverent, just above a whisper, and my

fingers itch to feel the warmth reddening her skin. I step forward again, and a thrill shoots up my spine when she doesn't retreat. "Before, you blushed because your *nonni* embarrassed you. Why are you blushing now, *dolcezza*? Is it embarrassment? Or something else?"

She's perfectly still, waiting for me to touch her, no doubt.

It's obvious she can feel whatever this is between us, but she's determined to ignore it. I like to chase, but I can't force this *vipera* into a corner. I want this little snake to come to me.

"It's just hot in here, is all. I don't feel anything." She swallows past her lie.

A dark chuckle rumbles from my chest. "Is that so?"

I lean in until I'm inches away from her cheek. She tilts her head, and our lips nearly touch, just like they almost did when I caught her in the bakery. Will she close the distance this time?

My gaze drops to her mouth. She bites her plump bottom lip, and my cock throbs in response. As much as I want to taste her, though, I stay completely still.

Her brows furrow when she realizes I have no intention of making the first move. I give her a cocky smirk, and she scowls.

"What's wrong, Tallie? Expecting something?"

A low growl emanates from the back of her throat, and she whirls away to pretend to be too busy for me again. Once again, she's trying not to face me and the tension between us. I don't take it as a slight, though. She was afraid to let Percy out of her sight, yet she trusts me enough to show me her back.

She unties the apron from her waist and snatches off the measuring tape hanging from her neck before packing them both into her messenger bag.

"You look mad enough to strangle me with that tape." I chuckle.

"Nope. Not at all. Like I said, I feel nothing." She gives me a smug look over her shoulder. "You'd probably like it anyway, wouldn't you?"

Her dare heats the space between us like a flame. My voice lowers, and I whisper in her ear. She can't help but lean toward me.

"Try it and find out, *vipera*."

A low gasp escapes her, and I stroke my finger a hair's breadth away from her cheek. She drifts toward me, touching her back against my chest. My cock hardens, begging to feel her. I don't move, but I keep silently encouraging her to come to me.

"You know what I think?" I ask.

“What do you think?” Her question is husky and full of need.

“I think you’re afraid of what will happen when you give into this. You know that once you do, you’ll crave my firm hand as much as I already crave your soft touch.”

I don’t know who surrenders when her cheek and my hand finally brush, and I caress my fingertip slowly down her skin. Her desire radiates off her, and it takes all my restraint to keep from spinning her around to kiss her.

But I know I can’t. She wants to be in charge. For now. It won’t be until she trusts me fully that she’ll let us have what we both need.

This is all new territory for me. Women in my world are more than willing to offer themselves up on a silver platter to made men like me in exchange for money or in hopes of becoming *la moglie di un mafioso*—a Mafia wife. I like the challenge with Tallie, but mostly I love knowing that when I have her, it’s proof that she wants *me*, not status.

Touching her seems to be putting her in a trance, and she relaxes against my chest. I set my cane to the side and wrap my arm around her, resting my hand just above her pussy.

“Let me take care of you, *dolcezza*.” My finger drifts down to her jawline, trailing along the edge until the ridge of her birthmark dips underneath my finger—

She swats my hand away and swivels around to turn on me. I quickly grab my cane for balance.

“What’re you doing here, Sev? Don’t you need to go back to your date?”

Her rejection was so swift and abrupt that at first I don’t understand her question. Then it hits me. I let her believe I was with “someone” without going into more detail. I have half a mind to let her sweat. Seeing this serpent spit jealous venom at me is priceless. But her suggesting that I leave makes my stomach lurch.

“I’m with my mother, Tallie.”

The tenseness in her body immediately relaxes. I’ve enjoyed playing games with her, but having her calm and trusting in my arms was infinitely better than pissing her off.

“You’re with your mom? Like you came with her? And no one else?”

“Yes. Just my mother. No one else. Well, unless you count her driver, Alfonso.”

She snorts. “What, no ticket for the help then?”

“It’s not like that with me.”

“Your mother, on the other hand—”

I wince. “She prefers he wait in the parking lot.” My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I fish it out to read the text. “Speaking of my mother...she’s asking where I am.”

“Better go, then,” she murmurs, but I shake my head.

“I don’t want to leave you by yourself. There’s no *fucking* security. Anyone could come back here while you’re all alone.”

She snorts. “Yeah, they just let you back here, didn’t they?”

I roll my eyes. “Come on, let me walk you out.”

I take her hand again before she can protest, but she stops in her tracks and tries to tug away.

“Seriously, I can manage.”

“Oh, I have no doubt. I saw you going for those scissors when I grabbed your hand. That *idiot* might’ve thought you were at his mercy, but we both know you were ready for him if he’d made another move.”

A wide grin brightens her face. “You saw that, did you? Well, I—”

She startles in the middle of her sentence and retrieves her phone from the pocket of her sweater dress to read the screen.

“*Merda*. Gio’s actually here to pick me up. The man will have a field day if he sees you. He’ll draw up the design for a three-tiered Italian buttercream wedding cake before I wake up tomorrow. Especially once he realizes you’re ‘*un bravo ragazzo italiano*,’ a nice Italian boy.”

A dark chuckle falls from my lips. “Oh, I can assure you, I’m as far from ‘nice’ as a man can get.”

Her breath hitches, and her eyes widen. They capture me until my gaze roams to her parted lips. I’m ready to finally taste them when my own phone buzzes again. She jolts back and away from me, filling the space between us with cool air.

“Y-you better get that.”

She ducks her head to focus intently on cleaning up the final touches on the room. Her moves are so quiet that if I wasn’t looking right at her, I might not even know she was there.

It seems almost like a ritual for her, so I leave her to it and read my screen to see my mother asking me once again where I am. I’d hoped the cast and crew would be enough to entertain her while I was gone. Once people realize who she is and the influence she has due to her husband’s power, she’s usually the life of her own party.

“I’ve got to go, too.” I stuff my phone back in my pocket and lift my head. “Let me walk you...out...”

She’s gone.

The room is barely larger than a walk-in closet, but I glance around anyway.

I’m tempted to follow her, but while I love the chase, I’ll let her flee from me this time. Besides, she knows this place better than I do, and there’s someone I need to chat with at the afterparty.

Before I leave the dressing room, I pause, waiting to see if she’ll come back. Knowing her, which I’m beginning to quite quickly, she’s either long gone or just around the corner, waiting to strike.

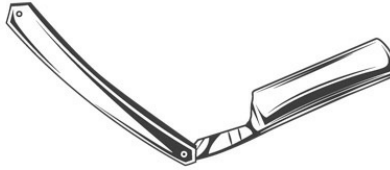
But just the sounds of the party greet me.

I chuckle and whisper under my breath.

“Fai la brava, vipera.”

Scene 9

THE PROMISE WAS A PROPHECY



Sever

There's no sign of Talia on my way back to the party. My head is on a swivel, though, searching for her. Did she leave like she said she would? Or is she watching me from the shadows, like I suspect? I don't know her very well yet, but one thing is becoming clear.

Tallie is a viper waiting to strike, and fuck, do I want to be bitten.

Pursuing her should be the last thing on my mind. I can't let my present obsession interfere with the vendetta from my past. My interest in her could derail everything, but I'm too enthralled to care about the warning signs. The way she leaned into my touch sealed both our fates, whether we like it or not.

I can't have her yet, but I'll sure as fuck protect her. I've been watching her all week, and it's only strengthened my possessive need for her. What happened in the dressing room with Percy is a mere papercut compared to what I'll do to him when the time is right.

The afterparty is in full swing when I emerge onto the stage behind the drawn curtains. Those with backstage passes mill about with the cast and crew. The talented schmooze and mingle with the rich, and vice versa. My mother is among them, in her element as she chats with a gaggle of actors and actresses surrounding her.

You'd never know that she is twice my age, but it's obvious from our looks that we're related. I get my dark hazel eyes from her, and she dyes her wavy gray hair back to its original jet-black hue. She's the finest dressed in the room with her red dress and silver shawl. No doubt she's already "hinted" at how prominent her husband is, and everyone is dying to leech off of her.

Gertrude Luciano-Vincelli may have wondered where I was at one point, but she's sated well enough now.

I grab a bottled water and twist the cap open with one hand before taking a swig. The untouched dessert table on the other side of the room calls to me, and I make my way over. It's much quieter and easier to people-watch here, and I quickly find who I'm looking for. The tall *stronzo* is doing just as I asked, enjoying himself and already drunk off his ass. He hasn't seen me yet, but once he does—

“Severino, there you are. I was looking everywhere for you.” My mother actually sounds worried, but when I tear my eyes away from the crowd to greet her, she's all smiles. “I have some people I'd like for you to meet.”

She introduces the flock of wannabes one by one, but it's all for show. She knows I don't give a shit about any of these people. I give them a cursory nod anyway, playing her game so she won't pout later about me “ruining her fun.”

“My son managed to get front-row tickets *and* have them upgraded to backstage passes. He knows I love the theater. My boy is a good one.” She beams at me, but I stand silent.

Before my father died, I never understood how he and my mother worked as a couple. She loves the finer things and gave up her career to be the wife of a future Mafia boss. He insisted on being a barber like his father before him rather than investing and playing the market like his half brother. My *nonno* was the boss of the Luciano syndicate, but he and my father both believed they didn't have to be rich to rule.

It's one of the reasons why my grandfather's affair with Claudio's mother shocked everyone, rocking both families. Despite the scandal, her parents still helped raise Claudio, so he grew up rich with his mother's last name, and my father grew up hating him and everything he stood for.

It was a fight they had all their lives, money versus power, before Claudio stole both. In some ways, my mother and my uncle are better suited together. He loves having a pretty trophy wife. She loves his money and status. Me, on the other hand, I've amassed more than all the Vincellis and Lucianos combined, but I still itch in a godforsaken suit. Having to wear one the entire time I was in Vegas was nearly torture.

The only upside is that it keeps the interest in my cane to a minimum. Most people see a young guy in a suit and assume the mobility device is a fashion choice rather than a need. With the Vegas fashion being as wild as

the culture, no one would've looked twice if I'd used it there. I only had a couple of bad days, though, so I was able to get by without it. Apparently I'm all out of luck now, though.

One of the actresses has been staring at me since my mother drew her posse over to me. As soon as the woman opens her mouth, I know exactly what's going to come out of it.

"Why do you have a cane?"

"Caught shrapnel in the Boston Tea Party back in '73," I answer without missing a beat.

Some of the small crowd give me odd looks at the blatant lie, others hide their smirks. But the blonde with brown doe eyes gasps in awe.

"Wow. You're so brave."

I huff my annoyance, and my mother quickly tries to recover the situation before I embarrass her.

"Isn't he? Wouldn't he make such a good husband, ladies? The son of Claudio Vincelli, no less."

"Stepson. And nephew, if we're getting technical," I sneer, but they're not listening. The circle seems to get smaller, and their hungry eyes sparkle with interest. But it's interest in who I know, not who I am.

"Yes, Mrs. Vincelli. He's perfect," the same nosy *idiot* purrs, and my eyes narrow.

"Mrs. *Luciano*-Vincelli."

The woman jolts at my tone, so unlike my little *vipera*. Tallie wouldn't have blinked twice at the venom behind my words, and she'd have given it back to me tenfold.

"Gertrude, another topic, *per favore*," I grumble.

My mother's smile cracks at my using her name, and she gives me a pointed look. "Fine. I'm glad you're here, Severino. I have a favor to ask."

Ah, a favor. That makes more sense as to why she texted asking where I was earlier. "What do you need?"

Her voice pitches higher and almost whiny, grating my nerves. "Would you please be a dear and fetch my coat? I'm going to catch a cold in here without it, and the driver isn't answering my messages."

"*What, no ticket for the help then?*"

Talia's scathing accusation hits my mind at full force. Hearing someone defend a *bastardo* like Alfonso Foglio, one of the most sadistic of Claudio's men, shocked me at first. But then I realized she was defending the value of

the man with the position, not the actual man. Which is good because I have plans for him.

Speaking of plans...

Movement out of the corner of my eye sets off a countdown in my mind. Time's running out for me to make my move.

"Of course, I'll get your coat, Gertrude. Be back as soon as I can," I answer her and finally get to walk away.

"Oh, thank you, Severino. See, ladies? Ever the gentleman. Now, where was I...oh, yes. My garden club. We're always looking for new members..."

My mother's voice fades behind me as I focus on Percy. His loud, drunken laugh echoes in the theater, drowning her out anyway. I chug my water bottle, keeping an eye on the crowd, before tossing it into a nearby recycling bin.

"Deon, you look like you're going to have a stroke. It's just a fucking word. Here, I'll say it again. Mac—"

"No!" A short man waves his hands high in Percy's face. His dark-brown skin is free of wrinkles everywhere but his forehead, which is creased with fear and frustration. "Stop saying it! You'll curse us all! Call it 'the Scottish play' like the rest of us, or as the director, I'll pull you from the next show, I swear to God."

"You wouldn't dare," Percy challenges before yelling, "Macb—"

He suddenly catches my gaze, and his voice cuts off sharply.

"See? What'd I tell you? Now you've lost your voice, and Shakespeare's ghost is going to kill us all one by one. Thanks a lot, Percy."

But Percy isn't paying attention to them anymore. His pale skin has turned a sickly green, and he slowly pivots on his toes to head offstage.

"Hey!" Deon shouts. "Where are you go—bah, who cares? He'll reap what he sows, mark my words."

I block out the rest of the chatter around us and follow Percy as he pushes through the crowd toward the dark hallways backstage.

To the *exit*.

"Oh, no, you don't, *maiale*."

My cane allows me to lengthen my stride and quickly carve through the crowd. Overcompensating for my ankle injury helped me form the long, purposeful steps, but I've perfected them to look like a formidable swagger rather than a limp. After straining myself earlier this week, I rested, iced, and practiced my exercises, so I'm feeling good today. I'll all but run on my

ankle if I have to in order to capture my target, tomorrow's pain be damned.

I weave through the crowd and make it to the back door just as it's swinging closed. The air pressure slows it, and I slip through before it seals shut with a *snick*.

Percy is already running at full speed, clanging down the flight of metal stairs. I'm quiet, letting him think the door closed without me following him. The lights shine brightly on the steps, but the cement ramp for dollies on the other side of the landing is concealed in shadow. I use it, silently following the path to get to the damp, icy ground.

The poorly lit parking lot behind the theater glistens with moonlight and is already freezing over for the night. It's dark, but I've trained myself to see faults before I step. Anyone could be hiding behind the dumpsters or down the back alleys, though, and I curse myself for letting Talia leave without seeing her off. Gio picked her up, so she should be fine, but I'll have to check on her tonight to see if she's okay.

My gait is slow but methodical while the hurried footsteps in front of me slap against the ground. I can practically predict it before it happens, the sickening slip of a foot against wet pavement, followed by a thud and a sharp yelp. The closer I get, the better I can see my prey rolling around the ground and groaning. A dark alley is less than ten feet away, partially blocked by a large dumpster.

Perfetto.

When I get within a few feet of him, I lift my cane and twirl it in my hand until it's upside down. Percy's head lifts, and his eyes widen.

"P-please! I-I thought you said you wouldn't hurt me."

"You must have a shitty memory, after all. I promised no such thing." I laugh and hook my cane around his neck, choking off any plea he may have tried. He scratches in vain at the polished wood, trying to get free, but I focus on my steps as I drag him into the dead end.

Once we're fully inside the dim alcove, I stop to sling him against the wall and off the hook of my cane. When he lands on his ass, he grabs his throat with one hand and gasps. His other arm reaches out as he begs.

"Please, man. Just let me leave. Don't hit me again."

"You're in no position to make demands." I tap the shaft of the cane against my palm. "Most people underestimate me with this. It's nice to hear you show it the respect it deserves. Too bad you don't do the same for women."

“I know. I know. I-It was a mistake. I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

“It doesn’t matter if she has a *boyfriend*. She’s a person all on her own and deserves to not be harassed by a *figlio di puttana* like you.”

“Shit, yeah. Th-that’s what I meant. I won’t ever talk to her again. I-I’ll ask for a different designer—”

“Why? So you can harass them, too? This is for Tallie. What you did to her is enough for the punishment you’re about to receive. But I doubt she was the first, which is why I have no regrets about what I’m about to do.” I shove my cane underneath his neck and slam his head against the wall. “And I can’t let you go before we settle something. There was a question I asked you. Do you remember it?”

“H-how many times h-have I t-touched Talia?”

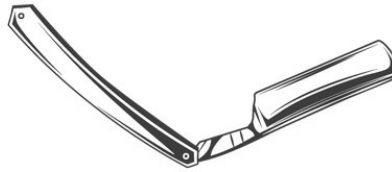
“So you have a *selective* memory after all. Let’s see how good it is after this.”

“After what—”

I whip my cane into the side of the head, knocking him out cold.

Scene 10

THE HEAD OF PERCY



Talia

I should've left instead of lying. I should be back home, showered, and cozy underneath my soft, jersey-knit sheets. But I'm none of those things because I can't get Sev out of my head. And because I don't want to miss my chance.

Once I disappeared on him in the dressing room, I hid in the shadows where I'm most comfortable. I watched him at the party, aloof and set off to the side, much like he was during the show itself. Cool, unbothered, bored. He spoke to his mother and apparently offended some of the actresses, if their faces were any indication. I scolded myself when I realized I was grinning. Petty, I know, but it felt good to watch all the same.

He's been so flirtatious with me that I'd initially thought he was a playboy and only interested in a quick fuck. I still haven't decided whether the second one is true, but I'm starting to wonder if he's a womanizer at all. With his devastatingly good looks and broody features, he could've easily stayed out here and picked up a conquest or three to take back to his top-floor apartment. But he didn't. He spent his time with me.

My heart skips, and I mentally tell it to calm the hell down. The hypnotic tension between us is one thing, but every time we're together, danger bleeds off of him and washes over my skin. Sev can only be a means to an end for me. He's a deadly distraction, and I have to be more careful.

I'm only doing recon to protect myself right now, nothing more. That's the excuse I give myself anyway as I stare at him and try to figure out why he's still here. When he walks away from his mother mid-sentence, leaving

her behind, I have to follow.

“What’re you up to now?” I mutter under my breath and slink behind the rows of curtains to stay hidden.

He’s hyper-focused on something across the room. I peek around the props and setting to see where he’s fixated when Percy rushes toward the back door.

What the hell?

I frown but keep studying them both until Percy disappears through the exit. Sev does the same only seconds later. The metal door closes behind him, and I sprint lightly after them. A coat rack stands next to the exit, and I snag the largest coat I can find to give myself some semblance of a disguise if one of them spots me. I rush to get the trench coat on over my puffy jacket and messenger bag, but as I stab my arm through the coat’s coarse sleeve, it scratches up my forearm.

A curse hisses from my lips, and I gingerly untangle myself. I make a mental note to inspect the damage later tonight. It’s my first day without wearing the protective film over the ink, so my skin is still sensitive, and this coat is anything but soft. I kind of like the sting, though.

I exhale the pain away so I can focus. Once my mind is clear, I slide through the door and quietly shut it behind me.

Outside is quiet compared to the party. Only the subtle sounds of the city echo across the pavement. I hold my breath so I can hear where they’ve gone.

Faint footsteps reverberate off the brick buildings surrounding the parking lot. I head in their direction, keeping my feet silent and my steps careful across the damp cement.

A yelp of pain nearly makes me trip. My heart and feet stutter to a stop underneath a busted streetlight.

Is Sev hurt?

Mentally cursing myself for worrying about him, I wait for some sort of signal that it’s safe to move. The clouds in the pitch-black night sky seem to swallow up the light everywhere it shines. Darkness is like a tangible fog in the air, making it nearly impossible to see farther than a few feet.

Someone begins to choke on the other side of a white moving van. The struggle continues as something is roughly dragged against the pavement. My heart thunders in my ears, but I risk leaving my spot to investigate the noises.

After a fortifying swallow, I pad softly to a dead-end alley. My thoughts are screaming at me to run, afraid that Sev is the one in danger. There’s no

way that Percy could overpower him, right?

My mind flickers back to the sight of Sev leaning slightly on his cane as he walked. Its wood was a gorgeous purple, so deep it was almost black, and it matched perfectly with his tie. But the way he wielded it as deftly as another limb shows that it wasn't just a fashion choice. I thought Sev was untouchable, but if he was in pain, could Percy have taken him down somehow?

There's another thud, followed by sniveling, and I recognize the nasally whimpers immediately. The tension in my muscles eases. Sev is safe. Percy on the other hand? Not so much.

I hurry to the entrance of an alleyway and hide behind a large dumpster. The space between it and the brick wall is just wide enough to allow me to crouch in the darkness. I'm safe, but I regret the hiding spot immediately. The damp, freezing air has diluted the stench of trash, but its nauseating warmth still reeks enough to make me gag. I swallow down the urge and cover my nose and mouth with my thick scarf. Once I'm settled, I peer around the wall.

Sev is using his cane as a weapon again. A sliver of moonlight highlights his enraged expression, and his low, growling voice whispers over my senses, relaxing me like a weighted fleece blanket. Considering the anger that rolls from him and barrels into his prey, there's no hope for the man who harassed me nonstop for the past few weeks.

Percy cries as he huddles against the wall, and I strain to hear what they're saying.

"...question I asked you, do you remember it?"

"H-how many times h-have I t-touched Talia?"

The memory of Sev brushing his thumb over my skin tingles across my knuckles.

"Don't worry, I believe you."

Sev's promise makes my chest ache. Those five simple words meant more than he could know. Even when I think about it now, my eyes still feel like sandpaper as I blink back tears.

But why does he care?

I'm stuck in my thoughts when Sev suddenly clocks Percy in the side of the head with his cane. My breath hitches in my chest.

Percy crumples, limp and lifeless to the ground. I don't know if he's dead or not, but I don't dare emerge from my hiding space. Sev twirls his cane

until it's upright, and he can use it to help him walk again. The swagger I'd assumed was part of his cocky persona is actually the gait he's using to hide his slight limp.

By the time I've finished studying it, Sev is only a few feet away from me. My heart races faster and faster as he gets closer, until he passes right by me. I hold my breath as he glances around my dumpster and the one that's blocking part of the alley. Apparently satisfied he's not being watched, he studies each dumpster, and my blood freezes in my veins. My hand drifts to my messenger bag under the trench coat.

He turns away from me and rests his cane against the opposite wall. By mere fucking luck, he chooses the dumpster I'm not hiding behind and pulls it farther across the alley's entrance. It's slow-going as he modifies his labored movements to compensate for his right ankle. The steady pace also helps keep the wheels silent as they roll. I'm mesmerized by his movements as he pulls the dumpster closer and closer toward me. When he finishes, he turns to analyze the rest of the open space...and the container I'm hiding behind.

Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck.

All the possibilities, dangers, and options fly through my head, and my hand tightens around my weapon. What will he do if he finds me? Will he stop whatever he's got in store for Percy? If he catches me, will that ruin his plans? Will he turn on me?

Or will he let me watch?

On some level, I know it's fucked up when a thrill flushes my cheeks and my core flutters. It's tempting to reveal myself just to see which one he'd choose, but the ever-present song whispering in my head reminds me of what's important.

Sev is a mystery to me, and with what I have in store, anything unknown can be deadly. I need to know all I can about him and what he's capable of.

Every one of my muscles, limbs, and fingers are on fire to move now that I can't. His eyes are as dark as night as he seemingly stares right at me. Does he realize I'm staring back? Is he pretending he can't see me because he wants me to see?

I can't tell whether I'm afraid for my life or turned on. If it's the second one, I've officially gone insane.

And I like it.

But if he doesn't stop looking at me soon, my lungs are going to burst

from holding my breath for so long—

He nods once to himself, satisfied with the single dumpster's placement. After snagging his cane from the wall, he walks back to a still unconscious Percy. My breath leaks out slowly, and every step farther from me feels like another bullet I dodged.

When he's finally far enough away that I feel like I can breathe again without hyperventilating, I analyze him again. There's a short, loose curl that constantly falls from his styled-back hair, as if it resents being tamed. His full black suit is covered by a long, down parka that makes him look even taller than he already is. The moonlight gives the illusion that he's a wisp of a shadow. A ghost.

The dumpster covers most of the alley, and with how far back he and Percy are, it's nearly impossible to see them. All the theater guests have either gone home or are still at the afterparty. That will likely go on well into the wee hours of the morning. Sev is safe to do whatever he pleases to his prey in the meantime. I plan to watch and enjoy every bloodthirsty second of it.

He unbuckles his leather belt one-handed before sliding it from its loops. The butterflies in my lower belly take flight, and my thighs squeeze together. While I'm trying to calm my sudden arousal, Sev gathers Percy's wrists and binds them with the belt.

Once his prey is secure, he loosens his dark purple tie from his neck. It flutters against his chest as he yanks off one of Percy's shoes and socks. Then Sev stuffs the long sock into Percy's slack mouth and wraps the tie over the man's mouth like a gag, sealing the knee-high inside.

Madonna mia, what is he doing?

"Don't worry, vipera, I'll take care of him."

What would happen if I just...let him?

Making my decision, I blank my mind free of the near-constant questions and scheming. Throughout my life, I've always tried to predict and anticipate everyone's next move while preparing to make my own. I'm shocked to realize that for once, I feel completely safe around another person, let alone a man.

So, I go with the instinct and literally sit back to enjoy the show without trying to affect its outcome.

Sev tightens the silk and leather restraints for good measure. Percy doesn't even flinch, and Sev frowns back. It's as if he's frustrated at his

victim's lack of fight. I know I would be.

When I had enough time to dwell on what happened with the gardener, I was almost disappointed that I didn't get more resistance from him. Granted, it worked out for the best. If my first kill had been more difficult, I might not have gained the resolve that I needed to keep going through my list. I highly doubt Sev needs the same encouragement, though. It's obvious this isn't his first murder.

Sev whacks Percy across the face. It didn't seem like it would be too painful, but Percy wakes with a sharp inhale that ends in a moan.

"Wake up, sleeping ugly. I've got questions to ask, and you've got the answers."

Percy's eyes widen with the realization that he's tied up. A muffled scream passes through the fabric silencing him, and he thrashes wildly on the ground. Sev smacks him on the arm this time.

"Keep your voice down, *idiot*. If you're too loud, I'll have to haul you back to my basement for privacy. You don't want that, do you? I'll take a lot longer, and it'll be a hell of a lot more painful, I can promise you that."

Percy sniffs back, but he doesn't attempt to say another word. His eyes widen, though, as Sev reaches into his own pocket and pulls out a rectangular piece of metal that glints in the moonlight. Its polished handle is slightly bent at an angle that's odd for a knife. I squint to figure out what it is.

Is that...a straight razor?

Once again, Percy flails around, but Sev pins him down by digging the cane's tip into the man's thigh. He leans heavily on the hook at the top, and the sock muffles his prey's wail. Sev ignores it, though, and makes a show of analyzing his razor. The blade is much shorter than the knife I carry, but the shiny edge looks just as sharp.

"Tallie is very important to me, Percy. She and I...we're cut from the same cloth. No *stronzo* like you will ever touch her against her will again. She doesn't know it yet, but she's mine. And no one touches what's mine."

My heart thrums in my chest. I'm his?

My body purrs, but my mind screams against it. What the hell does he even know about me?

Panic pricks sweat on the back of my neck, while my nipples peak with arousal. I fold my arms over my chest, as if covering up my insane reaction will make it go away.

"Now back to my question," Sev begins. "Do you remember how many

times you said you touched Tallie without her permission?”

He nods quickly, eager to do something right, no doubt hopeful that it'll keep him safe.

“Good. Now hold up that number for me.”

Percy raises two fingers from his bound hands.

“Very good, Percy,” Sev praises him, and Percy's shoulders relax.

“I have a feeling this is where it'll get interesting. Tallie had a different number. I know you said you can't recall the other incidents...but maybe I can refresh you. It shouldn't take long. I have a knack for jogging people's memory.”

Sev lays his cane behind him and teeters briefly. Once he regains his balance, he snatches Percy's raised thumb and positions the razor just above the first knuckle.

Percy fights harder this time, but Sev shoves him by the forehead against the brick wall, and his head snaps back like a car crash dummy. When it bounces back, he sways, obviously dazed.

“Whoops. What is that? Your second concussion of the night? Damn, that probably won't help with the whole memory problem, huh? Let's try it and see.” He holds up Percy's thumb again. “Do you remember touching her one time?”

Percy's head wobbles in a nod.

“Good man. One. What about a second time?” He holds up an index finger. Percy nods again.

“Two.”

My rapidly beating heart begins to slow with each passing moment of inaction.

What is he up to?

“Okay, now here are the hard ones.” He holds up Percy's middle finger. “Do you remember this one?”

He shakes his head quickly.

Sev sighs. “Thought so.”

Snick.

The razor is so swift that it takes me *and* Percy a moment to realize what happened. Percy's middle finger tumbles to the ground, and the night stills around us.

“Three.”

What. The. Fuck.

The sock in Percy's mouth smothers his hoarse screams.

"Come on, Percy, no need to be dramatic. Isn't that what you called Tallie? *Dramatic*? Goddamn, I hate that word. You'll never use it again if I have anything to say about it. Now that you know the stakes of the game, I'll tell you how to play. Tallie gave me a number, and we'll go through each finger until we get to her answer. She could've said three. Or she could've said more. But if you remember, I won't cut off a finger. If we go past her number, though, and you say you 'remember' it anyway, I'll take your finger anyway for lying. *Hai Capito?*"

He grabs Percy's ring finger and holds it up. "What about this time?"

Percy studies Sev's blank face before slowly shaking his head.

There's another *snick*, and the finger bounces to a stop beside the other. Percy screams into the gag, but Sev talks over him.

"That's four. This one?"

Percy doesn't even have time to fully shake his head "no" before another flash of steel cuts off his pinky. He shouts a stifled, weeping plea against his gag as Sev continues. With every single question and every severed finger, Percy begins to slowly hesitate before answering.

"Damn, Percy. You're only two for nine so far. I might have to start on the toes." He reaches for the last, blood-soaked finger. "What about this one?"

Percy slowly nods and mumbles against the tie, his face pale from blood loss and shock.

"Ah, *bravo*. I'm going to untie you so you can tell me what happened, alright? Maybe you'll be able to keep your toes after all."

My heart pounds. When Sev asked me the question, unexpected memories of each touch flashed like snapshots in my mind. I've told myself over the past few weeks that none of them were a big deal because, hey, I've endured worse, right? What girl can't handle a wandering hand or two?

But they weren't just "touches." They were assaults. I didn't realize until I answered Sev just how much each one had burned into my soul.

Although the stench of alcohol triggered me tonight, paralyzing me, Percy has physically done worse. I've done my best to brush it off because I was too afraid that reporting it could bring about unwanted attention that would interfere with my goals. But as Sev choked Percy in the dressing room, for the first time I asked myself, *What if I modified the list?*

Surviving my kidnapping left me with this eerie sense that I've been

living on borrowed time. When I decided to finish what Vincelli started all those years ago, I guaranteed that my life would have an early expiration date. I never dreamed that I could survive marking off every name on my list.

I push the thought away and center myself back to the present. Sev has unwrapped the gag from Percy's mouth and pulled out the sock. The man tries to catch his breath, but Sev jerks the remaining attached finger.

"I'm waiting. You better make it worth my time. No more lies."

I don't want to hear this.

Shame and embarrassment flood my face with heat. I don't want to be reminded of the times Percy touched me, and I let him get away with it.

"I-it was after our dress rehearsal last night."

My heart pounds. *Che cazzo*, why would he go with the worst instance? Doesn't the man have a shred of self-preservation?

Last night was the first time I fought back. Did he believe the others were actually consensual? Or maybe he thinks that if he tells the worst truth, Sev will spare his measly pinky finger. The only reason I don't cover my ears to protect myself from reliving it is because I'm dying to hear how he tells his side.

"First, she wore that outfit she knows I like..."

Lie.

Fuck, I can't take it. I hope Sev doesn't believe this bullshit, but I don't want to listen to it anymore. There's no way I'll be able to hear my actions through this pervert's point of view. My mind immediately detaches, filling in the blanks in flashbacks instead.

It began without warning...or maybe Percy's intentions were obvious, and I just refused to see the signs. He cornered me in the dressing room, roughly grabbed my hip, and squeezed my breasts, forcing me to cry out. I stabbed my needle into his flesh to get away, just like I did tonight. But he didn't stop then.

Instead, he shoved me into the wall and pressed his revolting cock against the apex of my thighs. It wasn't until he tried to cram his hand down my leggings that I finally realized how far he was willing to go. I stomped on his foot and pushed him as hard as I could into the clothing rack. As he untangled himself from the costumes, I fled without finishing my after-show routine.

And tonight, we pretended like nothing ever happened...until we almost had a repeat performance.

I should've reported it, I know that now. If Sev hadn't interfered, I have no doubt that my silence would've encouraged Percy to finish the job. Embarrassment at the thought makes me nauseous.

No.

I won't let a pervert's actions make *me* feel bad for mine. Not anymore.

I breathe in and out against my scarf and focus on the scene in front of me. Percy looks hopeful as he chokes out the rest of his story.

“See? She came onto me, I swear. It was all a misunderstanding.”

Wow. Vaffanculo, asshole. Fuck you.

“Tallie, came onto you? *My Tallie?*”

My heart stutters.

My Tallie...

“Yes! She asked for it, dude, I swear.”

Please don't believe him. Please, please, please—

Sev busts into an outright laugh.

“You're either delusional, a pathological liar, or both. Wait...did you think she wanted it all those other times, too? Is that why you never said yes?”

“I-it's true—”

Sev grabs his cane and Percy's lapels at the same time. “There's no fucking way that little *vipera* has ever touched you on her own. You're not worth the privilege.”

He lets Percy go to grab his hand again. The razor slices off the pinkie finger like butter.

“Ten. That's how many times you assaulted her, motherfucker.”

Percy's piercing scream trails off as he passes out. His head lolls to his chest while his hands fall to his sides. Blood glistens in the freezing puddles on the pavement, and I wish I could see the crimson color melt down the alley's storm drain.

Sev gathers the eight severed fingers, and curiosity furrows my brow as he wraps them up with his tie. I rack my brain to try to figure out what he'll do next, but nothing could have prepared me for the sight of Sev opening Percy's mouth and stuffing the bundle down the unconscious man's throat. Percy wakes instantly, and I watch in pure shock as my tormentor squirms and chokes to death on his own lies.

Meanwhile, Sev leans on his cane to stand, seemingly unbothered by the man dying in front of him. He calmly sets his cane against the wall, and his

grip tightens on the razor in his hand. Just as casually, he gathers Percy's thick head of hair and tilts his neck at an odd angle.

"The moment you touched my woman, your life was over. I warned you about lying to me, Percy. *La verità è bella*. Truth is beautiful. This was always going to be your fate, but at least you wouldn't have died a liar."

With that, Sev stabs his razor deep into Percy's neck and wrenches the blade to the other side with a grunt. Blood sprays out laterally as my assaulter dies instantly, and Sev drops him with a thud before wiping his razor on his victim's shirt. When he's finished, Percy's neck is left dangling from his shoulders, his head nearly torn all the way off.

The finality of the moment rings like a bell in the alley's quiet emptiness. I'm stunned into stillness, but inside, I'm dying to run to the man who just killed for me. My core throbs and my nipples tingle for his deadly touch.

I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me, but I back away before I do something incredibly stupid, like jump into a murderer's arms and beg him to soothe this ache inside me.

No one has ever stuck up for me. I was a pawn before I was kidnapped, and after, I had to hide to stay safe. My *nonni* did their best to love me through that trauma, but it was retribution that I needed, and that was impossible. No one takes on the Mafia and survives. For years, I've suffered in silence with my nightmares and no hope for justice. Not unless I fight for it myself.

And yet, Sev has just fought this battle for me.

"Raze, I've got a clean up."

I shuffle closer to the alleyway entrance again and strain to hear.

"*Che cazzo*," Raze curses so loudly I can hear him over the phone speaker, making Sev wince. He presses a button that decreases the volume as his cousin complains. "Sever, I thought you were going to a play or some shit. Now I've got to leave..."

Sever.

I glance at the corpse by his feet.

Yup, that tracks.

"There was a change of plans...yeah, yeah, yeah, but do we ever *really* get a 'night off?'... Then bring Tiero and Roman with you. I need someone to come take this *figlio di puttana* off my hands. Gertrude thinks I just stepped out to get her coat. She doesn't need to know I got sidetracked, and I need that plausible deniability...why? Well, he...he wasn't a target exactly."

Raze lets out a groan that's loud enough for me to hear even at this distance.

"Yeah, I let my emotions get the best of me this time, but the *bastardo* deserved it...of course, I'll help next time. You know I live for this shit."

So, do I.

Damn, Sever may be more fucked up than I am. I hate that I love that.

As the conversation continues, I back away. It was a risk to stay this long, but listening gave me information I didn't know I needed. I just have to wait for him to go back inside. Then I'll move forward with my plans for the evening.

He doesn't realize I follow him as he leads me to a black Rolls-Royce in the VIP parking lot. Just in case he sees me, though, I shift my knife into the pocket of my trench coat and keep my grip tight around the handle.

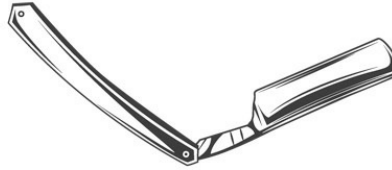
My heart races in my chest as I map out the scenario in my head. I already fucked up once trying to take out this target when I wasn't prepared. I won't make that mistake again.

The melody drifts over my mind, helping me focus.

The butler, the maids, and gardener...

Scene 11

THE DRIVER



Sever

Rage still flows hot in my veins as I analyze the man I just tortured to death. A quiet, tiny, less *unhinged* voice inside me whispers that I might've gotten carried away. But the memory of Tallie pale with fear flashes across my mind, and all my doubts disappear.

Cazzo, I wish I could do it all over again.

I thought the girl's death fifteen years ago was the only thing that could get me this angry. Apparently, any injustice against Tallie has the same effect. But why her? I barely know the woman.

And yet...

If I'm honest with myself, there's something about her that reminds me of the girl that saved me. Tallie is volatile in one moment and gently teases her stressed *nonni* in the next. She loves art, and when she battles her own nerves, she takes solace in soft comforts and order. The more I find out about her, the more I want to know.

I wasn't prepared to get so invested in a stranger, especially not now that I've started a war with my uncle. Love was never something I dreamed of for myself, but according to the dreams I've had lately, Tallie is exactly the type of woman I'd fall for—the type to glare at her enemy while hiding her weapon in trembling fists.

Tallie was ready to stab Percy in the balls with a pair of thread scissors for Christ's sake. I have no doubt that she would've done what she had to in order to defend herself, but she wouldn't have been able to give the *bastardo* everything he deserved. Besides, I didn't want her to do it alone. Now her

hands are still clean, and she's safe from the *stronzo* forever.

The only concern I have left is making sure my mother doesn't find out about this and tattle to her husband. Thankfully, Raze will take care of the body, and I'm hoping her gaggle of sycophants will keep her busy long enough that I'll be back inside before she even misses me.

When I hang up my call with my cousin, I ping him my location and tuck my phone back into my pocket. Using my cane again, I walk toward the dumpster and glance through the crack. The parking garage is deserted, from what I can tell, so I slide through and head toward my uncle's Rolls-Royce Ghost.

The night has grown quieter, and my gait echoes softly against the brick buildings surrounding the parking garage. With the lights so dim, I get the strange feeling that I'm both all alone and being watched. My grip tightens on my cane handle, and I stick to the shadows on the way to the car, prepared to defend myself should anyone attack.

I've always been vigilant and ruthless. A made man has to be. But something cracked inside me after I killed Vinnie. When I came up with my plan to get information from him, I thought he would give me all the answers I needed about the girl who sacrificed her life for me. Not only was that a dead end, according to him, everything I thought I knew was a lie.

The hunch I had about my father's death was right, but the rest of it—my kidnapping, the girl, even how the butchery became my father's barbershop—is all a lie. I've felt a twisted sort of guilt since I found out. Even though I had nothing to do with the Bianchis' deaths, I can't stop feeling like an accomplice by association.

Of course, the man who *actually* killed that family is leaning against my uncle's Rolls-Royce without a fucking care in the world.

I'd take Alfonso Foglio out right now if I could, but because I'm one of Claudio's soldiers, I don't have free rein to decide who lives and dies. If I did, Foglio would be one of the first to go. As it is, I'm already fucked if Claudio finds out about the mess I made in the alley. Not to mention every second that Vinnie stays on his "bender" is another one closer to Claudio realizing something is wrong. I need to move in silence for as long as possible so I can strike when I'm ready, which means my uncle's driver is safe for tonight.

But as I approach the Rolls-Royce, it's obvious that Foglio is determined to test my restraint tonight. His eyes are glued to his phone while he smokes a

joint. He swipes the screen, so bright against his pale skin that a stranger could easily identify his ass in a lineup. To top it all off, the garage lights catch the shiny plastic bag of pills in his hand.

What a maledetto idiota.

No doubt he's waiting for a drug deal, trying to kill two birds with one stone as my mother's driver tonight. A heavy sigh leaves my chest as I try to tamp down the emotions still flowing through my veins.

Before Claudio came into power, we never sold drugs on my side of town. Now the North End is the first place his lackeys stop. He even goes so far as to sell experimental shit from some mysterious supplier.

If this was my kingdom, we wouldn't fuck with drugs at all. Dealing around the neighborhood not only hurts our home, it's sloppy. Dipping into the supply is even worse. That's exactly what Foglio is burning right now with a blunt that's laced with fuck knows what from God knows where.

He isn't the sharpest tool in the shed on his best day, but stoned, he doesn't even have the foresight to turn off the sound on his phone. His fingers *click-click-click* away on the screen so loudly that he can't hear me coming. The guy's one saving grace is that he's as loyal as they come. But after all these years of driving for my uncle, there's a reason he's never been promoted to a higher position. It's not because Vinnie was smarter than him. It's because he's somehow dumber than Vinnie. Even with Vinnie fucking up so much lately, Claudio still doesn't have anyone better to replace him.

My stride never falters as I stab the tip of my cane against Foglio's chest, slamming him into the car. The *idiota* doesn't even reach for his—

“Where the fuck is your gun, Foglio?”

His eyes widen, and he looks down as if he's just realizing he's unarmed. “Shit. I thought I had it.”

“*Porca miseria*, how long have you been out here like this?”

His brow furrows. “Just a few minutes to grab a smoke. Why?”

He's too high to lie convincingly, which is good for him because it means he didn't hear the show I just put on in the alley.

“Were you waiting for someone?”

He gulps. “N-no.”

“Really? You're just out here with a bag of pills for fun? What have I told you about selling while I'm around?”

“Not to do it.”

“Exactly. And what are you planning to do right now?”

“Um, well, the thing is—”

I snatch the bag from his hand and hold it up to his face.

“There are cameras in here, *idiota*.” I point to the security cams that I redirected to my database this past week when I realized Tallie works at the Revere. The security guards have a week-long loop playing for them, so they’re none the wiser. “You’re putting Claudio’s entire operation at risk. If you get arrested, he won’t think twice before siccing someone on you in jail to keep you from talking.”

“I’m no *ratto*,” he sneers.

“Not yet.” I toss the bag back at him and lean on my cane again.

No longer pinned, Foglio wipes his shirt and puffs his chest. “You know what? Fuck off, Severino. I work for Claudio, not you.”

“And how would Claudio feel about you getting caught dealing while you’re driving his wife around, hm? Speaking of which, Gertrude wants her coat.”

Foglio tries to put his joint to his mouth again, but I snatch it from his hands and drop it to the ground.

“Hey!” He lunges for it, but I extinguish it with the tip of my cane.

“No getting high on the job.”

He grumbles as he grabs my mother’s pristine, white fur coat from the back seat. Before he hands it over, though, he squints at my chest and huffs.

“And you think I’m the one who’s noticeable. You sure you want to carry this back in?”

I glance down at my suit and curse. Despite how faded the lighting is around us, crimson blood glistens over nearly every inch of my jacket.

Cazzo.

I’m so used to completing jobs in the meat locker that I forgot I needed to be a little more discreet, clothing-wise, out here in the open. I was so caught up in protecting Tallie and punishing Percy on her behalf that I didn’t think about clean-up. It’s a rookie move, but I couldn’t help myself once I had Percy in my hands.

Panic seeps into my lungs, but outwardly I shrug at Foglio like I couldn’t give a damn.

“You worry about your shit, and I’ll worry about mine. Call your buyer and tell them the deal’s off, or I swear to Christ, it’ll be the last one you do.”

The *bastardo* glares at me as I take the coat. I awkwardly hold it away from my bloodied clothing to avoid stains as I walk toward the theater.

The closer I get to the theater's ramp, the more my hand sweats into my mother's fur coat. I don't know how I'm going to pull off getting this to her while I look like a walking crime scene. Potential solutions swirl inside my head until a shuffling sound clears my thoughts and slows my steps.

The noise is so faint behind me that I almost ignore it. But the farther I go, the more my instincts scream at me to turn around.

If that maledetto porco is still going through with his drug deal, I'll slice his throat open.

That idea is actually too tempting to pass up, and I give in. Within a couple of car-lengths away from the Rolls-Royce, the shuffling turns into hoarse curses, and it's clear that either the deal went south, or this isn't a deal at all. I pick up my cane to avoid making any noise of my own as I pad closer.

When I round a large van, I suddenly see Foglio struggling with a man in a trench coat in the corner behind my uncle's car. I duck back behind the van, and my muscles tense as I peek over the hood.

Should I stop this?

The fact that I'm merely asking the question and not unholstering the gun from underneath my arm tells me everything.

Foglio is already on my shit list for dealing, and I'll never forgive him for blindly murdering people like the Bianchis in Claudio's name. The driver undoubtedly has as much innocent blood on his hands as Vinnie did. Maybe I'll even get lucky, and this low-level dealer will take care of Foglio for me.

I lean against the side of the van, taking in what clues I can to see who Alfonso pissed off this time. Depending on what I find out, I'll either put a bullet in the attacker's head myself or shake his hand.

The man has managed to grab Foglio from behind and yank him by the hair. The grip stretches Foglio's head back at an awkward angle, and the light shines along his throat. He's stockier than the attacker and only a few inches shorter, but he's slow and stoned, an easy target. It's obvious who will lose when the attacker presses a long knife right underneath the driver's Adam's apple, just like I would.

The thought itches my brain, but I dismiss it so I can focus on the scene in front of me.

"My parents...dead..." The attacker hisses so low that all I can make out are bits and pieces. "...give...name."

The driver shakes his head. "No!"

Foglio is panicking, and with the blade where it is, any movement could be deadly. When the attacker questions him again too quietly for me to hear, the driver's next objection forces blood to trickle down his throat, and he squeaks.

“Won't...tell...”

The attacker grunts and slices deeper before hopping off of Alfonso's back. The driver claps his hand over his neck, stemming the bleeding as he slumps against the car.

It looks bad, but most throat injuries do. This one is just a flesh wound, so I have time to step in, if needed.

I drop the fur coat to the ground and rest my cane against the van to hover my hand over my holster. While I'd be fine with Alfonso dying right here and now, it would complicate things for me, especially since it seems the attacker is after information rather than drugs.

Maybe this could be beneficial in more ways than one. I could wait and hear what the attacker wants to know and then take them both...

The attacker leans into Foglio's face, the knife back to his throat. Their hurried, fierce whispers are impossible to decipher. But then the attacker reaches up and swipes his hand over the parking garage's frozen concrete half-wall. He brings his hand to his face and tilts his head, and whatever he says next makes the driver freeze. His only movement is when his mouth drops open to speak.

“It's *you*.”

That's the moment the attacker strikes.

He cuts the driver's neck in one fluid motion, nearly cutting it clean off...

Just like I would. Just like I did to Vinnie yesterday. And just like I did to the *stronzo* in the alley just moments ago.

Che cazzo!

It's my signature, but I don't know how the attacker would be familiar with the way I work. People rarely see the bodies unless my uncle wants proof of death. Only Claudio, or one of his men, would know my MO. And even if it is someone close to Claudio, why would he copy my methods to kill a man who's been loyal to him for well over a decade? I can't figure out an angle where this is good for me.

What reservations I had about interfering disappear. I can't let a copycat go free. Not to mention that if anyone in the Family thinks I did this as an unsanctioned kill, I'll be dead well before I can right the wrongs my family

has committed. My realization comes too slowly, though.

The man's head tilts at the sound of me unholstering my gun, and he's gone before I can aim. He hops over the garage's low cement wall and runs off. His bulky trench coat flaps in the wind, slowing him down slightly, but it's not enough.

While I've always excelled at weights and hapkido cane fighting in martial arts, running has never been my strong suit. I'm no match for the speed he manages on light, silent feet. Instead of following him, I focus on which way he goes. I'll cross-reference it on my CCTV footage later. He stays well away from the streetlights, and it's obvious he knows the area well when he sprints toward a thin crack in between two buildings and disappears inside. That direction will make it hard to piece together which way he went on the security cameras, but hopefully I've got enough out there to cover my bases.

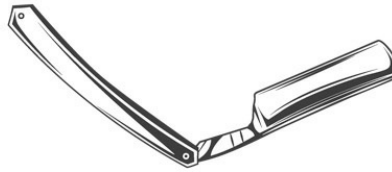
I strain to hear him, but all that comes are the sounds of Hanover Street, the North Square, and laughter from a group of people leaving the Revere afterparty. The last makes me glance to the corner where the corpse has slumped against the garage's half-wall. The driver's head hangs by a bloody thread from his spinal column, mouth, and eyes wide with shock.

And I'm the only suspect around.

Fuck.

Scene 12

IT'S JUST A DOOR



Sever

The man who killed the driver is gone, and now *I* have to deal with it. Frustration burns the back of my neck. I need to take the *bastardo* down, but how do you catch a killer when all you have for clues is a petrified body and a shadow?

Although the driver seemed genuinely shocked to see the attacker, they obviously knew each other. What information did the man want, and how long was he lying in wait to get it out of Alfonso? Did he hear me with Percy? Does he have something on me now, too? Maybe Tallie saw something—

Panic shocks through me.

Is Tallie okay?

I bite back the curses that sit on my lips as I type out a message to Raze.

Got another clean-up, but I have to go.

RAZE

E che cazzo, Sever?

What the fuck, Sever? Poor guy is shocked, and he hasn't even seen Percy yet.

Alfonso was attacked.

RAZE

What the fuck?!

I'll explain later. I have to go.

What about your mom?

Merda.

I glance around, but whoever just left the afterparty must've parked elsewhere. My suit might pass as different shades of crimson and black underneath the cloak of darkness, but inside it'll be obvious that the stains are blood. Now there's a dead body out here in the open, only hidden because it's in the corner of the parking garage behind the Rolls-Royce. There's no way I can go inside and leave it behind. For once, I'm actually thankful that my mother demands private VIP parking where the theater keeps its spare van and trucks.

I type back quickly.

I'll tell her the truth later. Got to go, now. Rolls-Royce key will be above the tire.

Without waiting for anyone to accidentally find me and the body, I quickly shove Alfonso into the trunk. Shards of glass-like pain pierce from my ankle to my knee, and I grimace, but otherwise it's easy muscle-memory to plop the body inside.

When I'm finished, I lock it all up and leave the key on the driver's side rear tire before texting my mother.

Something came up. I have to go.

GERTRUDE

Okay, dear, have fun! The girls and I are just chatting, so take your time. If we want to go out on the town, I'll ask the driver to take us.

I wince.

Text Raze. He'll take you wherever you go. Explain later.

GERTRUDE

Of course. Ciao.

I swipe out of our messages and hop back into the ones with my cousin.

RAZE

Roman said he'll take the van while I deal with Gertrude. What do I tell her if she starts asking questions?

I sigh.

She won't.

She never does. The “have fun...*ciao*” answer she just gave me is standard for her. The less women in the Family know, the safer they are. Despite what she tries to make me believe, though, I know she's not completely in the dark. Claudio has his dirty fingers in too many cesspools for her to be oblivious. It's just as Vinnie said, though. Convenient ignorance in the mob is bliss.

Once everything's in order, I set off toward the bakery to make sure my sweet Tallie is safe. After my CCTV recon, I was able to figure out that she lives in an apartment above the bakery. All I need to do is a little harmless breaking and entering, ensure she's sound asleep in her bed, and I'll be on my way.

The bakery's parking spot in the alley behind Tallie's building is curiously empty, and I make a mental note to find out where Gio parks. If he's not using their parking space, then he's likely paying an arm and a leg for a garage spot, not to mention it could be blocks away.

I file that information away and focus on unlocking the building's back door. Unfortunately, it's alarmingly simple to open with the lockpick on my keychain. I'll have to fix that as soon as possible, too. I can't let Tallie and her family be vulnerable when I'm not around.

The foyer separates the outside from the door to the kitchen, and another door that leads to the residence stairs. Each red oak step creaks with my weight. They look like they might be original to the building, so I slow my steps in case they're as rickety as they sound. The second floor's long, skinny hallway is dark, but it's easy to tell which door is hers and her *nonni*'s.

Theirs has a Thanksgiving wreath made out of cupcake liners and a bright welcome mat in the shape of a piece of cake with a mug of tea on the side. “Come for the Sweets, Stay for the Deets” is written in cutesy cursive. I only just met the two men, but if I had to guess on attitude alone, I'd bet Tony insisted on the decorations, and Gio quickly gave in to make his husband happy. The TV blares Lucille Ball's iconic cry followed by an audience's burst of laughter, a combination that will forever live in my memory thanks

to my own *nonna*'s obsession with *I Love Lucy*. It seems the Amorettis have the same love for the classic '50s sitcom.

Tallie's door, however, is empty, devoid of color or welcome. It's just like any other plain door, but compared to her *nonni*, it's almost...sad.

Che cazzo! Get a grip, it's just a goddamn door.

I listen for any movement outside her apartment with my ear pressed to the wooden door. I can't hear anything, and there's no light coming through the cracks.

After a few more minutes of silence, I take my chances, and as quietly as I can, I pull out my torsion bar and pick from the kit on my keychain. Just a little tension and a few feathering touches on the tumblers in the lock have the door clicking open softly. Again, it's barely any trouble, and I mentally curse myself for letting this lapse in security happen. Making a mental note to remedy it *immediately*, I slip through the door and close it behind me, all without making a sound.

Tallie's sugary and floral scent fills my senses, and my cock strains against my slacks. A tall, black privacy screen helps separate the entryway from the rest of the room, so I'm protected from her view—wherever she is. Her shoes are organized in a nice straight line, and her coats and jackets hang on doorknob hooks on the wall. I prop my cane up beside the door, but I stay behind the screen and lean past the screen to see farther into the studio.

Potted flowers, herbs, and heated lamps line the windowsill. The sweet scent makes me think of pastels and pinks like the bakery below, but Tallie's room is full of black, rich grays, and deep purples—the perfect palette and epitome of her. Beauty from darkness.

A shower squeaks on the other side of the room. When I hear splashes, I take my chances and venture farther into the apartment.

On the other side of the privacy screen, there's a quaint kitchenette with two chairs at a portable island. An oversized chair that looks comfortable as hell sits in one corner, and a queen-sized bed with a purple bedspread and a gray fabric headboard seems to take up the rest of the room. A mannequin in a baggy black dress and a white cloth draped around her like a scarf stands where a TV normally would. I can almost see her sitting up against her headboard, using her knees as a table as she draws and studies her design.

She's still nowhere to be found, though, not until I see the *open* bathroom door. The realization jolts me from my perusal, and I go stock-still, worried that I'll catch the attention of a stunning, but furious, *vipera*. Steam curls out

from the door, and I can't see inside at this angle, which means she can't see me.

Grazie a Dio.

I slowly back up behind the partition again and find a small crack in between screens so that I can keep my eyes on the bathroom doorway. My racing pulse has almost calmed down when my phone buzzes in my pocket, giving me a heart attack all over again. I glance back and forth from the bathroom to my screen as I check the message.

RAZE

Dude, why the fuck did you kill Alfonso?

Cazzo.

If my own best friend thinks I killed Claudio's driver, I'm fucked with Claudio.

It wasn't me.

Are you sure?

I swear. The guy by the dumpster is mine, but Claudio can't know about either one.

We can make the one guy disappear, but how the fuck do we make the driver look like someone else did it? He looks like he either got into a fight with you or a shitty guillotine. Claudio won't believe you didn't do it. Hell, I'm not even sure I believe you.

I bite back a groan. This is such a shitshow. As soon as Claudio sees that cut, he's going to suspect me.

I don't know how to cover this up yet. Take him back to the butchery. We'll figure it out when I come back. If we haven't decided what to do by tomorrow at dinner, I'll throw Claudio off the scent.

And the other guy? Where do you want him? Same row?

No, he was personal. He'll go for a swim in the Charles River. Save the heads of both, though.

You've got it, you sick fuck.

I smirk at my phone before sliding it back into my pocket. Raze, his

brothers, and I make two types of kills. Ones *for* Claudio, and ones against. The ones I'll use against my uncle get buried in one place, but we dump all the rest in the Boston Harbor. That's where Percy will go. If he ever gets found after we're done with him, his fingerless, toothless, waterlogged body will be unidentifiable.

The thought settles me. The man who assaulted Tallie will never bother her again. And she's safe in her apartment. I don't know what's next for us, but that's enough for now.

I turn to leave, but the sound of her humming floats in the air. The tune is soft underneath the shower's spray. My smirk lifts into a small smile as I listen, and I take the first deep breath I've had since she left me at the Revere Theater.

She's okay. I can go now—

My heart stops as the song takes on a familiar cadence. I'm not close enough to decipher exactly what it is, and my mind has played tricks on me before. Her voice is low, the shower gets louder when she moves, and she drops off at various beats, confusing me every time I think I've figured it out.

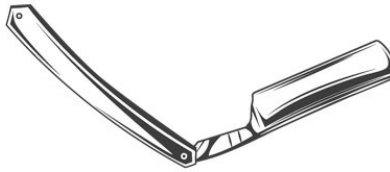
A slave to my curiosity, I creep farther into the room, sticking to its perimeter. I stop sneaking closer when I can see her outline through the light shower curtain. The lullaby is on the tip of my memory as it gets louder and louder, the breathy notes drawing me in until—

Until she fucking moans...

"Sever."

Scene 13

REVENGE SO TEMPTING



Talia

Butler. Maids. Gardener. Driver. Capo. Priest. Judge. Godmother. Godfather. Boy.

The first time I tried to kill the driver years ago was an utter failure that made me more superstitious and cautious than I already am. My list reminded me that I am a mere servant to my revenge. The order of names that I made up as a child isn't up for debate. As an adult, though, the driver has always been one of my main targets.

Even at seven, I knew my mother was dead the moment he crashed into our car. I was dazed and hurt, calling her name when the capo stole me from the back seat. My mother's wide, pained eyes still haunt my dreams. Right behind every nightmare of her is the memory of my father's feeble hand reaching out to me as I cried for him.

Despite all the hope I had as a kid, it's obvious to me now that my so-called "godfather" and his men never thought I'd get out alive. They talked about—and around—me as if I were as perennial a fixture as the horrid wallpaper. Staying silent and listening is how I found out my father did everything in his power to protect my family, and the Boss punished him for that.

Because of what the driver did to my parents, he was the most tempting to start with as soon as I graduated. I studied the Vincellis, and when I learned that their oil change was coming up, I thought it was a sign to make my

move. I spent hours scouring the internet until I figured out how to set up a trigger that would clip the brakes on their Rolls-Royce. After that, everything fell into place like it was fate.

The driver took the car to get the oil changed after he dropped the Boss off at confession, right on schedule. I dressed as a mechanic, smeared grease and oil over my scar, and nearly broke a rib wrapping my curves and breasts.

The pain was supposed to be worth it, but hatred consumed my logic that day. It blinded me to the many, many flaws in my plan, the greatest being that I didn't even think about unintentional casualties. I thought I was ready to start my list. I thought I was smart. But I was too emotional to think straight.

My botched brake job went even better than I could've anticipated when the driver careened off the road and into the side of St. Catherine's Church. If I'd been lucky, I could've taken out a few birds with one stone. Unfortunately, the crash was nowhere near the priest's office or the confessionals. In fact, the only person who got hurt was completely innocent.

The Boss's thugs nearly beat the shop owner to death. This wasn't like screwing up a dry-cleaning order the way I did with the butler. The driver could've died, and the mechanic paid my price. I should've thought about what would happen to him if the Boss found out about the brakes, but I didn't, and I was at a total loss of how to make up for my mistake.

All I could think to do was anonymously send the mechanic's family sweets while he recovered in the hospital. I prayed to a God who failed me, asking him to make up for it by healing the mechanic. He did heal, eventually, but his blood will always be on my hands. Killing the driver tonight is the closest I've come to feeling forgiveness for that mistake.

I'd hoped he'd give me the information on one of the names I need further down my list, but I underestimated his level of loyalty. Once I realized he was worthless to me alive, I decided to cut my losses. But I couldn't let him die without knowing who made the fatal cut.

He didn't believe me at first when I told him who I was, so I used the water from the damp concrete to wipe off my makeup and reveal my scars as proof. Once he saw them, he looked at me like he'd seen a ghost. Which, I guess to him, I was. Both the gardener and the driver were petrified of me once they saw the wounds the dogs gave me, leaving no doubt about who I was. The further I go with my list, the more I want my prey to know who caught them. After Chiara had to lose her name, my enemies don't deserve

for me to say theirs. But they're going to remember mine if it's the last thing I do.

When I'd heard someone behind me, I'd taken off, keeping to the poorly lit streets and alleys. Along the way back home, I wiped off my pearl-handled chef's knife on the coat I'd found at the afterparty, tucked it into my messenger bag, and chucked the trench coat into a dumpster. I hate that I'll have to "lose" the knife that my *nonni* gave me, but I can't let them use it at the bakery anymore, not after this.

Thankfully, Gio and Tony are engrossed in one of their sitcom reruns when I get back, so I'm able to mentally unpack my latest murder in peace. As soon as I enter my quiet apartment, I slouch against my door and wait for my mind to rest. But thoughts of Sev take over instead.

"Fai la brava, vipera."

His parting words whisper through me again. A forbidden thrill rushes up my spine just like it did when I heard him say them hours ago. He thought I'd disappeared on him, but I was hiding behind a prop just outside the door, and I'd nearly blown my cover by moaning. The sentiment sounds so gentle coming from my *nonno* Tony, and like a delicious command from Sev. Even now, I want to submit.

Two memories suddenly fight for my attention. One where Sev's hard body is flush behind mine, and the other is the way he looked with the blood of my enemy dripping from his razor.

My warped smile widens as the visions morph together in my mind. I push off the door, excited to unwind and jump under my covers. Hopefully my nightmares will only be dreamy flashbacks from this night. But as I go to take off my black puffer jacket, I realize my hands are covered in blood. Literally.

"Whoops."

They're dry, at least, so my doorknob is free from wet residue. As much as I want to bathe in memories of revenge and destruction, hot water and soap will have to do for now.

I sigh and kick off my shoes before placing them in the row next to the welcome mat. The messenger bag slides off with a shrug of my shoulder, and I make a mental note to clean the knife inside after my shower. I tug off my jacket and check it over for stains, but there aren't any, thank God. Finding that trench coat was crucial tonight. Without it, my favorite jacket would've been ruined.

The bed's siren song calls to me, but I don't give in. Instead, I head straight into my small bathroom and strip my clothes, inspecting each article as I go. The edges of my sweater dress are clean, but my leggings are soaked.

"Dammit." I trash them in the wastebasket in my bathroom with a huff. "Those were my best pair."

The apartment's cool air suddenly wafts over my naked body, hardening my nipples into peaks. These old apartments never quite heat up all the way in the winter, but a scalding hot shower should do the trick. Before I turn on the water, though, my gaze catches on my jagged, red scars in the mirror.

Without makeup, the ones on my jaw are a crimson riverbed with small rivulets etched into my lower cheeks. I push my hair aside where makeup still carefully hides the gruesome memory that I almost died fifteen years ago. I've never just looked at them without judgment. I've always been busy scrunching my hair, applying makeup, or being too ashamed and angry. But tonight, I almost admire the evidence that I'm a *fucking* survivor before closing my eyes.

It's all for you, Chiara.

The sweet little girl I once was would be horrified at who I've become. Sometimes I wonder who I could've been, but I always end up pushing the painful thoughts away. I wasn't born this vengeful, I was made, and I don't regret how I've dealt with it. Few might understand my actions, but justice is subjective. Depending on who you ask, what I've done is either righteous or evil. Good thing I'm not taking a poll.

Another cool breeze pushes the bathroom door ajar, making me shiver out of my thoughts. The drafty, old building is going to be the death of me. I turn on the shower, and as soon as it gets warmer than the air around me, I hurry into its warmth.

The hot water kisses my cold skin. Goose bumps erupt everywhere, making my body more sensitive than it already is. I quickly dip my hair under the water and go through my routine, humming as I wash blood off of my hands.

Normally I can clear my head during a shower, but I can't get the sight of Sever shrouding Percy's body out of my mind.

Besides my *nonni*, the last person I trusted was the boy. When he let me down, I lost all hope that I could depend on anyone else to protect me. I became the hero I needed when I was a child, but tonight? Sever was my god.

He inspired me to go through with taking out the driver once and for all. I

couldn't believe my luck when Sever left and the man stupidly kept playing on his phone. The light on the screen had perfectly highlighted every ugly feature that I've memorized. The glow from below was like a sign from the devil himself, telling me it was my time to shine.

I wonder what Sever would've thought if he'd seen me. Would he have been disgusted? Or proud?

"Don't worry, I believe you."

Pleasure tingles over my skin, zinging down to my core. I close my eyes and think back to the dressing room. Sever's finger gently caressing my cheek when I leaned in. Me pushing back into him and feeling his hard length. I detest every man's touch, but not Sever's. Why?

Looking back on it, he's never been the one to initiate. He's let me come to him. Is that the difference? I was determined to stay away from him, to hate him if I could. And yet, he's somehow gotten under my skin so effectively that I'm beginning to wonder if I can go through with my plan. What will happen if I don't write him off? What if I let him in instead?

Before I met him, the idea of giving up my control to anyone, let alone a man, never even crossed my mind. But the unbidden dreams I've been having about Sever are dark and tempting, and I'm close to giving in.

My breaths quicken at the thought. I set my loofah aside to squeeze body wash into my open hand and then rub them together. I tentatively cup my slippery hands around my breasts and moan softly. They're more than a handful, and my heart thumps in my chest as my fingers slip and slide around my hard nipples.

I've never done this before. Every time I've tried, I chicken out or flashbacks take over, causing more torture than bliss. I don't even know how to begin, but I hum louder, trying to block out anything other than pleasure. Letting my fingers and body be my guide, my fears slip away.

My core pulses almost painfully, and my clit flutters, begging me to touch it. Listening to my body for once, my fingertips trail over my soft belly past my trimmed curls. I spread myself before delving into my pussy and let both my mind and fingers wander. I'm slick with moisture that feels different than the water washing over me, and I realize something that I hadn't put into actual words yet.

I'm turned on. Neither men, nor women, have ever done it for me, but thinking about someone killing for me *turns me on*.

With that thought, my hand massages my breast harder. My fingers circle

faster around my clit. One name escapes my lips on a breathy moan.

“Sever.”

My core pulses back in answer, and my entire body starts to tense with need. On some level, I know what’s going on, but in a very real sense, I don’t. I gave up trying to take my body back on my own terms years ago, thinking I’d never be able to enjoy pleasure without my PTSD getting in the way.

But ever since Sev caught me at the bakery, my libido has had a mind of its own. I thought I was broken. That checking off my list would be the only thing that’s made me feel at all. I always knew death would set me free, but I would have never guessed that I’d need Sever to feel alive.

My muscles tighten, and my legs threaten to crumple beneath me. I back into the wall to keep myself upright. The water sluices down my skin, and the droplets caress the sensitive skin around my clit.

I imagine it’s Sever touching me. Sever’s fingers lightly kneading my clit. Sever’s tongue tasting me where the water trails. His lips kissing down my thighs.

He looks up, licking his lips before his tongue strokes up my entrance. One of his large hands fists his long cock while the other explores my core. My inner muscles tighten as if he’s really filling me, and I tug my clit lightly, imagining him sucking on the bundle of nerves.

“Sever, oh my god.”

On instinct, I pinch my nipple to the point of pain. The sting only increases my pleasure, and my pussy bucks against my hand. My fingers zero in on my clit, circling faster and faster. The motion tightens my lower belly while my core contracts, making me ache. Finally, I crest and tumble over a precipice I hadn’t realized I was climbing.

I am one pulse, beating to the tune of my very first orgasm. Pleasure rolls through my veins. Waves and waves crash over me, and I cry out Sever’s name on a long, hoarse moan. Sensation takes over, but I keep massaging, riding the feeling even as my legs give out. I slide down the shower wall, and I barely stop myself from gracelessly plopping onto my ass. My trembling legs splay out and I drape my hands on the edge of the tub as I catch my breath.

In the back of my mind, I hear a thump, and the heat clammers back on with what I swear sounds like a male groan. I chuckle softly at the thought. My imagination has always been way too vivid for my own good. It did well

this time, though. I don't hate the idea of Sever being here moaning with me during my first orgasm. My smile widens at the thought, and a strange warmth fills my chest.

The water begins to cool, so I slowly unfold my body to continue my shower. A shadow flickers in the corner of my eye. My eyes dart toward the open door, even though I know there's nothing there. I'm right, of course, and a heavy sigh of defeat leaks out of me.

Trauma has haunted me for over a decade. I'd thought I was finally getting rid of the apparitions. Over the past few weeks of getting justice, my mind and vision have been wonderfully vacant at times. Or as empty as they can be with that damned mantra stuck in my head. But it seems like the shadows are coming back.

I give myself a minute to feel sorry for myself before I finally continue my shower. My skin is like a livewire, but I'm extra careful with the loofah as it brushes over my sensitive tattoo. I might wait a week or two before I fill in the next snake. Hopefully I'll have a couple more I can do at the same time rather than just one. Tomorrow will be the judge of that.

I've finished off the driver, and it's time to move onto the rest of my list. The capo has been impossibly hard to find, but I'm determined. Tomorrow's a Sunday, so from my recon, he *should* be right where I need him. He was the one who stole me as my parents lay dying. He's the one who helped deal with my father in the end.

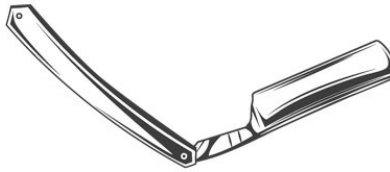
I need to know the name of one more person on my list, so hopefully someone along the way will give up the information. No matter what, though, I *have* to follow the order. Then again...I also *have* to get through my list before I get caught. If the capo doesn't turn up soon, I don't know what my next step should be.

What if he's not there and I can't go in order and I'm caught before I can finish and I can't punish every one of them and then what do I do about the last one and will he be a white snake like Antonella or filled in like the rest and am I giving up if I give in...

The thoughts race until I can't keep up with their pace. I retreat into myself, and the sick lullaby from my childhood becomes a frantic hum as it tries to escape from my closed lips.

Scene 14

THE DINNER GUEST



Sever

Watching Tallie make herself come in the shower was breathtaking. She moaned *my* name throughout, and it took everything in me not to fist my cock and join her. When she melted from pleasure, every muscle in my body had burned to catch her, and I nearly came at the sight of her so sated. As soon as I'd gotten home, I'd slammed my back against the door and relieved my own tension. It wasn't nearly as satisfying as Tallie's warmth would have been, but that will all come in due time.

Merda, it's been almost twenty-four hours, and I still can't get those memories out of my head, nor do I want to. But I have no choice, considering the fact that I'm at dinner with my mother, uncle, his three dogs, and one of his pompous guests, the *honorable* Judge Richard "Dickie" Blunt.

I'd rather not be here at all, but missing the meal we've kept every Sunday for decades would wave a red flag at a time when I'm trying to stay under the radar. My uncle is already on edge since his capo is still on his "bender," and his driver was mysteriously murdered last night.

Raze and I were able to convince Claudio that someone shot Alfonso. Because people were leaving the afterparty at the same time, Roman, Tiero, and I had to dispose of the body immediately to avoid police involvement. My mother thinks that's where I went when I left, and that's why Raze was the one who drove her and "the girls" around the city last night. I don't know how long we'll be able to keep this subterfuge shit up. It already feels like

I'm walking a tightrope of lies.

"Severino, dear, would you like some wine?" My mother's practiced faux Italian hospitality comes easy as she tries to help with whatever deal my uncle must be trying to broker.

"No, Gertrude. I would not."

Her smile cracks, until she breaks out into a bubbly laugh. "My son has always had a silly sense of humor, haven't you, Severino? Ever since he was a boy, he's insisted on calling me by my given name. So precocious."

"Quite. I'll take his portion, then." Dickie's nearly translucent skin is already flushed from alcohol, and the ends of his bushy gray mustache are dyed red from wine.

"You should come by Luciano's Cuts for a shave, Dickie," I offer.

"Oh, what a lovely idea. You should take him up on it, Judge Blunt. The barbershop is usually booked up for weeks."

"She's right. It's doing very well. My cousin, Orazio, runs a tight ship."

His wrinkles crease around his jaundiced-blue eyes as he tries to figure out if I'm fucking with him or not. Honestly, I haven't decided. I don't know why he was invited tonight, whether he's friend or foe. Claudio no doubt has an agenda that I won't like, but I can only wait for it to play out.

"Yes. I'll have my assistant make an appointment. Speaking of business, Claudio, how are your ventures doing? It's been far too long since we caught up."

I feign mild interest while they perform their small talk until a bottle of water appears in my periphery. The maid holding it is in the absurd Victorian-style uniform that my mother insists the staff wears. Its white cap adds to her demure demeanor, hiding her face, but I don't think I've met this one before. I accept the bottle and open it, listening for the crisp break of the plastic seal. It doesn't disappoint, so I nod at her and raise it like a toast.

"Thank you." I wish I could get drunk at my uncle's house, but being caught unaware here is the last thing I want to do, especially when he has guests.

She curtseys and shuffles away to the corner she's stood in throughout the meal. One soft brown curl slips out of the back of her cap. Its bouncy, tight spiral reminds me of Tallie's, and my heart aches. *Cazzo*, I can't stop thinking about her.

The maid doesn't have her generous curves, though, and she moves more stiffly and timidly than my *vipera* ever could. She stays well away from the

table as much as she can, which is perceptive, really, for someone who apparently only just started. Not to mention my uncle's Italian mastiffs are vicious toward new people.

"He didn't ask for water," my mother snaps.

"You'll reprimand someone for anticipating your guests' needs?" I ask, unable to keep the irritation from my voice. My fingers drum against the handle of my cane before I realize the tell. I lean it back against the table beside me so it's ready if I need it, but I'm also not broadcasting my irritation like a war drum.

My mother's practiced expression breaks as she glares at me for a split second. The smile is back before I can blink.

"Of course not, but the agency has sent so much new help recently that I haven't had time to properly train them—or vet them." She doesn't even bother to face the maid when she speaks again. "You *wait* to be summoned, girl. Or you *wait* in the unemployment line."

The maid nods without a word, but she slips her curled fists into the pockets of her dress.

I bite back my huff of laughter.

"Severino, be kind to your mother," Claudio snaps.

He sits across from me at the head of the table, smacking his mouth around his food and tossing gristle to the monsters at his feet. Despite my uncle's age, his light, clean-shaven skin hardly has any wrinkles. It's as if his thin wisps of dark gray hair are so slicked back that it smooths his face. His colorless eyes narrow at me, and he stabs the air with his fork.

"I'm not in the mood for your attitude tonight, boy."

He flings a piece of fat at his dogs and grins as they snarl and snap at each other over the measly scrap. I can barely see the chaos over the long, tall dining table, but I know one has conquered the others when two sharp yelps fill the room, making me, Dickie, and the maid jolt. Claudio chuckles, no doubt pleased that he got the reaction he wanted from everyone and everything in the room.

"Oh, don't worry about Severino, dear. He has been very kind. Just yesterday he took me to see that musical. I had the most delightful time."

"Yes, it was too bad you couldn't go, uncle."

"Maybe if I had, I wouldn't be down a driver."

"What's that, now?" Dickie asks, drawing Claudio's glare away from me. "Your driver quit? He's been with you for ages, hasn't he?"

“He didn’t *quit*,” Claudio grumbles. “You asked about business? Well, these are trying times, Judge. I’ve lost valuable employees, clients aren’t paying as reliably as they used to, and my enemies are increasing in number.”

“Business owners aren’t paying?” Dickie shakes his head. “Don’t they know who they’re dealing with?”

“You’d think. For most of them, all it takes is one visit to write the check. They just need to be scared straight to remind them what their protection fee is for.”

My chest tightens. The Amorettis’ bakery is in his jurisdiction. Have they been late paying?

I can’t see why. Their business is booming, with a line out the door every morning. I found that out today when I tried to stop by to see Tallie. Instead, Tony greeted me with a broad smile. How someone as surly and stubborn as Tallie could be raised by such a kind soul as Tony is a mystery to me. Granted, everything about Tallie is a mystery that I’m dying to unravel.

I put on a carefree tone even though my pulse is racing. “What does ‘scare them straight’ mean this time?”

Claudio waves his hand. “No concern of a soldier’s. I’ll get Vinnie to take care of it. If I can ever get a hold of him.”

My hand tightens around my steak knife as I cut like I’m actually going to eat a piece. Protection fees would be the first thing to go if I was in charge. I won’t need my own neighborhood’s money to “protect” them from rival families, I’ll have enough of my own. The sick truth is that Claudio does too, but he’s always been greedy. In the meantime, I need to tell Raze to go through Vinnie’s texts whenever he messages again. At least that way I’ll know what Claudio’s order is soon enough to stop it.

“The floral arrangement is beautiful, isn’t it, Judge?” my mother asks with an insistent, cheery edge in her voice. “I grew them myself and ordered the gardener to arrange the Tiffany vase.”

I focus on the flowers in the center of the table for the first time. Tall, magenta trumpet-shaped flowers mix with gorgeous unopened bulbs of purple petals so dark they look black in the ambient light.

“They are, Trudy. My wife would love them. Our gardener lacks the green thumb necessary for our desert home. You have quite the talent.”

“Oh, thank you, Richard.” She preens as if she didn’t draw the compliment out herself. “They’re *digitalis purpurea*, commonly known as purple foxglove. And the rest...oh, well, it seems the new gardener has taken

some liberties with the arrangement I designed. We'll have to have a talk about that," she murmurs the last part under her breath. "In any case, they are called—"

"Queen of Night tulips," I finish. "They were my aunt's favorite."

And Tallie's.

A smile threatens my lips, just as a pang of guilt hits my chest.

Tulips used to only remind me of the girl and the night I failed her. Now Tallie fills my mind. My nights have been the same. Before I met Tallie, I was plagued with nightmares. The girl's screams and the ancestors of the dogs in this room always played a key role in my torment.

Yet for the past week, Tallie has been featured in every dream, and they're sure as fuck not nightmares. I've found I'm still just as trapped, unable to wake myself. But I'd stay wrapped up in Tallie forever if I could.

"Severino is correct. Under my tutelage, the old gardener could grow anything in our greenhouse, no matter the season. We even dabbled a little in cross-pollination with the foxglove. I didn't realize he had an interest in tulips, though. They haven't grown in our greenhouse for years."

Our. As if my mother has been at Claudio's side all along and my father and aunt never existed. The insinuation rankles.

"Not since *zia* Antonella passed, right, *zio*?" I remind them both.

Riling the man up has always been my favorite pastime, and mentioning his late wife in front of him and my mother is a two-for-one special. His face reddens like a tomato, right on cue.

He flings another piece of meat, closer to the corner of the room this time. The dogs bound after it, champing at the bit and tearing into their brothers to get there first. One of them bumps into the maid, and her cry of fear shocks through me like a lightning bolt. I bang my fist on the table, silencing the room instantly.

"Get those fucking dogs out of here, Claudio. I've told you time and again not to bring them around me."

He grins, and I know I've played into one of his tricks. As much as I like to get a rise out of him, he's just as good, if not better, at doing the same with me. But my outburst wasn't for my benefit this time. When the young woman slumps against the wall with relief, I don't give a shit if Claudio feels like he's one-upped me.

"Very well, then. *Uscite,*" Claudio commands in Italian, and they obey, immediately exiting through the kitchen door. "I only need one guard dog in

the room, anyway, don't I, Severino?"

I blank my expression, refusing to dignify his barb with a response. On the inside, though, I'm exhausted as fuck. Claudio is tireless in his mind games.

At any moment, he could technically kill me for some minor infraction. According to him, my mother is the only reason I'm still alive, but I suspect there's more to it than that. He needs me for a reason, and for the life of me I can't figure out what that is.

My only explanation is that he knows there are those who are loyal to me and me alone. If I were to take out the boss without proof that he poisoned my father, my uncle's followers would put a bullet in my head. Likewise, if Claudio kills me without cause, my own men will do the same. The Family would be in chaos, something no one wants.

A throat clears, but I don't look away from my enemy as Dickie speaks.

"Trudy, I'm sorry, you said your old gardener? Was that the one I knew? I thought the Vincellis liked to keep their help for life. What on earth did he do that made you fire him, if I may ask?"

"Yes, you're thinking of the right one. I'm afraid he passed tragically earlier this week."

Good fucking riddance.

I hated the gardener. He was the reason the dogs were alerted when the girl and I tried to escape. I don't know what the fuck he was doing out and about that night, especially since he was injured earlier in the day. If he hadn't been there, the girl might've lived. I'm glad he's gone, but I would've loved to use my own blade on the *bastardo*.

"Tragically, you say?" Dickie pries before sipping his wine.

"Yes, he had a terrible accident in the garden while we were out of town."

Her voice is light, as if she's announced that the gardener was down with a cold. But her words freeze the blood in my veins.

First the gardener, then the driver. I would have extracted possible blackmail material about Claudio from both of them if I'd had the chance. The driver certainly had something that the attacker last night wanted to know. Instead, it's a frustrating loss of information, and I don't even know who's behind it all.

Che cazzo! What the fuck is going on?

"An accident? Again?" Dickie *laughs*. I couldn't give a fuck that the gardener died, but the judge didn't have a grudge like I do, and his callous

reaction makes my skin crawl. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Clumsy oaf, wasn’t he? I seem to recall that he had a run-in with the garden shears on one of my visits.”

My fork scratches against my plate.

Everyone grimaces, and my mother tsks. “Severino, please, this is Bernardaud China from our wedding.”

“Apologies, Gertrude.” I steeple my fingers in front of my face to hide the scowl I’ve let slip through my defenses. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t that years ago, Dickie?”

If the vibe in the room was awkward before, it’s icy now. The tension weighs heavy on my back, and I swear even the maid’s hands are shaking. She returns them to her pockets and stands stock-still.

“Yes,” Claudio answers for him. “I’d say it’s hard to find good help these days, but I’m afraid there’s more to it. I can’t get a hold of my capo to save his life, and I’ve had to resort to getting things done myself. Then my driver was murdered last night, and the gardener died so brutally. That ‘accident?’ Ha. The *bastardo* had shears embedded in his chest up to the hilt.”

“Dear God,” Dickie gasps. “Did you call the police? That’s no clumsy *accident*, Claudio.”

“No cops. You know that. Although I thought the same. My wife seems to believe otherwise, but she’s always been naive. A botany degree doesn’t mean a damn thing when it comes to good sense, apparently.”

My mother’s eyes narrow, but no one other than me seems to notice.

“It’s a terrible way to go, that’s for sure,” Dickie agrees around another sip of wine. “Excellent vintage, by the way, Claudio. They just don’t make it like this back in Nevada.”

And just like that, we’ve moved on. What’s a casual dinner conversation without a dash of murder?

“It’s actually not vintage, but it tastes even better. This particular bottle comes from my own vineyard. We’ve had a little trouble with the acidity of this batch, but it’s nothing a little blending and calcium carbonate won’t fix.”

“You’ll find nothing quite like it on the market,” I add. “That’s what I hear anyway.”

Claudio huffs. “And yet you won’t drink a drop.”

I shrug. “What can I say? I’m a liquor drinker if anything.”

My mother frowns. She knows I have the same affinity for wine my father did. I’ve suspected that was his downfall, so I have my reasons for not

drinking Claudio's. She's safe from the same outcome, but with the way she's behaved since my father's death, I don't mind her drinking from Claudio's vineyard. Her fate is her own.

"You've never had a taste?" Dickie asks.

"No, but I did bring something back from my trip a few weeks ago. I think you'll like it, Claudio."

I pick up the package I kept beside my cane and fish out the straight razor from my pocket to cut the taped seam. Inside, a canvas bag encases a wooden box, so I pull it out and set it on the table.

It's a little theatrical to unwrap it here, but there was no way I was going to bring just the bottle since it has no protective seal around the cork. Doing it this way, plus the lengths it takes to open the container, makes me feel like the contents are safe.

The Irishmen back in Vegas swear by the brand, so it's unfortunate that it'll go to waste here. After I open it, I won't have more than a sip, and I won't take it home with me. But it'll all be worth the look on my uncle's face once he realizes where I got it from.

As I open the light oak case to reveal the whiskey, the butler I've never met suddenly appears and tries to take it from me. I grab the bottle by the neck and glare at him as I pop the cork from the top. He tries to take it yet again, but I huff at him.

"Just bring me a glass."

He nods quickly and goes to fetch a rocks glass from the bar.

"Sorry, dear." My mother's tone sounds more frustrated than apologetic. "He's still relatively new and doesn't know all of your...um, your particularities."

"My apologies, sir," the man whispers before handing me the glass.

"No problem. As Gertrude said, I have 'particularities.'" I inspect the glass and sniff it for good measure.

"Dear God, Severino, the glass is clean," Claudio snaps.

"So it is." I pour two fingers of whiskey and finally hand the bottle over. "Please share with the rest of the table."

My mother waves him off and sticks with her wine. Once the men have been served, I raise my glass.

"To knowledge and truth. *Salute!*"

Claudio studies me, but he and the judge still repeat my toast.

I swirl the drink around, whiffing the delicious vanilla, oak, and spice

aroma before taking a sip.

The judge seems to like it, but my uncle makes a face.

“Is this that swill those Irishmen gave you?”

I can’t help the smug smile on my lips. “One and the same. I befriended them just as you asked. Would you like more, *zio*?”

He scoffs. “I sent you and Vinnie to Vegas to scout out the heads of the local families, *not* befriend them. You were recon before I risked rubbing elbows with them personally, that’s it. But not only did you not find out anything useful, now you’re best friends with the swine? They’re a means to an end, boy. Not allies.”

I found out far more than he thinks. Other than telling him it was safe to attend the McKennon wedding, he’ll never find out more from me. My loyalty has never lied with my uncle.

He slams his glass onto the table with a thud and swishes his wine like mouthwash. Ironic, really, that he’d use the wine for that.

“And now my *cugino idiota* hasn’t graced us with his presence for nearly a *week*. His texts are fewer and further between, and he turned off his location, too, just like he did a few weeks ago while he was living it up in Vegas instead of doing recon. You left the wedding before we did last weekend. Did you see him out at all?”

“The last time he texted me was before I boarded the plane, and he was drunk in some casino’s bar,” I answer with a shrug.

He grumbles more about how useless his “idiot cousin” is and I relax a fraction. The longer Raze and I can keep this up, the more time I have to figure out how to expose Claudio without risking the wrath of the rest of the families. The video will help, but this process can’t be rushed. I’m prepared to go down, but I don’t want the men that trust me, like Raze, Roman, and Tiero, to get caught in the crossfire.

“What, uh, what families were you surveilling in my state, Claudio? I thought you were sticking to New England these days.”

Dickie’s hand trembles as he takes a large gulp of wine. It’s his fourth glass, so the tremor could be from drunkenness or stress. The way he’s begun to slur his words makes me think drunkenness, which is fucking annoying because it’ll only get worse. The more he drinks and the more he talks, the more his voice grates on my nerves. It’s familiar, too, but I can’t place it.

“*Your* state?” Claudio chuckles. “Don’t forget where your roots are, Judge. I might need you back in New York soon enough.”

I'm beginning to understand Claudio's objective. The judge must have been an associate who tried to escape this life by moving across the country. It's never that easy, though, and he's been sucked right back in from the looks of it.

"We went to the McKennon-O'Shea wedding, Judge," my mother answers for Claudio, taking some of the tension out of the conversation. "I have to ask after seeing how...*empty* the desert is. New York has seasons, and it's so lovely in the fall. How could you ever leave it behind?"

And the tension is back. The man coughs into his napkin and shifts uncomfortably in his seat. This is getting good.

I steeple my fingers again to hide the smirk on my lips. "Yes, tell us, Judge. How could you possibly leave decades of hard work building up your career in one state, only to start all over again in another?"

Surely you're not attempting to flee the man who invited you here to blackmail you again...

"The desert has its own charm, especially at night. And, yes, autumn is gorgeous, but these winters..." He chuckles and points outside the window where the first real snow of the season falls silently to rest on tree branches. "I don't miss blizzards in the slightest."

My mother laughs politely, but I huff with exasperation.

"That doesn't answer the question, though, does it? I imagine it takes a lot of time and handshakes to become a judge. Was a little snow really enough to risk all your connections? Isn't that kind of move rare?"

Dickie narrows his eyes. "Federal judges have more freedom of movement than other positions if you must know. I earned my place on the bench."

"Did you now? With no help at all?"

"Severino, what has gotten into you?" My mother trills. "Please, Judge, don't mind him. He's in one of his moods."

My razor burns in my pocket, and I'm itching to keep interrogating him. The only thing stopping me is the fact that I know Claudio brought this man here—at a dinner with *me*—for a reason. I might be playing into whatever my uncle is scheming, but after what the judge said about the gardener, I have questions. The only way I'll possibly get answers is if I play his game.

"Well, thank you for the apology Trudy, even if it was on his behalf." He gives me a pointed look, and I glare back. The look makes him quickly turn back to Claudio. "So, the McKennons and the O'Sheas. What business do

you have with them?”

“I already have one successful restaurant, but if I’m to expand, I’ll need the Vegas families on my side. The McKennons and the O’Sheas lead the Garde, their so-called ‘secret’ society. I’m not surprised they didn’t invite you to the wedding, though. You know, since you were supposed to be the judge on one of their RICO cases.”

There’s a subtle shift at the table. The balance has officially tipped to where Claudio has the upper hand. His demeanor has changed completely, making me uneasy. I’ve seen that evil smile before. He thinks the judge is an easy win.

“Is that so?” Dickie hedges and shifts in his seat. “I have so many cases, I’m not even sure which one you’re referring to.”

For the first time, I finally realize why my uncle invited us both. These dinners are for those he wants to schmooze, punish, or flex his strength in front of. I’m obviously shit at the first, but I can easily take care of the other two. It’s likely why Claudio let me keep my weapons instead of leaving them at the door. I’m strapped with my cane, razor, and gun, so if Claudio wants me to scare the guy shitless, I’m ready for it. His voice has already annoyed the piss out of me, and at this point, I’m willing to slit his throat just to shut him the fuck up.

Granted, I still don’t know why he chose *me* specifically for this guest. Vinnie’s obviously out of commission, but any of his other enforcers or soldiers—Raze, Tiero, or Roman, even—could get the job done just as well as I could. I’m sure Claudio has his reasons, though, and he’ll relish in dropping them like a bomb before the dinner is finished.

“Severino, what did you think of the wedding?” my mother butts in, obviously trying to steer the conversation out of the pool of tension it keeps getting sucked into. “Did it inspire you to settle down, perhaps?”

“*Love makes a man weak...*”

It’s a sentiment I insisted on just a few weeks ago. After seeing Kian McKennon fall head over heels so quickly for his bride, though, I began to once again question everything my parents ever taught me. Is the way I feel for Tallie how it began with Kian?

Meeting Tallie was *un colpo di fulmine*, like a lightning strike. I’ve been obsessed with learning everything about her, how she ticks, and what she cares about. When I killed the man who dared to touch her, I felt strong and powerful. If that’s love, Tallie doesn’t make me weak. She makes me

invincible.

I won't let *anyone* in this room know that, though.

I stare at the whiskey swirling in my glass. "The McKennons' views on love are ridiculous. Love at first sight? Impossible. I have no plans to fall into that trap anytime soon."

"Aw, now, Severino, don't be so jaded." She has the audacity to hold my uncle's hand, and my fingers squeeze my glass so tightly I'm shocked it doesn't break. "Sometimes the situations are unorthodox, but love can be found in even the strangest circumstances."

Claudio gives her a cursory smile and pats her hand before continuing eating. I don't know what game she's playing at. Everyone in this room knows the "strange circumstances" she's talking about.

Bitterness burns my throat. "I wouldn't call marrying your dead husband's brother when he's barely cold in the ground 'strange circumstances.' Have you by chance asked your new dear husband about the 'strange circumstances' surrounding my father's death?"

"I already know the circumstances, Severino. Do you?" she snaps. "How dare you after all I've sacrificed to keep you safe."

"Sacrificed?" The girl's scream knives through my mind, and bile burns my throat. "What the fuck do you know about sacrifice? Do you know what your *husband* did? It's convenient there was no autopsy, isn't it? My father could have been poisoned for all we know."

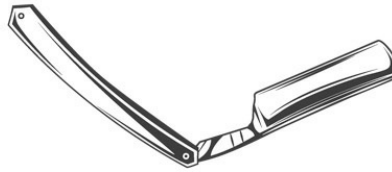
Cavolo, a suggestion like that is like stoking an inferno. It's such a stupid fucking move, but my emotions have been getting the best of me lately, and this dinner has set me off. Damn, does it feel good to have all this out in the open, though.

I slowly reach for my cane and the gun in my shoulder holster, ready for Claudio's reaction. But he looks...*bored*? And it's my mother who answers me with a sigh.

"You're right, Severino. Your father *was* poisoned."

Scene 15

THE GUARD DOG



Sever

“What?” My mind can’t wrap around her confession, but there’s only sympathy in her voice when she continues.

“It was Digoxin poisoning. Your father had heart problems, Sever. His doctor prescribed him Digoxin for it. It’s a safe medication, but an overdose can cause the very problems it’s meant to prevent.”

“An overdose...you’re telling me my father *overdosed*? The man was against drugs of all kinds. There’s no way he’d try to kill himself.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not suggesting that. I am saying he made a mistake. Whether it was a mistake in taking too many after too many glasses of wine, or a toxicity that developed over time without his knowledge, I don’t know. And we never will. But this vendetta you have with your uncle over your father’s death? It’s misguided. Your father died of *natural* causes. I accepted it, and I’ve...I’ve made sacrifices to protect you in all of this, but it’s time you knew the truth. Your uncle is only doing what he has to to keep the Family safe. It’s time you do the same.”

I fucking plan on it.

The thought comes like a habit, but if what my mother says is true—

No. Fuck, no. Guilt rushes in. It doesn’t matter what he did, or didn’t do, to my father. The girl was tortured and killed on his watch. My vendetta didn’t begin and end with my father’s death. It started long ago, and my uncle *will* pay for everything that happened to her.

“He’s far from innocent,” I growl.

“Innocence is in the eye of the beholder.” Claudio chuckles. “You’ve always looked for someone to blame, haven’t you, *nipote*? Ever since you were, what, ten years old?”

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. “And what do you mean by that, exactly?”

He grins and slowly shifts to face his guest. The unnerving smile and his dismissal tells me everything he isn’t saying out loud.

You’ll find out soon enough.

Anxiety raises goose bumps over my arms, but I wait in silence and observe. Watching my uncle spin his victims into his deadly web so subtly would be impressive if there wasn’t the constant threat that you could get tangled up and sucked dry next.

“I think this is a good segue to explain exactly why I called you here, Judge.”

“Alright.” He dabs the steak juices from the corner of his lips. “Do tell. I’ve been dying to know myself. Why did you invite me here, Claudio?”

I wait, loose muscles ready to act. This dinner started out boring as hell, but it’s gotten more interesting as the night’s gone on. I can’t wait to crack some heads with all the adrenaline and aggression rushing through me right now. If, while I do it, I get answers to the questions that have seared into my mind, so much the better.

“Well, from what I gathered, Dickie, the case down in Nevada with the Garde was thrown out.”

The judge nods slowly. “Yes. As it turns out, the key witness was the one who framed the leader of that society, the ‘Keeper’ I think they call him, and was using the leader’s case to fuel his own political aspirations. But not only was the witness a fraud, he skipped town as soon as he was found out. I threw the case out accordingly.”

“Ah, yes, the ‘Keeper.’ What stupid names these societies have concocted just to masquerade as something they’re not.”

“And what is that, *zio*?”

My uncle settles his gaze on me. “Powerful.” When he shifts back to his guest, I shift and subtly squeeze my arm against my side to feel the gun in my shoulder holster underneath my motorcycle jacket. My mother would be disappointed that I brought weapons to the table, just as she was when she saw the bike I rode in on. I don’t give a shit, though, and I’ll use whatever I

can to survive these charades. Right now, Claudio has an agenda, and I don't know whether it's for or against me.

"Do you know what makes a man powerful, Dickie?"

"I imagine a man's wealth, status...how he has risen in his career. Those all contribute to whether someone is powerful or not."

Déjà vu teases my mind. I had a similar conversation with the McKennons. They'd said love. I'd insisted just as the judge did, and yet, I don't know if my answer would be the same today.

Claudio grunts. "Knowledge makes a man powerful. That's one thing the Garde has gotten right with their 'Keeper' of secrets. But the Garde aren't the only ones who know secrets...are they Dickie?"

"I don't know what you're insinuating Claudio, but I wish you'd come out with it already. I've had enough of your wordsmithing and mind tricks for one night."

"Says the dirty judge," I snort. He glares at me, but Claudio continues on.

"Your trial witness was one of my associates, and he would have done wonders for me with his New York and Nevada connections. Imagine my surprise when I found out he didn't 'skip town.' He was murdered. I know he was blackmailing you—"

"I had nothing to do with his murder if that's what you're trying to get at. The man was bluffing. He could never produce any evidence when I demanded it."

Claudio shakes his head with a grin. "He wasn't bluffing. If the case had gone to trial, he would have been given photos that incriminated your honor in the most dishonorable acts. Now, I, of course, have no idea how he could have gotten a hold of such pictures—"

"I should have known you were behind this," the judge seethes. The way his words slur from alcohol sparks a wisp of a memory that I can't quite catch. "You promised years ago that you'd destroy those photos, so long as I did your bidding. You had what I needed at the time, but I'm done with that life. I don't need you anymore, so why am I a pawn in your games again? What do you need from me this time? A pound of flesh?"

Claudio shrugs. "If that's what it takes. You know how I work, Judge. Favors. I need some business dealings to go through in New York *and* Nevada. It looks like the Garde is going straight, so they won't be any help. Now that my associate is dead, I have to resort to you. Don't act like you weren't a willing participant in those photos, Dickie. I might have taken them

with our camera system, but you were the one in the stills.”

“Exactly, which means that if those photos get out, you’ll be just as culpable as I am for facilitating the arrangement.”

“I thought you might’ve figured that out.” Claudio huffs a laugh. “Which is why I’m now offering a more *persuasive* incentive. Threatening you with those pictures might not work anymore, but it’s important you realize that I’m not the only one left who knows your secrets. Granted, the number of people who knew seems to be dwindling. My priest and capo won’t say a word, however, there’s one other. He was quite fond of your victim, and he could easily be convinced to turn on you. Once he puts it all together, my guard dog will go feral, and I’ll be the only one that can hold his leash.”

“But we had a deal. I did everything you asked for, signed off on questionable business transactions, made charges disappear, and convinced a coroner to declare a child dead from a car accident rather than in *your* care. I told you after that I was done doing your dirty work.”

“I seem to recall you benefited from that girl’s death as well, Dickie. No body, no case, as your people say, am I right?”

My mind stutters, and my stomach churns.

Che cazzo! How would he have benefited from a child’s death...

And how did he know that the gardener cut himself on shears years ago...

...on the same day the girl suffered so we could escape...

...the same day she died...

What. The. Fuck.

Bile burns my throat, and I cling to the knife in my hand.

Claudio huffs a laugh.

“It seems my nephew has started to put things together. Severino, should we tell him what you know?”

“What? *Him*? What could he know? He was a child back then,” the judge hisses. “Has he seen the photos?”

“He didn’t have to see the photos. He was there.”

My heart thunders in my ears, a drumbeat before an execution. The rest of the world stills around me, and my mind is slow to process his words as he continues.

“I locked him in the room beside hers so that I’d have a backup plan if the day came when you’d be reluctant to play your part. I couldn’t have anticipated how attached he would get to her memory, but he’ll give me no trouble when I sic him on you. It’s been a long con, but those are the most

satisfying don't you think? He's the only one who would willingly testify about what happened to his little friend. I'll warn you, though, if I unleash him, you probably won't make it to a trial. Not after what you did to Chiara."

"Chiara?" I breathe life into the name, and I instantly know. "That was... that was her name?"

The girl who saved me.

I finally know her name.

The knowledge cracks through me like lightning.

I break.

"You motherfucker." I lunge from the table with my steak knife in hand before I can think. Judge Dickie scrambles up in alarm, and his chair clatters to the floor behind him.

"No! This is a nice dinner!" my mother gasps as three sets of arms grab me mid-leap. Whoever snuck in while I was distracted can barely hold me back. I slice the air rabidly until someone snatches my arm and bends it back at an odd angle, forcing the knife to fall from my hand.

"Now *this* is the show I've been waiting for." My uncle chuckles before snapping his fingers. "Take away his cane, too. The man is brutal with it if he can get his hands on it."

They do as he orders, but I still fight back. I've lost my sense of reason to the wave of rage that I'm submerged in. The man who hurt Chiara is right in front of me.

Claudio bangs his fist on the table. "Everyone else out! For Christ's sake, *idiot*, don't you realize when you're not wanted?"

I'm still fighting with my captors, but out of the corner of my eye, I see the butler flee through the door. The maid hesitates to follow.

"Here, dear, let me help you." My mother jumps from her seat and puts her arm around the maid. She cringes away, making it impossible to see her expression. I don't know why she gives a shit about me, and I don't care. There can't be witnesses to what I'm about to do.

"Go. Get out of here! Now!"

She jolts, but she listens to me and leaves with my mother. My mind clears again, and all I can focus on is my sniveling target in front of me and the arms and hands keeping me from slicing him to ribbons.

"*Lasciatemi andare!* Let go of me!"

"Think about this, Sever. Rein those emotions in," Raze grunts under his breath.

I glance back to see him, Roman, and Tiero grappling with me. Betrayal burns like acid in my chest, and I throw punches where I can. They must have slipped in while my head was ringing with Chiara's name.

"Fuck you! Get off of me. I'll fucking kill him."

The judge steps closer to me, but I can't attack him because my cousins push me chest first into the table's edge, knocking the wind out of me. One of them shoves my shoulders down, wrenching my arms back and forcing me to collapse to my knees. Pain shoots up my leg, but my adrenaline is too high to let that stop me. I glare up at them and meet their grimacing faces.

"I'll kill all of you if you don't fucking let me go—"

"Now, now, Severino. This might be fun and games for me, but I need you to settle down. There's still business to discuss—"

A sharp pain slices into my chest, and I gasp. I turn around in slow motion to see the judge with a crazed look on his face and a bloody steak knife in his hand.

"Oh, *shit*," one of my cousins curses.

"Huh, well, that was unexpected," Claudio mutters. "One of you, please restrain our guest."

Roman has already released his grip on me before Claudio makes his order. He grabs Dickie by the collar of his suit jacket, easily subduing him. His weapon drops to the ground, and manic laughter wheezes from him.

"Was this your intent, Claudio? To let me take out the witness myself? Your methods are questionable, but I have to admit, killing a man does feel exhilarating."

"I'm not dead yet, motherfucker. Come over here and try it again when I'm facing you, you goddamn coward," I growl and push off the ground. The judge scrambles backward into Roman. My cousin shoves him into his chair, while Raze and Tiero slam me to my knees again.

Having two men holding me back instead of three should make it an easier fight, but my chest burns every time I try to rip away, and warmth spills down my torso. The holster underneath my arm becomes slick with blood, and it slips against my ribs, taunting me with the fact that I can't get to it.

I writhe and seethe, air practically smoking from my nostrils. The red haze of revenge clouds my mind, and I can't think straight. All I can see is the rapist in front of me that's about to die.

"What you see here in front of you is weakness, boys. Emotion like this

clouds the mind.” In my periphery, Claudio studies me as he stands and rounds the table, but I can’t take my eyes off my victim. “Find weakness. Exploit it. Don’t succumb to your emotions like your cousin here. As Severino has demonstrated, you won’t get far in this world if you let them get the best of you.”

I feel it before I see it.

Blinding white agony explodes in my vision as Claudio kicks the shit out of my leg. My eyes roll back in my head, and I have to breathe through my nose to keep from throwing up. Once I open my eyes, I see he’s picked up the steak knife I dropped.

“*Che cazzo*, Claudio?” Raze growls.

The grip on my arms loosens, and I crumple farther to the ground. Agony radiates through my body, keeping me down this time.

“I subdued him where you failed, Orazio, so I took matters into my own hands, as usual, lately. Watch where your loyalties lie when I call on you.”

My cousins grab me again with even more force, and Claudio wheels around to face the judge.

“Why are you doing all this, Claudio?” The judge gulps.

His pale skin is mottled red, and he looks like he’s about to have a heart attack. His eyes dart back and forth between me, his knife on the ground, and Claudio, as if he can’t decide who is more dangerous.

“Because my dealings need to stay off the feds’ radar. With such strong contacts in both New York and Nevada, you are the only man I can depend on to ensure my goals are met in both states.”

The judge licks his lips nervously and stares at me raging like a bull against my captors. Part of my mind still has the wherewithal to listen to the conversation even if I’m dizzy with rage.

“A-and if I don’t?”

“Simple. I sic my bloodthirsty nephew on you. I’ll keep him at bay for as long as you meet my demands. If you refuse, I’ll unleash my dog.”

The judge’s face purples, and he braves taking his eyes off of me to point at Claudio.

“I have my own people, you know. I’m not the new judge, fresh on the bench without power or backing anymore. I have my own resources and my own men that can make you and this *problem*” —he jerks his thumb at me— “disappear.”

Claudio chuckles. “We all know it’s *my* men who make problems

disappear. And trust me. All the resources in the world won't stop Severino once he's set his sights on it. He's already up to something, I can smell it. At this point, it's you or him. I trust that one of you will figure it out. Either way, I know how to bring both of you to heel."

"Fine," the judge grits out. "I'll play your sick games as long as you keep him under control."

"Excellent, Dickie. You're making the right choice."

Claudio settles back into his seat like a king on a throne, his hands casually lying on the armrests. My hatred for him is nearly as strong as it is for the judge, and having them both in front of me without being able to do a damn thing about it makes me so furious I'm lightheaded.

"I'll need you back on the New York circuit by next month, Judge."

"Next month?! That's impossible, Claudio—"

"I don't give a shit. Make it happen, Dickie, or else..." He juts his chin toward me.

"Don't fucking, 'or else' him, Claudio. Fuck your deals. He's *mine* whether you like it or not."

Claudio chuckles. "Have you forgotten I have your mother under my thumb as well? You may hate her for marrying me so quickly, but you're not callous enough to put her life in danger, are you? And if you are so heartless, just know that I have other methods of making you comply. Ones that are, arguably, even worse."

The hair on the back of my neck rises. I don't know what he could have in mind for the second threat, but fuck if he's not right about the first. It's just as it's always been. My mother and I haven't seen eye-to-eye since she skipped over my father's warm, dead body to "sacrifice" herself to keep me safe. That might have saved my life, but her decision has destroyed my plans at every turn. As much as I hate her for that, Claudio's right. I can't have my mother's blood on my hands.

The judge watches me grow limp with defeat under my cousins' hands. He whines like the *puttana* he is as he begins to dial on his phone.

"Fine, I'll do it. Let me leave, and I should have an appointment to figure out how to transfer by tomorrow morning."

Claudio smiles like a Cheshire cat. "See that it happens, Dickie."

He glowers at my uncle as he holds his phone to his ear. "Richard, here. Yes, I know it's late on a Sunday, but I have a request..."

He swings the door open on the opposite side of the room, and my mother

comes through.

“Nice to have you, Judge. Come back soon, hmm?” Once she’s inside the dining room, she smiles at Claudio. “I saw to it that the girl went home. She understands the importance of—”

I lunge to get past her, but now all three of my cousins tear me away from making it to the door.

“Severino, what’s the meaning of—” She gasps and steps toward me with a theatrical hand over her heart. “Oh, my poor baby. Are you hurt?” Her eyes narrow at something behind me. “Is that blood on my rug?”

I don’t answer her. All I can focus on is the swinging door and my lost opportunity. It’s not until the front door slams that Claudio nods to my cousins.

“Take his gun, cane, and razor.” I try to throw punches, but my ankle bends awkwardly and I fall. He smirks at me while they riffle through my pockets and holster. “You can have your toys back if you behave.”

“Leave the premises,” Claudio orders. My cousins hesitate but step away slowly through the door behind them, not daring to turn their backs on me. I glare at all of them until they disappear.

When they’re gone, I stand, using the table for help, and slap the surface. “*Che cazzo*, Claudio?! What the fuck was all that about, huh?”

Claudio leans over and drags my mother’s chair to his side. He pats the seat, and she doesn’t hesitate to sit beside him.

Once she settles against him, he unholsters his gun and lays it on the table. His arm stretches over the back of her chair, and he taps the handle of the pistol with his other hand. Huge gold rings glint from his knuckles like a warning sign as he silently threatens us both.

“You’ll do as I say, Severino. I know you have some twisted loyalty to that dead girl, but having that judge in my pocket is good for the Family. As long as he is on my side, you will obey me. Leave him alone, understood?”

“No.” I step forward and realize my razor is still in my pocket. The wooden handle prods me through the fabric, urging me to use it on Claudio and end all of this.

I push off the table to attack, but the world tilts on its axis, and I have to slam my hand against the wooden surface to keep upright. *Cazzo*, my chest aches like I’ve been punched by a wrecking ball. I pull my jacket to the side to see my black shirt glistening in the light. My fingertips graze the cotton and come away with crimson stains.

Fuck. I guess it wasn't the rage that made me dizzy after all.

"Blood loss getting to you, *nipote*?"

I blink and refocus on the door. Claudio laughs and tosses me a dinner napkin.

"Oh, Claudio, that's a Frette linen—"

I catch it at the last second out of reflex, but the movement throws me off, and I grip the table's edge again for balance.

"You'll never make it to go find the judge tonight, Severino. And don't even think you can take me on right now, or at any time, for that matter, without it being a suicide mission. So go ahead and kiss those revenge plots goodbye. Hell, from the looks of it, you might not even make it home."

I press the cloth to my chest and bite back my groan. Shit, he might be right. I don't know how I'll ride my motorcycle in this condition. It's got a modified twist grip handle and extended reach foot control that I rigged to accommodate my ankle. But I've never tried my mods while this injured before.

Claudio seems to read my mind, and he puts on an affected tone. "Damn, it seems I already sent all my men home except for the brownstone's security. However, will you make it home wounded?" He shrugs. "Then again, maybe I've underestimated you, Severino. You made the journey once before as a child. I have faith you can do it again."

"But Claudio...dear, maybe you should—"

"He'll be fine, Trudy." He smirks at me. "Besides, he's going to have to toughen up if he's going to come after me. Don't think I'm not watching you, Severino. My driver gets into a freak accident. We had to fire both our butler and our maids. Then the gardener and the driver are murdered...those little things are starting to add up."

A long-forgotten tune hums in my mind, but this time instead of the girl's voice, it's Tallie's.

My mother brushes her fingers over the back of his hand. "Please, dear, don't be rash. You know he wasn't behind those—"

Claudio brushes her off as she apparently tries to stick up for me. It's too fucking little, too goddamn late in my book, anyway.

"Guard!" One of his bodyguards appears out of the woodwork and grabs my arm. "Take him out. Follow him back to the North End. If he goes off course, shoot him."

My heart thrums.

The North End...

Tallie...

My addled mind provides a vision of her smiling wickedly at me.

Home. I have to get home.

I blink, and I'm back into reality where Claudio is still yelling as his soldier escorts me out.

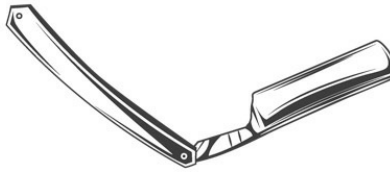
“If he's survived the ride by the time you reach the North End, let him find the rest of the way home. So help me, Severino, if I find out you've been the one taking out my men, I swear to God, I don't care what your mother wants. I'll end you!”

Not if I get to you first.

Act 3

Scene 16

TROUBLE KNOCKS



Talia

I'm wringing my hands, pacing back and forth in my apartment. The hem of my black, long-sleeved nightshirt brushes over my bare thighs, making me shiver. I've already washed off my heavy prosthetic makeup, and now that the corset is off, I can finally breathe, even though I'm on the verge of hyperventilating. My hair is still braided in a Dutch crown around my head, though the curls are springing from the plait. I'd take it down to get ready for bed, but I'm too busy wearing a damn hole in the hardwood floor.

Today was more informative than I could've hoped for, and I think I finally know all the names on my list. It still amazes me that I pulled the whole thing off. I thought I would get caught so many times. I thought I would break so many times. But my willpower is nothing if not strong. It wasn't easy, but I did what I set out to do, even though I have more questions than ever now.

But I can't shake the feeling that I'm in over my head. Did I miss my chance?

"If I wasn't so fucking concerned about my *stupid* order..." I groan for what feels like the millionth time since I got home. But if the list isn't completed in order, everything falls apart. What if I had failed and the rest had gone free? What if I fail anyway and they all go free? What if it's already out of order and I had nothing to do with it?

That last thought has plagued me all night, but I need to wait, plan, and prepare so I get this right. I stand by that decision.

I think.

“No, I *know*,” I mumble so low I can barely hear myself. “If I’m right and he took that one out, then I just have to get to the p—”

“Tallie! Tallie! Tallie!” my *nonni* scream at the top of their lungs out in the hall, jarring me out of my thoughts. I run to my door and fling it open.

“What the hell is going on—*Madonna mia!*” Tony and Gio struggle as they carry Sever, and I rush toward them. “Why the hell is Sev bleeding out in our hallway?!”

“Tallie, *aiutalo!*” Tony insists in Italian. “Help him, please. We were finishing up downstairs, and we heard him pounding on the door—”

“It’s bad, Tallie. His chest is wounded. It could be a gunshot or stabbing.”

“Why is he here, then? He should be at the hospital.”

Gio gives me a pointed look. “If he came here, you know he can’t go there.”

My gaze immediately drops to his blood-soaked shirt, and my own chest aches. When Tony stumbles, I help Tony’s frail body shift out from underneath Sever’s arm. His heavy weight drapes over my shoulders, and the scent of aftershave mixed with blood wafts up. Tony swings my door open so Gio and I can slowly help the six-foot-five giant inside. I rack my brain for anything I have that could help as Gio and I lay him over my bed with a grunt.

“Towels, Tony. Water. Then go downstairs and grab the clean cheesecloth you use for the cannoli.”

“Got it.” Tony’s fingers shake as he frantically tosses two towels by Sever’s head and leaves a pot of water on top of my laptop on the bedside table. He disappears through my door before I can thank him.

“Gio, give me the muslin mockup near the mannequin and my sewing apron.”

“Right, muslin mockup...” Gio murmurs and searches around my mannequin. “Wait...what’s a muslin mockup—”

“Just yank the creamy-white dress off the sewing machine.”

I focus on Sever’s chest, but his bleary-eyed gaze catches my attention.

“*Vipera*...didn’t I...just see you?”

My eyes widen, but his lips quirk up into a loopy smile. It’s a hint of that characteristic smirk I haven’t seen him wear in twenty-four hours. My heart twinges. I’ve missed it.

Shut up, heart. Now isn’t the time.

I listen to my brain and quiet my heart.

“No. I haven’t seen you since last night, *folle idiota*.”

“Last night?” Gio pipes up as he lays down the fabric and apron. “What happened last night?”

Sev turns toward Gio with a dozey smile, but I answer before he can.

“Nothing happened. Now come on, let’s get this shirt off him.”

Tony opens the door and rushes inside to lay the gauzy cheesecloth on the bedspread.

“I also got this.” He holds up a half-full bottle of dark amber liqueur. “It could help take away the pain if you have to stitch him up.”

“Alcohol?” I ask, my brow raised.

“Oh, fuck yes,” Sever groans and reaches up. Tony hands him the Amaretto, and Sever unscrews the top with one hand and knocks back several swigs. “*Cazzo*, that’s sweet.”

“But it’ll do the job.” Gio takes the bottle and sets it aside but still within Sev’s reach.

“Thanks,” he breathes with a grimace.

“We were baking the batches for tomorrow,” Tony rambles in Italian. “We heard loud thumps on the front door. We didn’t know what they were at first. We thought it might be one of Claud—”

“But you opened it and found him?” I ask, not letting them finish.

As conflicted as I am about my feelings for Sever, I don’t want to involve him in our problems until I know more about him. We’re later than usual on paying Claudio’s protection money this month. We’ve only received threats so far, but if Claudio has his way, our luck might run out soon.

“Yes,” Tony answers. “Sev was lying on the ground, still knocking when we opened it.”

“Lying on the ground...”

I glance down at his foot, where a boot print is outlined on the bottom of his pant leg.

“*Cazzo*, someone *kicked* you? Why did they let this happen?” I murmur. “Lift his foot, too, Gio. It needs to be elevated.” Gio does as I ask without a word. He’s usually the talkative one, going nonstop, but Tony’s monologue is helpful as he recounts picking Sever up and bringing him to me, hoping I could stitch him up.

“Help me get his jacket off, Gio.”

He and I wrestle Sev’s bloody jacket and shirt off of him. He shifts around on the bed to help us, but his face twists up in pain with every

movement. His grunts of pain rip through me, but I grit my teeth and keep going. Once his shirt comes off, a bloody dinner napkin rolls from his chest, revealing an inch-long stab wound.

“I’ll call one of our regulars,” Gio offers. “He’s a doctor. I’ll tell him we cut ourselves on a knife, and he can get us antibiotics for this.”

“Good idea.”

“*Mamma mia*. Look at all that blood,” Tony stutters. Gio pats his husband on the back as my poor, gentle *nonno* blows out a breath. “This is worse than the Navy. We were just chefs there! We never saw anything like this.”

Trying to focus, I ignore Tony’s reaction to analyze the ragged slash just underneath Sev’s collarbone. The skin gapes open, but it doesn’t look like the blade was long enough to go all the way through, and I don’t see bone. It’s deep enough to cause blood loss, but I think he’ll be okay.

Then again, what the fuck do I know? I’m a costume designer, not a medic...

“This couldn’t have been too long ago, the dinner napkin looks like it might have staunched some bleeding,” Gio points out.

It might have helped, but he’s still pale from blood loss. I dip a towel into the water and gingerly clean the wound. Tony gags beside me.

With all the false confidence I can muster, I lie through my teeth. “Gio, take Tony back to your apartment. I’ve got this.”

“Are you sure?” Gio asks, his worried expression now darting from the sickly-green hue on his husband’s face to Sever’s cut, and then back to me. “I can help Tony home and then come back—”

Tony dry heaves, and Gio holds onto him to keep him from doubling over. “Actually, come get me if you need me. I’ll do the texts and check on you.”

“Sorry, *dol*—” Tony chokes on my nickname, and Gio curses.

“We have to go, Tallie, but let us know if you need anything.”

“Make sure all our doors are locked before you go back. We don’t know who did this.”

Gio nods and rushes Tony out. We all know helping someone on the wrong side of the Mafia is dangerous, but we’ve made our decisions. I hope we don’t regret it.

With them gone, I press the towel to the wound with one hand and quickly unpack nylon thread, a surgical needle, and thread snips from my apron with the other.

Sever blinks rapidly at the needle. “Do you know what you’re doing, *vipera*?”

“Nope. But I’m all you’ve got unless you want me to drop you off at Mass General.” I assess his brutal cut and its jagged lines. Fury burns in my veins.

“Who did this to you,” I murmur.

He huffs a chuckle back. “You don’t even want to know.”

I frown at his answer, but I go back to inspecting him. The blood isn’t flowing as much anymore, which I take as a good sign. I’m normally fine with wounds, especially since I enjoy causing them so much, but apparently it’s different with Sev.

His skin is flayed open, but before I get sick like Tony, I thread the strongest nylon I’ve got into the eye of my surgical needle. My fingers shake while they pinch the two sides of the wound closed, and I swallow before whispering to myself.

“It’s just like leather. It’s just like leather—”

“The fuck it is. It’s *skin*.”

“Hey!” I bark. “Are you trying to piss me off?”

“I just don’t think you can do it. Maybe I should take my chances—”

I stab through his skin and take more than a little pleasure in his groaned curse. When I look up at him, though, agony etches every single inch of his face. Agony that *I* caused, and guilt, of all things, pangs in my chest. But there’s a glint in his eyes that relaxes me.

He was trying to piss me off.

My eyes narrow at him, and his lips curve into a pained smile that makes my chest ache and stomach flutter. He knows I can do this. I know it, too, but he realized I just needed a push.

I take a deep, cleansing breath and lean over him, getting as close as I can to see.

“Okay, prepare yourself. This is going to hurt like a bitch.”

“I know.” He takes another swig of the Amaretto and grimaces at the taste before growling. “I’m read—oh, *cazzo*.”

He groans as I pierce his skin with the needle on the other side of the wound and nearly writhes off the bed.

“*Stai fermo!* Hold still!” The needle stays embedded in him while I quickly straddle him to stop him from moving. I bear my weight on his torso as I continue to sew him up, and his hands grab the back of my thighs to hold

on. He hisses through his teeth and squeezes me so tight that I'm sure I'll bruise.

"I'm sorry," I whisper and focus on my next stitch.

I don't know how tight these need to be or how deep I should go. The best I can do is make sure they're not so close that the skin puckers in between each one.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Sever closes his eyes and groans under his breath.

He grips my thighs so hard that I can feel his fingertips bruising me... marking me. I don't stop him. If this is what he needs to get through this, I can take it. Other than that, all I can do to help him is focus on the task in front of me.

Once I get to the final few stitches, he begins to hyperventilate, and my heart stutters.

"Breathe with me, Sev. Just breathe, I'm almost done. We can get through this together."

I breathe an exaggerated inhale and exhale slowly, waiting for him to catch up with me. I don't know if this is the right technique, but hopefully getting him to focus on anything else will help. On his exhale, I pierce his skin again. He bucks lightly underneath me and digs his fingers into my ass cheeks. I ignore the sudden jolt that shoots up my spine like lightning.

Now is so not the time.

He breathes with me, and I go with the rise and fall of his chest to finish up. When it looks like there's just one final piece left, I slow my breaths even further.

"One more for me, Sev. You can do this."

"One more for my *vipera*." He grins softly, making my core flutter, and I quickly make the last stitch.

"Porca mis—son of a—"

He groans and bucks up underneath me. I can feel his half-hard cock straining behind his slacks. My eyes bulge out, but he's too racked by his pain to notice, and there's no way he's in charge of his body right now. What's underneath me is *massive*, though, and a confusing thrill rushes through me.

Sweat prickles his brow, and his skin has taken on an ashen color. I don't know how much blood he lost, but I'm hoping these stitches will hold him together. His lips are clamped closed, and he breathes heavily underneath me as I tie the thread off and snip it. When I'm finished, I set the spool and

scissors aside. I turn back to find him breathing much more normally, but he's staring at me with a mixture of gratefulness, awe, and...something else.

Desire.

Cazzo.

My nipples perk against my T-shirt, and for the first time, I really register the position we're in. I'm still straddling him, and my hands now rest on his chiseled torso. I'm just in a simple long-sleeved nightshirt, no bra, and all that's underneath is a flimsy—totally soaked—thong.

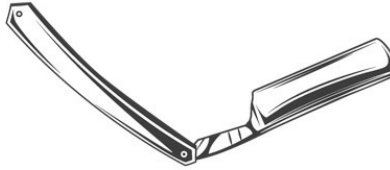
I'm not small, but Sever's large hands nearly span the width of my thighs, and his fingers brush against my thong's elastic band. The heat in his eyes goes from a campfire to an inferno in an instant. The hardness underneath me turns to stone. Almost as if it has a mind of its own, his hand drifts up from my thigh to squeeze the back of my neck. I lean into him and let him guide me closer.

"Sev..." His name sounds like a desperate plea. My eyes drop to his lips, and I lick mine.

We balance on the edge of temptation, until he growls, "Fuck it."

Scene 17

FIRST KISS, LAST CHANCE



Talia

Tension explodes between us as our lips collide. Sev's are like pillows against mine, promising solace and safety in him. At first, his fingers dig into my nape, and his other hand grips my hip to the point of pain, as if he's afraid I'll disappear. But leaving his arms is the last thing I want to do. As I melt into him, he lets up on the pressure. I'm tempted to fight him just to get it back, but the part of me that's controlling my body is still too stunned that this is even happening. And with *him*.

From the moment he caught me in the bakery, I've been dying to know how Sev tastes, but I've never kissed anyone before. Of all the things my body has had to sacrifice, I've never given that piece of me. With Sev, though, he isn't *taking* anything from me. It feels like I'm getting something back. I don't know what that is yet, and I'm too caught up in this moment to care right now.

That's why I let him in. Sev moans like he's been waiting for me to make this move for an eternity rather than a few seconds. Our tongues meet with long strokes, and his teeth nip my bottom lip, making me moan. His kiss is sweet, flavored from the Amaretto. He shifts to grab both of my hips and pull me closer.

"I want you, *vipera*. All of you." His hard length grinds into my core, and I squeeze my thighs around him to roll my hips on him. "Give into me, Tallie."

Tallie...

My eyes snap open, but his are still closed. He's serene, relaxed, and has

no idea that he just flipped a switch in me. As much as my body wants to fall into his peace, soak up the security his strong arms promise, my mind remembers. And it has never let me rest.

I shove away from him and stumble off the bed.

“Tallie!” Sev tries to catch me, but I’m able to right myself before I fall. Once I’m standing, I quickly straighten my T-shirt over my thighs and my sleeves down my forearms to cover myself.

“Tallie? What’s—”

“That’s not my name!” I shout and shake my head. “I mean...it is. But...”

“Okay...so you want me to call you Talia?”

“No...” I groan at how crazy I sound. “Tallie is fine, I just...”

I drift off as that realization registers. When I adopted my *nonni*’s last name, they encouraged me to pick my first name as a way to get some control back after I’d lost everything else. Ever since then, they’ve been the only ones to call me their nickname to my face and lived to tell the tale, so to speak. And yet, I’ve never once corrected Sever.

Just now, though, it was the fact that he wasn’t calling me by my *old* name that got to me, and I don’t know why. “Chiara” has never felt right after I escaped, and in this moment, it still doesn’t feel right. He’s never even known me by that name, either. So, what the hell am I doing?

“What just happened?” Sever’s words grate out with the same question I have. I shake my head again because I don’t fucking know.

He sits up and winces before lightly placing his hand over the wound on his chest.

His wound...the one I just helped him patch. The stitching is some of the best work I’ve ever done, but the skin is a puckered and angry red. Gio will get antibiotics tomorrow, and as long as Sev didn’t lose too much blood, he’ll likely be just fine. His life was in my hands, and I helped save it.

Why?

“I don’t know, Sever,” I mumble and back away.

“Sever?” His head tilts to the side. “And how do you know *that* name?”

I frown. “Uh, because it’s your name?”

“No...I told you my name was Sev. But you called me that last ni—” I narrow my eyes at him as he clears his throat. “I mean, you called me that just now. How did you come up with Sever?”

I rack my brain for when he could’ve told me, but he’s right. He never did. I got his other nickname from a phone call that I wasn’t supposed to

hear.

Merda.

“Lucky guess, I suppose.” I want to focus on what we’re talking about. It could screw me over if I say the wrong thing, but my mind is still hooked on what just happened between us.

He narrows his eyes. “Really lucky fucking guess. You should play the lottery.”

“Yeah...maybe I should...”

I search around the room for something to clean. Everything is in order, though, except for the mess that’s surrounding Sever—Sev—and there’s no way I want to go close enough to tidy that.

A song builds in my mind, but I push it away. My feet start to walk in a circle, physical proof of the thoughts swirling in my mind.

“Talk to me, *dolcezza*.”

His voice is calm and forgiving, and the truth begs to spill from my lips. I turn to face him, but the words dry up as soon as I try to release them. The confusion marring his handsome face matches the emotion that aches inside my chest. I don’t know how to explain what’s going on even to myself, and I certainly can’t with him.

Everything I just did is at odds with all that I’ve worked so hard for my entire life. I’ve spent countless hours trying to avenge that little girl. For me to go and forget everything she went through for even a moment to do something like this...

A low hum builds in my chest, and I shove my hands in my hair.

“Tallie?”

The tune gets louder in my head, but the words only echo around and hide behind my lips. I skip the notes for the names I don’t need anymore, but I emphasize the last one in my head, so I don’t forget. I can never forget.

“That song...what is it? You keep skipping in and out—”

Fuck.

I thought it was all in my head, but apparently he can hear what I hear this time.

“It’s n-nothing,” I stutter. “You should...you should go.”

He jolts back as if I’ve slapped him. “You’re going to kick me out?”

Guilt makes me wince, but I nod sharply. “You’re feeling better now, right? Did you ride your motorcycle here? I think a cab would be better. I’ll call for one to take you back to the barbershop.”

“Don’t bother. I can make my own way.”

He pushes from the bed to stand, but he narrows his eyes on his way up.

“Wait, how did you—”

Suddenly, his face slackens, his eyes roll back, and he collapses onto the bed.

“*Merda!*” I jump onto the bed and cup his cheek. “Sever? Are you okay?”

No response. I’m officially out of my depth. I can sew his skin as if it’s fabric, but what do I do when he passes out? Am I supposed to wake him up? Do I leave him to come to on his own? Did he faint from blood loss or pain? And does that change how I’m supposed to react?

Worry takes over the song in my head as I brainstorm how to fix him. I scan him for any hint to tell me what he needs right now, but I get sidetracked along the way.

His intense eyes are closed, so I don’t feel like he can see through me anymore. The full, sensual lips I just kissed are perfectly parted. My hand on his cheek lifts to hover over his warm skin—

I should stop here. Get up and clean the bloody mess around us.

But my hand drifts down...

The hard and chiseled muscles in his chest are soft now, and his inhaled and exhaled gently rise and fall at a steady cadence. Two gorgeous tattoos line his ribs. He obviously got it a while ago, since the dark green stems and the vines that wrap around them are faded. When I see the flower at the top—a black, closed bulb—I gasp.

It’s a black tulip. A Queen of Night tattoo.

I clap my hand over my mouth to keep from saying anything, but my questions sprint through my mind. I trace the dark purple petals before I can stop myself.

Why does he have a black tulip tattoo? What does it mean to him...when it means everything to me?

A broad hand wraps around my wrist, and I’m instantly thankful my T-shirt has long sleeves. Sev pulls my hand to his chest and places it over his heart.

“Wh-why the tulip?”

He studies me, and I can’t tell whether he sees right through me or if he’s about to let me see through him.

“There was a girl once. I let her down. She loved black tulips.”

“What happened to her?” My voice is so hoarse I can barely hear myself.

I don't know why I ask. I don't care what he says, and I don't care about him. I can't. Once my list is over, so is my life. I've already made peace with the fact that there's no way I survive this vendetta. A relationship with anyone, especially Sev, is a recipe for disaster, a distraction, and full of heartbreak.

"She died. I survived, but I've never lived."

"I...I know what you mean."

All I've done my entire life is survive. I survived my father making deals with the devil, even when the devil came to collect his due. I survived those nights in that basement and my perilous escape. I've survived the shame that's plagued me with voices and nightmares.

Everyone talks about survivors after trauma. But not all survivors *live*. How do we do that in a world that betrayed us? After we escaped our torment, we were merely given a pat on the back, a "survivor" label on our chest, and sent on our way.

I've always struggled with that, and instead of unpacking my trauma, I've spent my days hell-bent on revenge. But could there be more than that for me?

He gazes up at me, his face inscrutable. I don't know how to manage the emotions aching and fluttering in my chest all at the same time. The urge to lean over and kiss him again is strong, but I can't. He's still too much of an unknown, too dangerous.

Like last night, why did he kill Percy? Was it really *for* me? Or does he have some other agenda? Does he just get his rocks off killing people? I can't take not knowing, but I'm not sure how much longer I can take not kissing him either.

His eyes flicker over my face, studying me like a book before boring into my soul. One hand lifts up and pushes back a curl. They've spilled out of the braided crown that I knotted them up in. His fingertips caress my skin, down my cheek, and I barely resist leaning into his palm. He continues to trail down my jawline until he traces my jawline and its uneven ridges.

His eyes narrow.

Oh, shit.

As soon as I got home tonight, I washed off my caked-on makeup. He's seeing the scars of my past, and I'm so not fucking ready for that. I'm terrified of his questions, terrified of what could happen if he finds out. My mind begs me to flee.

But instead, I freeze.

He sits up again and turns my chin to inspect my scars.

And I *let* him.

A different type of pained look etches into his features, so unlike the one that filled his face just moments ago while I was stitching him. As his gaze travels down my neck, concern widens his eyes, and his nostrils flare.

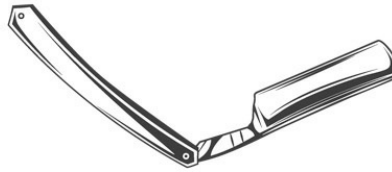
He pushes my curls over my shoulder, but he thankfully doesn't insist on going past my shirt's neckline. I know what he sees. I've suffered from seeing my reflection every day for the past fifteen years. The jagged red edges. The pits of purple and pink in various shades that only reveal the surface of how deep my wounds go.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows roughly, as the rest of him is deadly still. His gaze locks with mine, and I recognize the same fury that I've seen in my own. His whisper is terrifyingly calm, heavy with promise, and latent with threat.

"Who did this to you?"

Scene 13

TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT



Sever

Talia stills underneath my fingertips. When she'd first realized I was touching her scars, she was obviously nervous how I'd react. Then she leaned in and submitted to my touch in a humbling display of trust.

And I fucked up.

I couldn't hide my rage, and as soon as I growled the question, she'd snapped out of whatever hypnosis I'd had her under.

"Who says it was a 'who?'" Her eyes narrow. "Besides, I could ask you the same question."

She places her hand on my chest, and my cock jolts. I've been half-hard for her ever since she straddled me earlier. But when she pushes against me, pain radiates from the stab wound I'd somehow forgotten about.

A vision of the judge's crazed expression flashes across my mind, and I grimace.

"It's better if you don't know."

Her lips part in disbelief before she snorts. "If you don't tell me how you got your scars, I'm not telling you how I got mine."

The world tilts as I'm hit with *déjà vu*. Fuck, the blood loss first made me pass out, and now I'm stumbling through a mental fog too.

She studies my face for a second longer. I don't know what she's looking for, but after a moment she sighs, and drops her hand from my chest. Cool air replaces her touch, and I'm nearly overcome with the urge to wrap her around me so I can roll her over and sink into her warmth.

Resorting to sex is what I would do with a woman from my world.

They've proven time and again that they'd stab their loved ones in the back just to gain money and status, so I've never wanted to "talk things out" when things got hard, and neither have they. I've always been as jaded as they come, but Tallie feels even more disillusioned by life than I am.

Whatever we have between us feels different, though. *She* feels different, and she makes me want to be different, too. So once again, I'm at an impasse, waiting for her to come to me.

Only she doesn't this time.

She leaves the bed, wringing her hands, and quietly talking to herself. Finally, she leaves her inner conversation and speaks to me.

"You're right. You just passed out from standing up too fast. There's no way you can get back to the—wherever it is that you live, in one piece."

I don't tell her that it's right down the street. Something feels odd about her phrasing, but after my whirlwind of a night, I can't figure it out, so I brush the thought aside.

"You can stay here." She nods toward the double-sized bed that's too small in width and height for me to lay on.

My brow raises. *This is unexpected.*

"You want to sleep next to me?"

She snorts. "No. I'll go stay with my *no...nni...*" She drifts off before talking to herself again. "*Merda*, I don't want to wake them. They have a hard enough time getting to sleep with Gio's sleep apnea..."

"You could always stay here. In *your* bed." I pat it for emphasis.

She nibbles her plump bottom lip, and my cock jolts again.

This woman might give me death by blue balls. I barely have enough blood left without my cock throbbing for it.

She finally shakes her head. "No...I'll sleep on the floor—"

"*Assolutamente no*, you're not sleeping on the floor." I groan at her stubbornness and stand up more carefully this time so I don't pass out.

I take a careful step, grabbing onto the bedside table for support. Pain shoots up my leg like an electric shock, but I make it through with just a grimace. If I didn't live with this shit every day for the past fifteen years, I'd think my ankle was broken from where my uncle kicked it. But no, I'm sure he only aggravated the old injury. What I wouldn't give to have my cane right now, though.

"What're you doing?! Sit back down!" She rushes forward and pushes me back onto the bed with her hands splayed over my abs.

“You’re not sleeping on the fucking floor, *vipera*. I’ll be fine there.”

“No, you’re injured—”

“So? This is your home. You doctored me up. I’m not letting you sleep on the damn floor.”

“Sev—”

“No, Talia. End of discussion.”

Her eyes flare, and her cheeks pinken as she shivers.

Like that, do you?

Does my sweet little viper like to be told what to do? I store that delicious morsel of knowledge away for later and attempt to stand again, but her hands stay firmly in place, despite my warning. Okay, so maybe she likes being told what to do, but only because the stubborn woman will still do as she pleases.

“I have an idea.” She leaves me to grab various blankets and fabrics from around the room.

“What’re you doing?”

She doesn’t answer as she tosses the mountain of soft items onto the bed and makes a line down the center. When she’s finished, she props her hands on her hips and smiles at her handy work.

“There.”

I frown at the makeshift wall until it finally registers. A huff of laughter rumbles through my chest.

“Are you so afraid of kissing me again, *dolcezza*?”

She scowls at me and crosses her arms. “These are my conditions. Take it or leave it.”

“If you think I’m passing up sleeping beside you, you’re out of your mind.”

“*Madonna mia*.” She swats the air in frustration and roams around the room again, “Just keep your hands to yourself, *hai capito*? You can sleep on the side you’re already on. Oh, there’s some extra-strength pain meds in the bedside table drawer. Take them, and I’ll be right back.”

I follow her instructions and take a swig of her water bottle as she grabs a pair of scissors and the fabric that Gio brought her. Her narrowed gaze darts from the fabric to my chest and back again. After a moment of studying me, she cuts off a long strip of fabric and brings the bundle to me.

“Stay still.”

I do as she says. I’ve spooked her too many times already to disobey her now. She wraps the fabric into a ball, then signals for me to lift my arm.

“I don’t have gauze, but this should help protect the wound until we get some.” She gingerly unrolls the ball of fabric around my shoulder, underneath my arm, and over the stitching. While she works, I barely breathe, afraid that she’ll stop touching me if I move. She finishes all too soon and begins to bunch up the down comforter I’m on top of. For the first time, I realize blood has soaked into it. My stomach churns, and shame heats my cheeks.

“Fuck, I’m sorry.” I shift and lift myself off the bed, careful not to put weight on my injured foot again as she gathers the rest.

“Sorry about what?”

“I got blood everywhere.”

She pauses and looks up at me with a bewildered expression.

“You nearly bled out, Sev. Who the hell cares about a fucking comforter?”

She’s so matter-of-fact with her explanation, as if I was crazy to worry. An ache appears behind my sternum out of nowhere, and I rub it. After she trashes the comforter, her eyes lock on my fingers kneading my chest.

“Are you okay? Do you hurt there, too?”

“What?” I glance down and drop my hand immediately. “No. I’m fine.”

She frowns like she doesn’t believe me, but eventually she continues to make the bed.

“Settle in, and I’ll put on a new comforter. It gets chilly in here at night.”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am,” I chuckle. She only rolls her eyes, but I catch her shy smile.

I carefully remove my socks, shoes, and jeans before getting under her sheets. Once I’m comfortable, I shift my arm on my uninjured side to stretch behind me so I can rest my head on my palm and watch her better. She glances at me as she drapes the comforter over the bed, then quickly looks away. Satisfaction warms my chest, but I don’t show it.

As she continues, I mentally take note of her nightly routine. When she turns off the lights, the orange city lights filter through the windows, outlining her shadow before she tucks herself under the thick comforter. The pillow wall between us is effective at hiding her from me, and I silently curse it. Granted, it’s probably for the best.

Ever since I was young, I’ve had nightmares that are impossible to wake from peacefully. Sleepovers were a blast for my prankster cousins...until I woke up in a violent fit and broke one’s nose.

Although it's been years since I've reacted that way, I still wince at the thought. Lately, my dreams have been far from nightmares, with Tallie in the starring role, but I'd willingly take another knife to my chest rather than accidentally hurt her.

"Hey, Tallie? I, um, sometimes have vivid dreams. So, if I have one... don't wake me, alright?"

She's quiet for a moment before whispering, "I have bad dreams, too."

Fuck, if her nightmares are anything like mine, I'll tear the world apart to destroy anyone who caused them. I'd ask her, but I can't explain my own, so I leave it be for now. Instead, I sink into her bed and soak in her floral-sugary scent.

"Goodnight, Sev."

"Night, Tallie."

With my injury, my feet dangling off the end of the bed, and my wide body on the small bed, it takes a while to figure out a comfortable position. Tallie, however, is out in no time, and her breaths are even on the other side of her pillow wall. Meanwhile, my mind won't shut up.

I'm not sure why I came here. All I know is that I somehow made it to the North End on my motorcycle, parked in an alley across the street so I didn't lead Claudio straight to the Amorettis, and stumbled my way to the bakery.

I could pretend that the reason I stopped at Sweet Tallie's was due to blood loss screwing with my mind. I could pretend that it was only because it's a shorter distance from Beacon Hill. I could pretend that it's because I know Raze will be at the barbershop waiting for me, and I'd sooner punch my best friend in the face than talk to him right now.

But truthfully, it was none of those things. If I'm honest with myself, it was because I *trust* her.

Considering the betrayal that litters my past, it's hard to believe that I'd trust anyone, let alone a near stranger. And yet, it has to be true. There's no reason my addled mind would come here if I didn't. But it seems that trust doesn't go both ways. I was out of it, but I do remember her split second of hesitation when her *nonni* asked for her help.

She hesitated like that just yesterday, when Percy's life was in her hands. Was that why she second-guessed saving me? Did she weigh the pros and cons of me dying, just like she did with that asshole that hurt her? I don't know what her reasoning is or if my hazy memory is making all this up. The way she acted afterward has me leaning toward the latter, but if she

entertained the thought of letting me die, I need to find out why.

A heavy sigh leaves my chest, and I grimace as my skin pulls my stitches. Now, that was a stroke of luck. I hadn't considered that she might be able to stitch me up. All I'd been thinking about was seeing her. Holding her.

And that kiss...*merda*. She moaned just like she did during her shower last night. What I wouldn't give to have her melt in my arms the same way she did then. So far the only place I've been able to give her that pleasure is in my dreams.

With that in mind, I finally shut my eyes and hope it'll be another sweet dream. If sleep is the only place I can see her unfurl for me, then I'll take it. For now.

It's a promise to myself. A silent promise to her.

You're mine, sweet Tallie.

But sleep doesn't come. Instead, dark memories from long ago ravage my mind and I stay half-awake, tossing and turning as my mind refuses to give me peace. I'm on the edge of a nightmare when whimpers shock me fully awake.

I sit up abruptly and hiss at the sharp tug at my chest.

Cazzo, my nightmares are getting more realistic by the day, it seems. I shake my head and go to lay back down when I hear it again. That soft, fearful, *pained* whimper.

I got stabbed tonight, and yet what I felt then is nothing compared to Tallie's helpless, anguished cries. The pillows are tossed to the side, and she's safe in my arms before I can stop myself.

"It's okay, *dolcezza*, I've got you," I whisper low, hoping it won't wake her. As much as I wish I could snap her out of whatever nightmare that's plaguing her, I know firsthand that the terrifying limbo between dream and reality is the worst place to get jolted awake from. Still, I wrap my arms around her and pull her close, ignoring the fire in my upper chest.

She shocks the hell out of me when her body relaxes into mine. Her warmth and acceptance make my cock twitch, but I will it to calm the fuck down. In no time, her breaths are deep and calm again, and pride fills my chest. She's fine, at peace, even.

But I don't want to leave her. If she has another nightmare, I want to be here.

This time, sleep comes easier for me than it ever has. Dreams filter through, but they're different this time, as if they're tainted by my

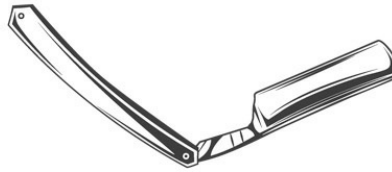
nightmares. Fear tinges my desire. In them, I'm afraid she'll vanish again, just like she did in the dressing room yesterday. And I don't just want her this time, I *need* her.

The thought scares me, but I can't stop the inevitable as I barrel into sleep and succumb to the darkness. Heat, need, and the fear of losing her war within me, hijacking my body and mind as my dream takes hold. Dream Tallie doesn't want me yet, but I can't let her leave me again. She's the only woman I've ever trusted, and she needs to know she's mine.

I give into my urges in the dream. My body acts on its own, forcing me to take what I need, like manna to a starving man. Instinct refuses to listen to reason, even as my guilty conscience screams at me to let her go.

Scene 19

A DREAM ITSELF...



Talia

I dream of death.

Of the relief that comes with it, of the beautiful retribution that fills my veins and heals my soul. It's a warm blanket around me, filling my lungs with the scent of sandalwood and crisp aftershave. It promises safety, security, and revenge. Justice will take care of me. I snuggle toward the feeling, letting it embrace me like a warm hug.

Until it turns on me.

The security I felt goes rigid, stifling me and caging me in. The warm heat at my back is hot like a fever, and I try to squirm away, but it constricts around me like strong arms. I've had dreams like this before, confusing ones that make me feel fucked up because I got off on the thought of punishing my enemies. But this one feels different, more *real*. I don't know if I want to wake up or give in.

Logic tries to override my instincts, insisting this dream has devolved into a nightmare and I need to snap out of it. Despite the fact that I desperately want to give in to the strength protecting me, I try to fight and claw back.

"No," the sexy growl rumbles against my neck. "Mine."

Sever.

My mind might be screaming for me to wake up, but I melt into his embrace on instinct.

He sighs behind me, and his arms loosen their grip. My inhaled and exhaled breaths match his, lulling me further into submission even as his large hands begin to roam up and down my body.

What is he doing?

“Sev?” I whisper, but all I get back is a sleepy grunt.

Wait...this isn't a dream.

I still as his hand slides over my breasts to lightly squeeze my throat. The other trails down my soft belly to cup my pussy.

Cazzo, this is most definitely *not* a dream. This is very, very real, and this man is either about to make me come or kill me.

Desire floods from my core.

And I want to sate it.

Sev's stiff cock pushes against my ass, and I tilt my hips back to return the pressure. His hand tightens on my throat while the other ventures farther between my thighs. My T-shirt shifts up with our movements, but I don't tug it back down, letting his fingers rest over my panties. Only a thin scrap of cotton separates my clit from the pleasure his dream promises us.

That last thought hits me.

Oh, god, is this wrong?

He's asleep, and I'm letting him rub up and down my body. Granted, he told me not to wake him...but would he think I was taking advantage of him if I let this go any further?

Uncertainty wars with desire. Mixed with both is a strange sense of freedom. If he stays asleep, no one can witness or judge me for savoring this.

There's always been a sense of shame deep down whenever I even think about enjoying anything sexual. Making myself come to the thought of Sever last night was the first time it didn't feel *wrong*. This doesn't feel wrong either, even though I know it should.

If I just let him have his way with me, I'm not taking advantage of him, right?

Fuck. It's a fine line...isn't it? I've craved him for days, so maybe that's tainting my good sense. But that kiss earlier broke my will. His gentleness and the way he followed my lead took all the resistance I had left, and now it's come to this.

Should I wake him up?

He said not to...

Yes, but...

“Sever?” I whisper.

“Talia,” he moans before his lips brush soft kisses along my neck. “*Mia bella vipera.*”

“A-are you awake?”

He moans something unintelligible in response, confirming my suspicion and further making me question my morals. While he might not be awake, his hands have a mind of their own. The one that ventured between my legs pulls my panties aside and swipes through my arousal.

Oh shit.

This is wrong, but God, it feels so right.

I should stop him.

“Sev, wake up—”

The hand on my neck swiftly moves up to my mouth and covers it. I try to open my lips, but his palm thoroughly seals them. I could scream. I could even bite him and wake him up, consequences be damned.

But when sex has always come with so much humiliation, there’s something...satisfying receiving it like this. My choice was taken from me years ago, but my instincts are telling me that I’m safe now. This *is* my choice, and it feels like the perfect scenario to let go.

No one has to know if I revel in the feelings he gives me. And if it goes too far, I’ll fight back, and he’ll stop, whether he’s asleep or not. He proved that to me with how enraged he was at the way Percy touched me without my permission. Sev defended me to Percy’s last breath, brutally and without hesitation. A man who does that would never harm a woman.

And as to whether I’m harming Sev? Well, if I don’t initiate anything on my own, then I’m not taking advantage of him, right?

Hell, I don’t know, but I stop trying to figure it out when he thrusts against my closed thighs.

I let him in.

His finger swirls around my opening before diving in, and I soften against him. My hips grind against his steel-hard shaft, barely restrained by his boxer briefs. I pretend it’s his cock as his fingers pump in and out of my channel, curving inside me. A light moan hums from my lips against his hand.

Sever groans back in response. “*Sei mia.*”

Mine.

Even asleep, he wields the word like a vow. Sheer bliss fills my chest. When his finger slowly withdraws from me, I whimper at the loss. He’s only gone for an instant, just long enough to shift behind me. His hand rests on my hip again, pushing my T-shirt up further, and he holds me close as his hot, naked tip prods the backs of my closed thighs again.

My eyes widen, and I hesitate, trying to decide if this is too much or just right.

“Fammi entrare, dolcezza,” he whispers before biting my earlobe.

Open for me...

I shiver in anticipation and don't think as I lift my thigh to let him squeeze between my legs. His mumble of approval makes me preen.

What is wrong with me?

I should stop this now, it's too much.

But if he makes me come this way, there will be only ecstasy. My desperate need to let my body experience this without shame overrides my morals.

His fingers dip underneath my panties again and inside my core. I'm soaked, and he gathers my arousal to coat his cock. He slides through my wet thighs and along my center. I barely resist tilting my hips so he can push inside.

“You...want me...” he murmurs with gentle thrusts through my arousal.

I really fucking do.

But I shouldn't want him, and I definitely shouldn't like this...right?

In response, my hips meet his thrusts with the slightest of movements. With his massive size, I'm not sure he could enter me unless I open my legs wider. His fingers move from my entrance to massage my clit. I moan loudly against his hand, and his fingers work harder.

My arousal has made us a slippery mess, so I squeeze my thighs together to tighten my grip around his cock.

“Fuck, Tallie,” his whispered awe sends a thrill of pride down my spine.

I sink my nails into his forearm and swivel my hips to increase his pressure on my clit. My moans come in pants.

“Sever.” His name tastes delicious on my tongue.

My eyes snap open, and I lick my lips. He's not covering my mouth anymore.

Now's my chance to flee. If I did scream, Tony would hear me and come running. He's always been a light sleeper. Even if he doesn't, if Sever refused to let me go, I could just jam my finger into the wound I stitched up.

But I don't want to do any of those things.

An exhale of surrender deflates my chest. I release the shame that's plagued me my whole life, and I give in to what I want. What I *need*.

My hand drifts over my pussy, where his cock and fingers have teased me

despite the doubts in my head. I push my palm against his fingers to add pressure, and I press my fingers over the head of his cock to add sensation for him. The position keeps him tantalizingly close to nearly breaching my core. When his tip just barely slips inside me and pulls out, my pulse goes haywire, and we both moan.

“Tallie?”

The world stops, until he shifts his huge body to envelop me further into his embrace, almost like the cage from my dream is back. I don't want to run away this time. His lips brush my ear, and his warm breath caresses my neck.

“I'm awake now, *vipera*.”

His cock thrusts slowly between my thighs again, with plenty of time to stop him, as if to say, “Your move.”

I hold my breath and rock my hips back and forth.

That's all we need to ignite.

His growl rumbles from his chest and into my back, vibrating through every cell in my body. He leaves my clit to wrap his hand around my inner thigh and lift it to rest on his leg. The new position allows even more room for his long cock to glide along my entrance and hit my clit. He doesn't breach my opening this time, and I'm grateful. As much as I want him to turn me over and have his way with me, I'm not ready for it. He seems to sense that too, and he doesn't attempt more.

My hand wraps around his cock to nestle him between my core and my palm again. It acts as a sheath when he begins to thrust again. Once we find our rhythm, his moves are fast and drag against my sensitive bundle of nerves with every stroke.

The hand he'd used to cover my mouth plucks my nipples over my T-shirt. I moan his name as he rolls a diamond peak between his fingertips.

“*Cavolo, sei perfetta, dolcezza. Perfetta per me.*”

Fuck, you're perfect, sweetheart. Perfect for me.

I squeeze my eyes tight.

I'm nowhere near perfect, and I'm definitely not perfect for Sever.

Swallowing back the truth, I let my body take over. His fingers knead and mold my breasts, rippling sensation down to my clit. My muscles tighten as my orgasm steadily builds. It makes me lose control, and my fingers loosen their grip on his cock. He grabs my hand and moves it to cup the back of his head instead. I latch onto his hair, threading my fingers through it, and he returns to teasing my clit.

Within a few strokes, we're both hitting our peak. A moan vibrates behind my lips, waiting to explode with me. I meet his strokes and bring my leg back down to tighten my thighs around his cock as his thrusts grow wild. His fingers pinch my nipple hard, and he bites the sensitive scars to the point of pain. Pleasure fills every corner of my being.

I combust.

The roller coaster I was riding crashes down, and my body racks with wave after wave of pleasure. His teeth release, and he moans against my tender neck.

"Cazzo, Tallie...goddamn."

He thrusts one last time between my thighs, and jets of warmth coat my pussy and his palm as he pulses behind me. A hot trail of his cum drips down my thigh, and he scoops it up to pool with the rest of his cum in his palm.

My body rests against his as he murmurs against my ear.

"Do you always melt when you come? Or is it only with me?"

"Only with you," I admit with a blissful smile.

He groans as his soft, sated cock slips out from between my thighs.

Is he leaving already?

Panic shocks through me, but it disappears as his fingers spread me again. I'm so sensitive that I squirm under his touch, but he massages my breast with his other hand and rumbles against my neck.

"Shh, sarò gentile, dolcezza. I'll be gentle."

I relax instantly, trusting him, and he makes good on his promise as he gingerly swirls his fingers through my core and brushes his palm over my entrance. It takes a few strokes for me to realize he's drenching my pussy with his cum, marking me, claiming me with the evidence of the bliss *I* gave him. Pride tingles underneath my skin, and I can't stop myself from wiggling my hips to help him.

"You're mine, dolcezza." He slips a cum-soaked finger into my pussy, waits for me to adjust, and then slowly adds another.

I whimper at how thick his fingers feel, but I hold my breath as he continues, *"You'll learn that soon enough. Tonight was only the beginning."*

His words fall between a threat and a promise, but his fingers begin to move, and any objections I might have had drift away.

My body tenses right back up for release, as if I'd never come down. His palm massages my overly sensitized clit, and his fingers flutter inside my channel.

“Sever.”

He licks up the side of my scar and nips my jaw. “I’m going to fuck my cum into you one day. You’ll love my cock then, like you love my fingers right now. You might pretend to hate me, but you want me as badly as I want you.”

I shake my head, and his other hand suddenly moves from my breast to turn my chin to face him. His eyes are intense as he meets my gaze.

“Say it, *vipera*. Say you want me as badly as I want you.”

I bite my lip, but it’s hard to remember why this is a bad idea with his fingers stroking against my inner muscles.

My body shivers, ready to come again. I cry out and give in.

“I want you...I want you as badly as you want me.”

“Good girl.” He smiles. “Now come for me, *vipera*.”

His fingers barely twitch again, and I ease into ecstasy again. The orgasm is softer, gentler this time, but my muscles tense and release, tense and release, over and over again until I can’t tell if this is one long, satisfying orgasm or several small ones one after the other. When my muscles finally stop contracting around him, his lips caress my cheek and down my scar.

“Beautiful. No washing off. I’m inside you now, and I want to stay that way.”

He wraps me in his arms before rolling over to lie on his back. The move makes him grunt, reminding me that he’s injured. I lay against his chest, careful not to hurt him, and rest my hand next to the wound I tended to earlier. Thankfully my stitching has held, and it seems the pain medicine is working given everything that just happened.

What if I hadn’t stitched him up? Could he have bled out?

Anxiety runs cold under my veins at the thought, and I squeeze his waist. He grabs my thigh and lifts my leg to rest against him, just under his semi-hard cock. When I try to shift, he lets me, but his hand stays wrapped around my thigh.

“There’s no more running after tonight, Tallie. Whatever we’re afraid of, we’ll face it together.”

Whatever we’re afraid of...

I’ve always wanted to be the one that others were afraid of. I was scared for so long as a child that I worked to cut the weakness from me as an adult. But ever since I met Sever, it’s become an undercurrent in every thought.

What if I get caught? What if I’m found out? What if I never get to finish

my list?

One of these days, Sever will find out about the real me. I used to relish in the idea that everyone would finally know who I am, but now I'm not so sure. The satisfaction on his face when he killed Percy, for *me*, makes me wonder if he'd embrace me for who I am. But would he do it again if he knew who I was? If I trust Sever with my secrets, will he use them against me, or will he become another weapon I can use? Or will he be something else all together?

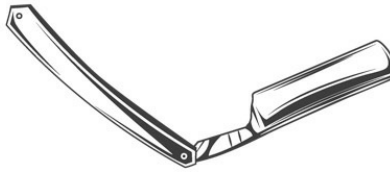
I have time to find out. There are still more names on my list that I can recon first. The capo is still up in the air right now, but I can at least nail down the schedules of the rest. Once I establish their routine, hopefully I can attack before I get caught—

Panic zings through my skull like a migraine at the fear that's tormented me for weeks. My familiar little tune drifts through my mind, and I recount all that I have left, trying not to dwell on the obstacles ahead of me.

Butler. Maids. Gardener. Driver. Capo? Priest. Judge. Godmother. Godfather... The boy?

Scene 20

...IS BUT A SHADOW



Sever

A lullaby hums in my mind, gently waking me from my sleep. Whiffs of earthy flowers and sugar make my mouth water. I stretch, only to have searing pain shoot up my leg and down from my chest.

“Porca miseria. Holy shit.”

The stabbing aches bring all my memories to the forefront of my mind. All of them. The bad. The good. The carnal.

My uncle setting me up with his mind games to pit me against my enemy and his latest minion.

Tallie tending to my wounds.

Tallie coming in my arms.

My cock perks up at the last one. I reach out to bring her back to me, but my hand only comes up with cool sheets. My eyes flicker open, and I sit up to look around. Fire radiates from my upper chest again.

“Ah, fuck me.” I press underneath my clavicle where that judge took his shot. He never would’ve even gotten close if my cousins hadn’t been holding me back.

As if on cue, a phone vibrates nearby. If it’s mine, I have no doubt it’s been going off incessantly. My messages are probably filled with concern and apologies from four different people. Three I may accept. One I’ll never believe again.

I push the thought aside and sit up more gingerly this time. On the bedside table is a stack of clothes, perfectly folded. I sift through them to find a large, long-sleeved black T-shirt, much like the one Tallie wore last night.

The rest of the layers are my pants, boxer briefs, and socks, while my shoes are lined up to fit in between the legs of the table. I don't know where my jacket and shirt are, but considering the neat display beside me, I'm sure Tallie has put them somewhere tidy.

She could've left all my clothes strewn on the floor for me to gather up myself. I'm not shocked that she picked them up or that she folded them. It's the fact that she cleared off the precisely organized surface to set them closer for me.

Warmth fills my chest. I swallow back the inexplicable lump in my throat as I tug the clothes on. I'm careful to avoid aggravating my injuries, and I leave the worst—my socks and shoes—for last.

From the outside, the only difference between my legs is the scar on my thigh and my slightly larger right ankle. The enlarged joint forces my foot to curve inward. When I focus on flattening my foot as I walk, however, the awkward angle and the ache it causes are hardly noticeable in my gait.

But that's how pain is. Invisible. It comes and it goes, some days are worse than others. Today will be on the "worse" side thanks to my uncle, but I'll get through it. I always do.

The blood loss must've gotten the better of me while I slept, because at some point, Tallie used her makeshift gauze to wrap my foot. If I'd been awake, it might have hurt enough to make me pass out, so I'm thankful that she did it when I was unconscious. The wrap helped, but my ankle is still the size of a softball, and the swelling has spread to my foot and upper shin. If I didn't already have mods on my bike, it'd make riding home impossible. I'm sure Claudio hoped I wouldn't make it back to the North End in one piece. Good thing the *stronzo* has always underestimated me.

I ease my foot into my boot and tie it with a grimace. The shoe's high ankle and its added compression will help, but my leg will still hurt like a bitch. Before I get up, I look around the room for any sign of where Tallie's gone.

It's my sense of smell that gives me my first clue. Warm, rich, sugary, and freshly baked pastries.

The nostalgic scent reminds me of my *nonna*. It wafts up from the floor below, tempting me. Once I'm fully dressed and ready, I carefully make my way downstairs.

I vaguely remember riding here last night, but fuck am I glad my addled mind took the chance. If it hadn't been for Tallie's *nonni*, I'm not sure I

would've made it up these stairs. The steps aren't as rickety as the ones I replaced in my own building, but if I have any say in it, I'll make the upgrade here, too. I'm sure Gio and Tony will appreciate it as much as I will.

The first-floor landing has two doors, one that leads through the back entrance of the bakery, and the other that would take me outside into the freezing cold Boston air. I could leave right now, take a left, find my motorcycle in the alley where I hid it in, and head back to my apartment. It's what I *should* do now that Claudio has made it clear he'll either have my compliance or my death.

And aside from that, Tallie hesitated when I needed help last night.

I don't know why, and I don't know what changed her mind. But after she cared for me, I woke up finger-deep in her warm cunt and her moaning and submissive in my arms. Did that moment change whatever caused her hesitation? If the situation rose again, would she help me without a second thought?

That doesn't matter, though, not really. I won't turn back now. If she still has misgivings about me, I'll figure them out, and we'll get through it.

I push open the bakery's back door and enter their kitchen. Delicious scents fill my nostrils, and I'm hit with a cacophony of pots, pans, and Italian curses as Gio goes toe-to-toe with my feisty *vipera*.

I bite back a smile. I can see where she gets it from.

Tallie's past is still a mystery to me, with many basic questions unanswered. Like, how did she come to live with her *nonni*? Are her parents alive? Who—or what—the fuck caused her scars?

Rage flares underneath my skin at the last thought. If someone gave her those scars, I'll make sure they're repaid in kind. Then again, they're probably already on Talia's shit list considering how riled up she gets just with her *nonno* Gio.

"You're always hiding my good knife! Where is it this time? I haven't been able to find it all day!" Gio shouts in Italian at a mile a minute.

Tallie rolls her eyes. "Gio, how many times do we have to go over this? That was *my* knife from the set you and Tony gave *me*. You just kept borrowing it before, but now I want to keep it all to myself."

"The request sheet says they want a waterfall cake of fondant roses, carved fruit roses, and diced strawberries. *Diced!* You would make your poor *nonno* Gio use the worn knife and suffer through his arthritis—"

Tallie snorts. "You don't have arthritis."

“I will if I have to keep using the bad knife!” Gio harrumphs and wags his finger up at her. “If I find out you used it to—”

“Gio, Tallie...we have a guest again.” Tony chuckles as he kneads a huge ball of dough, leaning his body into the motion before flipping and folding it over again.

Both of them whip around to face me. Tallie’s face pinkens before she shrugs off her reaction.

“Oh. It’s you.”

“*Fai la brava*, Talia,” Tony tsks.

“That’s right, Tallie.” I smirk. “Be sweet to me.”

“You *do* know Italian!” Gio claps. “Ah! Bravo! Bravo. See, we were right. He is a good man. Perfect for our *dolce nipotina*.” The way Gio beams at me only seems to torture his granddaughter more.

“Gio, *per l’amor di Dio*, for the love of God...” Her cheeks redden until they’re only a few shades lighter than the fondant roses on the parchment in front of them.

Seeing her blush makes me shove my hands in my pockets to keep my thickening cock from being noticeable behind my zipper. I have to be discreet now, but fuck, I’d love to carry her upstairs and see how far that blush goes.

“Be nice to the man, Tallie,” Tony adds and winks at me. “We are happy to see you up, Sev. If you had slept longer, we might have had to take you to the hospital.”

“What time is it?” I ask.

“Late afternoon,” Gio answers.

I’d thought the dimming light meant it was dawn, but apparently I slept the day away. “No wonder I’m feeling better. I didn’t realize it was so late.”

“That reminds me, Tallie.” Tony nods to the cake. “The delivery driver will be here soon. Can you help us load the cake? He makes us pay extra if he has to do it.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to offer to help, despite my injury, but what he says finally registers. “Delivery driver?” I frown. “Don’t you have a car?”

Gio scowls. “Bah! We had to sell that months ago.”

Months ago?

“But didn’t you give Tallie a ride Saturday night after the show?”

“Saturday night?” Gio asks.

His eyes dart to Tallie’s so quickly that if I’d have blinked, I would’ve missed it. “I borrowed a neighbor’s car.”

“A neighbor’s car?” I repeat. All three Amorettis continue to work without missing a beat, making me wonder if I read too much into that subtle movement after all.

“Sì, a neighbor. Antonio?” Gio grins wildly at me and Tallie as he grabs a sheet of pastries. “Come, help me empty the display, *amore mio*. I think our little birds of love have things to discuss.”

“It’s *lovebirds*, you overbearing *folle nonno*.” She glares at Gio as he backs into the swinging kitchen door with a smug smile across his plump cheeks.

Tony chuckles at them both again, but when his gaze lands on me, concern deepens the creases in his forehead.

“I’m glad to see you are well, Sev. We were worried last night.”

“Me too.” My fingers drift up to my wound where it’s warm to the touch.

“Oh yes, we have antibiotics for you.” He wipes flour off on his apron, grabs an orange pill bottle from the corner of the room, and hands it to me.

I inspect the blank bottle and shake it for emphasis. “Where did you get this?”

“A friend of ours is a doctor. He dropped it off on his way into work this morning. We told him that Talia cut herself on a knife, and it got infected. That should keep you from getting sick.”

“And he had no problem dropping off pills without an appointment?” It’s not like it’s fentanyl or Xanax, but still. I don’t know many doctors who would risk their livelihood to prevent an infected cut.

The look of pride that had filled Tony’s face disappears. “Well, we, um... we—”

“We have an arrangement with him,” Tallie answers with a shrug. “Insurance is expensive. We give him free desserts for his office in exchange for basic medical care when we need it.”

I barely hide my frown. The shop has to be doing well, and while insurance costs a ridiculous amount, Tallie’s *nonni* should have more than enough to cover their expenses. Which means Claudio’s “protection fee” is drowning them. Anger simmers in my chest, but I raise the bottle like I’m toasting him with a drink.

“Thank you for everything you did, Tony. I know this is a risk, and I appreciate it more than you know.”

I pop the top and dry swallow a pill. Tony smiles and pats Tallie’s shoulder.

“Oh, it is no trouble. But don’t make our *dolce nipotina* regret saving you. She is sweet at times, but you don’t want to get on her bad side.” He gives me a pointed once-over, and his voice deepens with warning. “Gio and I do the same.”

For the first time, I see where Tallie might have a little bit of Tony’s influence, too. Frankly, I’m impressed, especially when his smile returns like the fearless old man didn’t just threaten me.

“*Ciao, Sev.*” He leaves to join Gio, letting the door swing closed behind him.

Tallie rushes to the door’s window and looks through it on her tiptoes.

“They’re too nosy to just leave us alone,” she hisses. “Watch them be behind this door, listening to every word.”

I’m tall enough to see over her head to see if she’s right. Her prediction doesn’t come true, though, and we witness their private moment instead.

Tony bends to whisper in his husband’s ear. Gio practically giggles and wraps his arm around Tony’s lower waist. The tall man rubs Gio’s back and places a kiss on his bald, freckled head.

I glance down at Tallie. She’s mesmerized, and a small smile plays across her soft lips.

“They’re sweet,” I murmur.

When she replies, her voice is so low that I almost don’t hear it. “You asked me before why I like theater.”

My heart pounds in my chest. I’ve waited for her to make every physical move between us, and now I wait with bated breath as she makes her first emotional one.

“I like it because I love happy endings. Most people don’t get those in real life.”

My brow furrows. “Why can’t you?”

“Because it wouldn’t be fair. I don’t know how long I’ll have after—”

Her mouth shut. Whatever reverie she was lost in is gone, and with it, her vulnerability. She clears her throat and whirls around to face me.

“How’s your chest?”

“No, don’t shut down, *dolcezza*. You don’t know how long you’ll have after...what?”

She shakes her head, but her eyes are soft. Sad almost. “After nothing. How are you feeling?”

My eyes narrow, but she doesn’t budge. I want to push her, but pressuring

her to answer will only make her dig her heels in more. In the short time I've known her, I've learned my *vipera* can't be forced to do anything. I don't want to ruin the progress we made last night.

"I'm fine." I place her hand against my bandaged wound. "It barely hurts. And my ankle would be the size of a basketball right now without you. If you decide art, costume design, or baking isn't for you, you'd make a fine doctor."

She snorts. "I think I'm busy enough, thanks." When she pulls her hand away, her sweater's long sleeve flutters back down her wrist. I catch a glimpse of the tulips on her forearm again, but there's something gray as stone there, too.

"Is there more to your tattoo?"

I reach for her hand so I can inspect it, but she steps away and shoves the sleeve down over her wrist.

"If you don't want to show me yet, *dolcezza*, that's okay. But you won't be able to keep it hidden for long. One day soon, I'll see all of you." I caress her cheek slowly. "Every...single...inch."

Tension creases her forehead.

"Look, Sev, last night...it can't happen again."

My jaw tics, and I cross my arms, ignoring the pull from my stitches. "And why not?"

She huffs like she didn't expect me to push back and flounders for an answer. "Because I just—I just don't want to be someone's fuckbuddy, alright? I don't have the time for it."

"Who says I want you to be a fuckbuddy? I don't want that. I told you as much last night. I want you. Full stop. I want you."

Her swallow travels down the column of her neck and into the neckline of the sweater that must cover even more scars.

"I saw these last night." I brush the faint purple mark she's tried to cover with light makeup. She doesn't flinch, and my heart soars with triumph. "I don't think you show them to many people. Do you?"

She shakes her head slowly. "No, but that doesn't mean anything—"

My hand grips the sides of her neck before she can finish. I close in on her to cage her against the wall.

"That means *everything*. Don't you understand? You were vulnerable with me last night. And I was vulnerable with you. I could've gone home. I could've gone to the hospital. I could've gone anywhere, but I ran to you.

You took care of me. You let me sleep in your bed. Then you let me take care of you.”

Her eyes dart from my mouth back to my gaze. I tighten my grip on her neck and glide my other hand down her waist to rest on her hip. She steps closer, and I pull her in so that our hips meet. We’re centimeters apart, and I’m a breath away from kissing her again. She licks her lips, inviting me to taste, but I only brush mine against hers.

“I get the feeling you don’t open up to just anyone, *vipera*, but you did with me. You can try to pretend that you didn’t melt against me when we came together. You can even try to pretend that what happened last night was just sexual. But one day you’ll have to admit that whatever this is between us is more than that. It’s worth being vulnerable for. It might just be worth everything.”

Her inhaled and exhaled breaths rise and fall against my chest. She pulls back as her intense, golden-green eyes search my face before she clears her throat.

“There are...there are things you don’t know about me. Things that if you found out, you wouldn’t—” She shakes her head.

“Whatever it is that you think I can’t handle, you’re wrong. You just have to trust me.”

She swallows and whispers so low I almost can’t make it out. “But our past...”

“What about our pasts? Can they be so awful that you wouldn’t want me?”

Yes.

My conscience creeps in, making me question what I’m doing with her.

She’s worried because I don’t know her? She doesn’t know *me*. When she does, though, why would the bakers’ granddaughter ever take a chance on a dead mafioso’s son? Not to mention my uncle is the man who’s tormenting her grandfathers.

Putting an outsider in danger has been the main reason why I’ve resorted to only dating women who know what they’re getting into dating a mafioso. Sure, they’ll lie through their teeth and do whatever it takes to get what they want. They’ve all used me for one reason or another, but we both knew the score. Tallie is nothing like them.

She doesn’t know my world, and she’s never manipulated me or used me to get on Claudio’s good side. My *dolcezza* is thoughtful, fiercely protective, and guarded. There’s been only one other person like that in my life...and

she sacrificed everything for me.

Am I making a mistake?

My instincts are screaming that I need Talia Amoretti. Deep down to the depths of my soul, I need her. But what if my selfishness costs us everything?

My fingers lightly brush her hair out of her face and graze down her cheek to trace her scar again. I swallow as I confess what I've been afraid of admitting this whole time.

"You...you remind me of someone." Her eyes widen, and I quickly continue, afraid she'll stop me before I can get out the truth. "That girl I told you about? She was strong, loyal, and fearless. Like you. If I could, I'd go back and do everything in my power to save her."

Sadness splinters her expression for the tiniest moment before rage floods the cracks.

"I'm *not* that little girl. I don't need saving." Her eyes are still rife with pain, even as she tries to swat my hand away. I'm too quick this time, and I pull her flush against my body.

"But what if *I'm* the one that needs saving?"

Her lips part in surprise, but before she can respond, the moment is cut off by the screeching of tires out front.

"What the hell?" she murmurs.

"Stay here." I push through the door and past her *nonni* to peer through the bakery's picture window. The street is empty, but I can't shake the eerie, sick feeling that's churning in my stomach.

"What was that?" Tallie asks. "Was someone street racing?"

I whip around to find all three of them right behind me.

"I told you to stay in the kitchen. Go in there until I tell you to come out. All of you."

Tires screech again, and my heart thunders in my chest, pressuring me to protect them.

"Get out of here. Go!"

"The car is back!" Tony points at the all black, beat-up old sedan.

My heart stops. I watch in slow motion as the driver's arm extends out of the window and raises a submachine gun.

"Look out!" I shield Tallie with my body and cradle the back of her head before shoving us both to the ground. In the chaos, I reach out to grab someone else and manage to yank the hem of a shirt down beside us.

It all happens so fast, but we're down right before the rapid-fire *rat-tat* of

an uzi peppers the picture window. Glass crashes around us. The tires screech away, but the deafening noises ring in my head long after the car is gone.

The world quiets around me, leaving only the thick hum of adrenaline and thundering heartbeats in my skull. I lift up and run my hands over Tallie, checking for injuries. I don't see anything other than scratches from the broken glass, but her eyes are wide with terror, and she's as still as stone.

"Tallie, are you okay? Answer me, *dolcezza*."

Her brow furrows, and her gaze locks onto mine. She glances behind me at the window before scanning me like I just did her.

"Sever, are you—"

"I'm okay. We're okay." I tug her to my chest and cling to her, ensuring she's safe. She embraces me back just as strongly. "You're okay. *Grazie a Dio*, you're—"

A low, baleful moan from behind me jolts me out of my relief. Tallie's arms tighten around my neck even as she pulls away to find where the cry came from. The blood drains from her face. Her expression contorts with agony right before she screams.

It pierces like a dagger into my ears and a knife to my heart. It rips and tears its way down my body like a jagged blade. It's the kind of cry you feel in your bones, breaking you from the inside out irrevocably, and you instinctively know that you'll never be able to be put back together again.

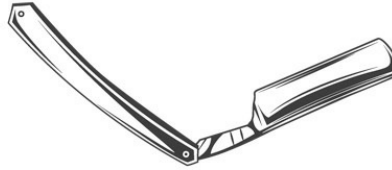
I cradle her in my arms, wishing I could shield her from whatever it is that's breaking her heart. She fights me, but I refuse to let her go as I turn around.

My heart shatters for her, and my own pained groan lurches from my chest.

"No."

Scene 21

IL MIO AMORE NON C'È PIÙ



Talia

How many times can life tear you to shreds before there's nothing to sew back together?

Sever holds me in his arms, cradling me, comforting me. Only a second ago, my chest was light with relief that we were okay. Now my heart has shattered into shards sharper than the glass glittering in the dimming sunlight.

One of the only people who's ever truly loved me is dying, soaking the pink pastel floor with crimson. The other is sobbing so hard over the love of his life that I'm afraid he'll leave with him.

And it's all my fault.

"Tallie, *dolcezza*, we have to go. They could come back."

Sever's plea snaps me out of my thoughts. I push aside the guilt that my vendetta, that *I* caused this and shake my head.

"Tallie—"

"No!" I scramble out of his arms and crawl over cracked and broken glass to get to my *nonni*.

Maybe he's okay. Maybe I can stitch him up like I did Sever. Maybe—

But once I get there and see Gio cradling my *nonno* Tony, I can't hide from the truth.

Blood blooms from Tony's chest, like several dark red drops of dye on paper. His brown eyes blink rapidly as they try to focus on his husband.

“*Amore m-mio.*” Tony raises his hand to touch Gio’s face, but Gio shakes his head violently and continues in Italian.

“Don’t strain yourself. We’ll call the police. An ambulance will come and save you—”

Tony coughs, making the blood seep down his shirt faster. The fact that there’s no pain in his expression is both a relief and terrifying at the same time. Pain means you’re alive.

“We’ll get through this. We survived the Navy, didn’t we?” Gio tries to laugh, but his tears already flow freely down his cheeks.

Tony’s eyes search for me.

“I’m here, *nonno.*”

I huddle closer to grip his hand. It’s always been so strong before, holding mine to cross the street for school, teaching me how to knead dough, gripping Gio’s shoulder before giving him a kiss.

Now, I notice for the first time that his fingers are gnarled and bony. The flesh yields easily to my touch, like the muscles underneath no longer have the strength to resist the pressure. His skin is paper-thin, and I worry that I could rip it open with the slightest movement.

“I have loved you from the moment I saw you,” Tony whispers through blood-stained lips. “Both of you.”

Gio gently swipes the crimson off of his husband’s lips. “And you’ll keep loving us. All you have to do is hold on. Help will come, and you’ll be fine. Just hold on.”

“*Amore mio, per favore—*”

“No. I won’t hear it. You’ll tell me later—”

“There...might not be...later—”

“No! Don’t talk like that—”

Sev’s large hand grips Gio’s shoulder, but neither of us dare to look away from Tony.

“Let him do this,” he murmurs.

He knows. He knows these could be Tony’s last words.

The realization burns in my chest. I hate Sever. I hate him for accepting the inevitable before I can wrap my mind around it. I hate him for his compassion and his understanding when I’m broken and angry. I hate him... and I’m grateful at the same time. If these are the last words my grandfather ever says, I want to savor them.

Gio swallows before letting Tony continue in Italian.

“You both were the best things that ever happened to me. But I don’t want to be the best thing that happens to you. You can’t survive with death always on your mind. So grieve. Weep. *Feel*. Let it all in...then let it all go. Promise me you’ll live after this.”

“But...Antonio, *amore mio*, how? How could I...without you?”

“The same...the same way you do now. Stubbornly and passionately. Live for the ones who don’t know they love you yet. Live for each other. Live for...live for me. Live for yourselves.” His mouth works to smile at me through wheezing huffs. “You’ve always liked theater. I want to see a show up there. Give me a good happy ever after, *dolce nipotina*.”

I nod. “I love you, *nonno*.” The emotion choking me won’t let me say anything else, and really, what else matters?

“*Ti amo, amore mio*,” Gio whispers, too.

Tony’s eyes flutter. “*Vi amo*, my loves.”

Gio lowers his voice so only Tony can hear, and I lean back on my heels to give them privacy while still holding Tony’s hand. Tony smiles wider at whatever Gio says, until a cough racks his body, and he droops against Gio’s chest. I squeeze his fingers tighter to let him know we’re with him. He doesn’t squeeze back.

My dying grandfather’s hand lies limp in mine. It’s the heaviest weight I’ve ever felt.

Gio begins to rock him back and forth, still murmuring his goodbyes. The tension throughout the rest of Tony’s body eases, making me realize how much he was fighting to hold on just for us. His eyes finally flutter closed.

One final breath raises his chest. Death draws it out for the last time.

Gio presses a hard, trembling kiss on his husband’s forehead. Grief racks through him, shaking him uncontrollably as he sits back and looks at me.

“T-Tallie, h-he...my love is gone.”

“Oh, *Gio*.” My own sob chokes in my throat, and I wrap my arm around his neck, hugging them both. Gio’s quiet cries rattle into my chest, leaving cracks I know will never fully heal.

Sever’s hand smooths over my back in gentle circles. I look behind me and see his pained eyes, as if he feels my heartache as acutely as I do. He swallows, and our eye contact breaks as his gaze returns to Tony.

I take a deep breath. It’s supposed to give me strength, but it only feels like I’m trying to breathe past the steel cage trapping me in this new nightmare. Gio rocks Tony again, and I pull away, keeping one hand on his

shoulder and the other holding Tony's.

"I'm so sorry, Tony."

They're the words I was too cowardly to confess while he was alive. I pray he can still hear me beg for forgiveness.

"It was one of Claudio's men, I am sure of it," Gio spits with more venom than I've ever heard from him.

Sever's hand stills on my back. "How can you be so sure?"

"Who else would do something like this?" Gio snaps.

His soft, round face is full of hard, angry lines, and his eyes are narrowed with hate. It's shocking. I always thought of Gio as my kindred with our fiery personalities, but his fury is something I know firsthand, and I've only ever seen it in my own reflection. I don't like seeing it on him.

"It wasn't one of Claudio's cars." Sever uses a chair to help himself get up. When his hand leaves the back, the painted pink wood is clean.

"Your hands aren't bloody," I point out numbly.

I don't know why I notice that, but the difference between him being nearly spotless and me and Gio being covered in death feels stark. Sympathy wrinkles his brow. His mouth opens and closes like he doesn't know what to say. Neither do I.

He turns to Gio instead and clears his throat. "Is there anyone else that could have it out for you?"

"You think someone other than that tyrant would attack a couple of old bakers? Claudio has been threatening us for months because we haven't been able to pay him on time. Protection money. Bah," Gio spits.

"Goddammit," Sever mutters as he rakes his fingers through his hair before bending to kiss my forehead. "I...fuck, I hate to do this, but I have to go."

My mouth falls open. "You're leaving? *Now?*" He winces, but I don't let up. "How the hell can you leave at a time like this? Gio and Tony helped you last night, maybe even saved your life. And now you're just going to leave?"

"I'm sorry, Tallie. I wish I could stay, but there's something I have to do —"

"You know what, Sever? *Vaffanculo*. Leave." I throw my hand toward the door.

"Tallie, I—"

"Leave!"

"I promise, Tallie. It's for a good reason."

Gio is no longer present for the conversation as he lovingly caresses Tony's face. I shake my head at Sever.

"There are no good reasons for what's happening right now." Sorrow and resentment shudder out of me. "Leave if you want. There's nothing here for you. Not anymore."

"Tallie, please..."

"Go."

"I'm sorry, *dolcezza*," he whispers.

I don't look at him. I keep focus where it should be: Tony and my grieving *nonno*.

Sever's uneven steps crunch the shattered glass on his way out. The bell rings like a cheerful, mocking omen. A shadow passes across the empty window as he walks away.

That's what we are. Shadows. I'm haunted by dark fragments of memory, and I let one sliver of hope trick me into believing that Sever could shine a light to help me escape. I don't know why I fell for it. I've honed my hatred for over a decade, and this is where hope got me.

But...what if *I* did this? My hatred. My thirst for vengeance. That was all me. Was I found out? If I hadn't set out on this vendetta, would Tony be alive right now? Would Gio have been safe from this heartbreak?

Is this all my fault?

One sudden, jarring word shouts in my mind.

No.

It's theirs.

All of them. Every single person on my list.

If my father hadn't been forced to make a deal with the devil in the first place, then Tony would be alive. If the driver hadn't run into our car, if the capo hadn't stolen me, if the maids hadn't watched me suffer, if the butler had fed me, if the gardener hadn't ratted me out, if I wasn't told my sins were my fault by the—

The priest.

He's not supposed to be next unless the capo is already dead. I want to move forward anyway, though. Order be damned.

But I can't keep going with the list, can I? As much as I hate them, what about Gio?

"I know what you are thinking." Gio's voice is hoarse.

My heart stops. "What do you mean?"

“This is not your fault.”

I swallow. “H-how did you know that’s what I was thinking?”

He sighs and stops rocking Tony, and I still, too. He brushes Tony’s cheek and speaks in a detached voice. I listen with bated breath, soaking in every word.

“Your mother used to bring you here when you were little. Do you remember?”

I nod. “You were the only ones I could think of when...when Antonella asked me where she should take me.”

“Your mother would bring you here whenever the mob showed up at your father’s butcher shop. You look just like her, you know. The early worry lines and everything. She loved you, but she hated the men your father worked for. They both knew he did it to protect you. He tried to protect you. Your mother tried to protect you. Antonella tried to protect you. We...we tried to protect you.”

Every name is another innocent death. And all for what? For Claudio Vincelli to sit in his house on the hill and lord over a false kingdom?

“We may have been your *nonni*, but you are our daughter. We always wanted a little girl, then you appeared on our doorstep. We have always tried to protect you, but we were not perfect. When you started your little list, Tony and I did not know what to do.”

My muscles are stone.

“Oh, yeah, we knew.” Gio chuckles wryly, answering my silent question. “You have been singing and humming that awful nursery rhyme since the day you came. They were the only words you said for the first couple of months until we fattened you up and convinced you we were here to stay. It wasn’t until Antonella died and you stopped singing ‘godmother’ that we realized your nursery rhyme was more morbid than we could’ve imagined. Then a few weeks ago, more notes disappeared from your song. We found out the Vincellis’ butler and maids had been fired, and that’s when we started putting it together.”

“You knew all this time and you didn’t say anything?” My chest constricts like a boa has coiled around my lungs.

Does he hate me? Does he blame me, too?

I blame myself, but I couldn’t bear it if Gio did, too. I have had so few in my life who loved me, cared for me, and were on my side. Losing Tony *and* Gio? I wouldn’t come back from that.

“We knew you were up to something, but we weren’t sure what, exactly. We found costumes in your room that had nothing to do with your musicals. Your sketches have always been...disturbing, but they started looking more like plans than nightmares. We were worried, yes, but we...we...”

“You what?”

Grim intensity thins his lips. His eyes are still red and watery, but his conviction is clear in his hard-set jaw.

“We understood. What happened to you in that house...everyone who played a part in it deserves to pay. And now that they’re behind this, too—”

“I’m sorry, Gio—”

“It’s not your fault. It’s theirs.” A big inhale raises his chest, and he squeezes Tony tighter to keep him from falling from his lap. “I need to ask you a favor, *nipotina mia*.”

“Okay...”

He glances around, but even though the bakery is usually slammed by this time, no one has so much as peeked inside thanks to the drive-by. Once he decides the coast is clear, he still lowers his voice and switches our conversation back to Italian.

“How many are left?”

“How many—”

“In your song. How many are left?”

I bite my lip before answering. “Four.”

He nods once. “Don’t stop.”

“Gio—”

“No, we have never asked you for anything, and I hate that what I’m asking for is so big now. But I’m asking you for myself and for him right now.” His jaw tics and his medium-brown wrinkles furrow as he narrows his eyes at me. “Finish your list. Finish it for him. Finish it for me. Please. Those *figli di puttana* don’t deserve the air you’ve let them breathe for so long. We knew you had all the evidence needed to take down every single person who walked into that hellhole, but we didn’t let you. We were too afraid for your safety to let you go after them in court.”

“Gio, it’s okay, I was a child—”

“You were, but you’ve always been strong. Much stronger than your *nonni*.” He grips my forearm so forcefully that it pushes up my sleeve. “Be strong for us now. Avenge yourself. Avenge Tony. Avenge the lives we deserved to live. Finish what you have to do. Tony asked for a good show.

Give him one, *nipotina mia*.”

I study his eyes, searching for any disgust, shame, or blame, but there’s only our shared need for retribution.

“They stole everything from us, Talia. It’s time for you to do the same.”

He lets go, leaving a handprint of Tony’s blood on my Medusa tattoo. Purpose fills my chest again. A renewed sense of vengeance swallows up my anguish and hurt, and I nod.

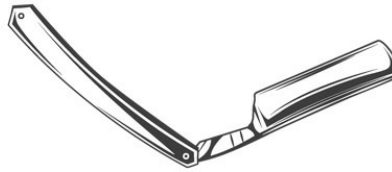
Sirens wail in the distance. Gio darts his eyes to the kitchen door.

“Go.”

I kiss him on the cheek without waiting another second. By the time the police and ambulance come, I’m gone.

Scene 22

PRETTY LITTLE TRAITOR



Sever

My motorcycle was still tucked away in the alley I left it in. It's a shaky ride, but I make it back to my parking space behind the shop and headed inside. The back door slams into the wall as I fling it open and start to mash the button for the elevator. It's quick with the extra work I've had engineered on it, but today it seems to be taking an insultingly long time. I slap the button again and again until the well-oiled doors slide open in front of me, and I step in. After the agonizingly slow ride up ends, the doors open. I snatch my razor, cane, and pistol sitting in the small hall outside my apartment. Knowing my cousin, Raze likely returned it as a mea culpa and a request for forgiveness. We'll fucking see.

As soon as I'm inside, I limp as quickly as I can to my security setup. The blacked-out sedan is the biggest question mark. Claudio uses guns to take out his problems but leaves Vinnie to do most of the dirty work. My uncle hasn't personally made a hit in years. Plus, whenever Claudio orders car "accidents," he always insists the hitman uses a high-end car to send a message. I've never seen a Luciano or a Vincelli do a drive-by. It's too messy, and the potential for unintended casualties is high. Of course, Claudio doesn't care about the last risk, but it is harder to convince cops to look the other way when innocents like Tony get caught in the crossfire.

Tony...

Is that what he was? An "unintended" casualty? Gio thinks they were the target, but I'm not so sure. At dinner last night, Claudio hinted that he'd have to escalate his threats, but murdering two elderly bakers isn't "escalation."

It's war.

The North End is my neighborhood. It's where I grew up, and if Claudio thinks he can toss a grenade in my home and I'll go running, he's out of his goddamn mind.

But what if I'm the target? And what if it wasn't Claudio at all?

I haven't been able to get the judge's crazed expression out of my head ever since I left the bakery. It's like someone dropped a filter over every thought. He said he had men that could take care of his "problem." Did he make his move, and Tony died because of it? Because of me?

There are way too many goddamn questions, but I'm hoping the footage answers at least one.

My heartbeat races as my system boots up and security feeds take over the wall of screens. I locate the cameras that show the front and back of the bakery, as well as the surrounding streets. My stomach churns at the sight of the bakery's broken picture window. The street is eerily empty, but I can hear sirens on their way, so that won't last long.

If Tony wasn't already gone, I'd be enraged at how long they're taking. I have no doubt that if Claudio is indeed behind this, he has something to do with their delayed response time. And if he was the one that ordered the hit on Tony, I'm going to find out.

I scroll the feed back in time until I see the shooter's car.

There's nothing special about it other than the fact that it has heavily tinted windows, and they're so dark it's impossible to see the driver inside. I'll have to enhance the footage, but in the meantime, I want to answer a different worry.

If this was about me, how the fuck did anyone know I was at the bakery to begin with? I hid my motorcycle from view, and I don't remember being tracked. Granted I was suffering from blood loss, but I'd like to think I would notice someone following me.

I scroll the footage back to last night around the time I think I arrived at Sweet Tallie's bakery. After watching the video in reverse on ten-times speed for several minutes, a black car zips across, and I quickly slow the video down. I lean forward to squint at the screen as it drives up and down Fleet Street and the road behind. It seems aimless, moseying down the road at the late hour, but no one just cruises this neighborhood this late on a Sunday night, telling me all I need to know. They're looking for something.

"Fuck!" I slam my hand on the desk before I can stop myself. My palm

throbs, but I ignore it to see if there's anything distinguishable about the car in any of the stills. Try as I might, though, I can't see the license plate or any defining feature. I want to get back to Tallie as quickly as I can, and enhancing the video will take precious time I don't have. So, instead of studying a vehicle that someone purposely made impossible to track, I start looking for me. If the car spots me and follows me to the bakery, I'll know I'm the one they were after.

As if on cue, I roll onto the screen, wobbling on my motorcycle. Goddamn, I'm unsteady. It's a miracle I made it to the North End at all.

Once I get to the bakery, I ride the bike into a small alley between buildings down the street, then stumble onto the sidewalk. Even on fast-forward, it takes a painfully long time for me to get anywhere close to the front door. There's no moving car in sight, so I rewind to see if one started following me before getting to the bakery.

I find it again roaming the streets, but I'm sidetracked when it passes a woman rushing down the sidewalk on the street behind Sweet Tallie's.

"What the..."

She's wearing low black heels and a long, black puffy jacket, but her hurried gait catches my attention. Her head is down, only lifting for furtive glances, as if she's afraid of being followed.

I slow the video down and watch intently. On every well-lit corner, she huddles into the shadows, ducking her head farther away from the light. Away from the *cameras*. The longer I watch, the more an uneasy feeling churns in my stomach.

When she glances up at just the right angle, the light reveals the same face I saw earlier in the night, but couldn't inspect because she'd kept her head ducked from me. The facial structure is different, as if she's wearing something to disguise her features, but with the bright light shining on her, I know exactly who it is.

The breath in my lungs freezes.

Tallie.

"What're you up to, *vipera*?" I murmur.

I try to rack my brain for any detail I saw last night that could hint at where she'd been before I got there or why she was out so late and rushing home. My memory is hazy, but from what I do remember, she was already in her pajamas with her hair braided into a crown on her head.

She makes it to the residence entrance to her building where she finally

slows down, raises her head, and pulls back her hood.

That's where she fucks up. She's wearing a white bonnet. The kind a Victorian maid would wear. The kind my mother prefers her staff to wear. Like the maid that worked at the Vincelli Sunday dinner last night.

The one whose fists shook when my mother ordered her around like a bad pet. The one who backed away every time I talked to her. The one who anticipated my needs before I realized them.

Why the fuck was Tallie at my uncle's last night? And why the fuck didn't she say anything when I came to her afterward?

My uncle kicked Tallie out of the dining room, so I don't know how she would have reacted if she'd seen me getting stabbed. I thought she'd been upset when my cousins grabbed me, though. But then, when her *nonni* had asked her to stitch me up, she'd hesitated. So was the emotion at dinner all an act? Why would she draw attention to herself as part of an act?

On the monitors, Tallie enters the bakery's back door. I arrive on my motorcycle shortly after, and it takes me ages to make it to the front. There was plenty of time for her to change and get ready for bed. Meanwhile, the black car travels up and down the streets, still prowling for whatever it was they were searching for. By a stroke of shit luck, the sedan travels up the street just as Tallie's *nonni* carry me inside.

"Cazzo."

As soon as I'm inside, the car speeds up and leaves the North End.

They were stalking me, and I led the *bastardos* right to the Amorettis.

This is my fault. Tony is dead because of me.

Pain, rage, and confusion hollow out my chest, and I sag from the emptiness. The need for answers barrels to the forefront of my mind. I spend the next few minutes searching through the feed at ten-times speed as far back as I can go before the system uploads to a cloud portal. Whenever I see Tallie leave the bakery, I slow it down and follow her with every camera feed I have in the neighborhood.

The first thing I notice is Tallie periodically walking around Fleet Street with fliers for the bakery. She leaves them at different businesses every round, but she *always* stops by Luciano's Cuts, never failing to hand the flier to Raze personally. My heart twists. Something deep inside me almost wishes it was because she was interested in my cousin first, but I have a sneaking suspicion her motives are much worse.

The more I see, the more my suspicions are confirmed. She'll wait around

for Raze to come get the flier, and she even brings him dessert samples, but other days she goes out of her way to pass the shop for seemingly no reason. No matter what, she scowls every time she passes. It's unnerving how many times she waited across the street, watching me as I came and went, and yet I never saw her. A strange theory starts to build, and I write it down before I forget.

Bringing Raze desserts to get to me?

Even thinking it makes me feel crazy, so I push the thought aside to keep watching and take notes.

I become engrossed in the footage all the way up to the day we met. On that morning, she left at the crack of dawn in a long puffy jacket and bulky, black hiking boots and came back after a couple of hours with dried mud staining the top. I scratch down my question on the paper. It's yet another stretch, but I need to find out...

When did the gardener die?

The next time I saw her, the night at the Revere, she'd lied about Gio picking her up to take her home. She arrived on foot much later than she would've if she'd left at the time she'd said. I follow her path all the way back to the Revere Theater. At one point, she took off an oversized coat and stuffed it in a dumpster. The longer I follow her back to the theater, the faster my heart races.

On a hunch, I switch to the camera feed for the parking garage behind the Revere and zoom in on Alfonso's murder. At the time, I'd assumed the attacker was a man. I zoom in closer, though, and quickly recognize the extra-long trench coat.

What the fuck?

The attacker had accused the driver of killing their parents. Did Claudio order Alfonso to kill Tallie's parents? Claudio only became the boss after my father died, but he's been giving the "car accident" order for decades. At the time he was murdered, Alfonso had probably had tens—if not *hundreds*—of "accidents."

Tallie has been stalking me, potentially killed two of Claudio's men, and she was at the dinner last night. Is she after Claudio, too?

"Goddammit."

Plenty of people have reasons to hate Claudio. If Claudio killed Tallie's parents, then she had better reasons than most, even before he started threatening her grandfathers. I would have no problem with that, except for

the question that aches in my chest. Has she been using me to get to him?

I've been manipulated so many times in my life by people who want to either settle a score with Claudio or get on his good side. My father, my mother...it's infuriating. Now, yet another person has pulled the wool over my eyes.

Fury flows through me like a raging river and out my fingertips. My hands sweep across the desk, sending paperwork, keyboard, and laptop crashing to the ground. It's still not enough, though, and I punch the desk before I can stop myself. The sudden burst of violence cracks the mirrored glass surface into a spiderweb. My reflection catches my eye, and I stare down at myself in the debris.

Anger reddens my face, my jaw is hard as stone, and my eyes are dark and full of an emotion so strong that I don't have a word for it.

No. I do.

Betrayal.

And I promised myself long ago that I'd never feel it again.

A deep breath rises and falls in my chest. My lungs expand, but my heart hardens behind my sternum. It's painful and heavy, a burden lodged like a boulder weighing me down.

My fingers carve into my hair. The newest piece for my collection glares at me from the windowsill.

I haven't added it to the display in the corner of my room yet. When I took the life, I'd felt righteous defending someone I thought had deserved it. But was Tallie lying then, too? It felt like she'd been telling the truth, but being faced with this one huge fucking lie makes me question everything she's ever said to me.

Tallie—no, *Talia*—slithered behind my defenses, making me believe she needed saving. She drew me in with what I thought had been her vulnerability and trust. I killed for her. The remnants of the body are in the Charles right now, and the skull's accusing, sardonic grin and fresh, empty sockets bore holes into my own eyes right now.

My fingers ball up again, and I fight the urge to hurl the skull into the wall.

But even as I overthink every interaction with her, a memory of that night in the dressing room flashes through my mind. I don't think I'll ever forget the sight of Tallie trembling as she stood toe-to-toe with the man who dared to touch her without permission.

Fuck, I'm so confused. I have to get to the bottom of this. I have to draw her out of the darkness she clings to and force her to give me the answers. She's stubborn at her core, and I know she'll never willingly give me the information. At this point, I need punishment. I need justice, and I'll do anything to get it.

My mind is already working on a plan, something that's guaranteed me information in the past but is more delicious and exactly what she deserves. I let the ideas simmer as I turn my attention back on the screens.

I expect them to be blank since I tossed my laptop to the ground. But my backup computer has engaged, and present-day Fleet Street still flickers across my monitors. An ambulance stops in front of the bakery, and the emotions I just tried to purge flare up again. There is someone who is truly innocent in all this, caught in the crossfire of whatever battles are being waged between me, Claudio, Judge Blunt, and Tallie. Just as the paramedics hop out, I catch movement on the monitor behind the bakery, where the pretty little traitor flees out the back.

Why? To ensure the cops won't discover what she's been doing in the shadows?

I glare at the screen and watch as the viper escapes her den. She shoves her hands into her long, puffy jacket, and I squint to see her newest disguise.

The hem of a black dress nearly reaches her feet and drifts above simple shoes. She wears another white cap—wait, no.

I huff in disbelief as the whole ensemble finally clicks for me, and I shake my head. She's wearing a goddamn nun's habit.

“Do you have no shame, *vipera*?”

There's no telling what she's going to do in that outfit, but I'm going to find out.

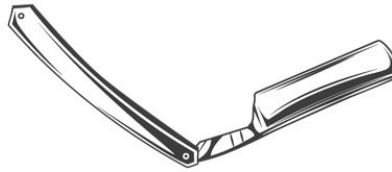
I study the screens to figure out which direction she's going. When she gets to the end of the block, she stops at the corner and takes a breath so big that I can see her shoulders move on the CCTV. Then she heads toward St. Catherine's Cathedral.

I flip my razor in the air, snatch it as it falls, and feel a vicious smile curl my face. “*La verità è bella, vipera.*”

Act 4

Scene 23

THE SEVENTH DEVIL



Talia

Claudio Vincelli only let me out of my room to go to his garden or to St. Catherine's for confession. Gardening was my escape. Confessing was torture.

Antonella taught me how to plant every flower she loved and how to uproot the ones she didn't. Apparently, her sister-in-law liked to order the gardener around and tell him what flowers should go where. We plucked up enough foxglove to kill a horse, but Antonella explained that we had to keep a few because she didn't want to make Claudio mad. I didn't know what she meant at the time, so I just figured she hated the flowers. I didn't realize she hated the woman who planted them.

It didn't matter to me. Yanking them up was just as therapeutic as planting them. It was the perfect activity to get out the anger I had toward everyone, even sweet and soft Antonella. She was the bright spot in my day, but I despised her for not helping me run away. Now that I'm an adult, I realize I was just like her garden. Despite risking Claudio's wrath, she did all that she could to protect me.

The priest did not.

When Claudio took me to confession that first time, I thought all my prayers would be answered. I didn't hold back as I told Father Lucas everything, hoping he would save me. I told him the driver murdered my parents. I told him I was kidnapped. And I told him the judge drugged and violated me every night he visited. His response still shocks me every time I remember it.

“Thou shalt not lie.”

It’s the ninth commandment, the first lesson the priest taught me, and the phrase that haunts me the most. Before every confession, I was instructed to say, “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” even though I was the innocent one. At the end of every session, he ordered me to repent for lying.

Claudio wanted the priest to convince me I’d made it all up. My parents had died in a tragic car accident. The capo saved me from the foster system when he brought me back to the Vincellis. Claudio was merely a disciplinarian, while I was ungrateful and spoiled. And the judge? Only a whore and a sinner could think those vile acts, let alone say them out loud.

After my first confession, Antonella cried as she locked me back in the room, and I created my list. The priest made one of the top spots. One could argue that he might’ve deserved a lower position, but even as a child, I knew there is an evil in gaslighting that can be worse than the act itself.

It makes you question your trauma. The body and soul remember, and yet your mind questions it, all because someone else’s words weaved into your memories and tore them apart. The priest said that I would go to hell for spreading lies. But in that house, I felt like I was already there, and the wrongs that happened to me there were made worse by the fact that every time I was forced to confess, I was called a liar.

That’s why the priest made my list. Anyone who tries to make someone question their reality doesn’t deserve to have one of their own.

And while I stand here in front of St. Catherine’s, I know for a fact that I’m meant to be here to right the wrongs of the corrupt man inside.

He’s not technically next on my list since I still haven’t caught the capo. I’m hoping my hunch is correct, though, and he’s already been taken care of. If I am right, I’m disappointed that I didn’t get my hands on him, but at least he’s gone from this world and unable to hurt anyone else.

The capo isn’t my only mystery. I still have no idea what to do about Sever. He was right when he said we had a connection last night. We did, and it fucking terrified me. But then he left right after my *nonno*—

My chest pangs, and I suck in a sharp breath.

No, I can’t think about all of that right now. I have to stay focused on what will bring me, Gio, and Tony justice, and that means marking off the rest of my list. The names I have left are high profile, and taking them down means I’m playing with fire. Then again, I’m going to hell for what I’m about to do in God’s house, anyway. I might as well get burned on the way down.

Warm air smacks into me as I push open the church's imposing double doors. Once they slam shut behind me, I hang my jacket on a coat rack and step toward the worship area. Inside is more stunning than I remember, with gold and silver filigree glittering everywhere you look. The pews are empty, giving me an eerie sense of *déjà vu*. Claudio always locked the church down during his confessions to protect himself from nosy churchgoers. He refused to confess anywhere but the church, though more out of superstition than religion, if I had to guess.

My fingers dip into the font of holy water and cross myself out of a long-forgotten habit. An overwhelming sense of stifling hatred and confusion flows through my veins as I take in my surroundings.

I've always desperately wanted something bigger than myself to believe in, a hope to cling to when things get unbearably hard. Maybe one day I'll find that, but it won't be here, and it won't be now. I never learned about the love of God in this building, only the failings of men.

I shake my head free of the anger clouding it. If I'm going to get this right, then I need to be at my best, and my mind needs to be clear.

As I stalk toward Father Lucas's office, my chef's knife burns against my thigh in the pocket of the nun's habit I designed. Once I'm outside his door, I take a deep breath and look around. I'm still alone, but I don't know whether anyone is hanging out in the rest of the church. Whatever happens inside the office will have to be quick and quiet, or I could be found out before I flee past the first pew.

I slip one hand into my pocket to grip the knife's pearl handle, while I knock on the wooden door with my other. Every muscle in my body goes stiff as I wait. But there's nothing.

Panic slices down my spine, and I look around again before knocking.

Silence.

"*Cazzo.*"

He didn't already go home, did he? His Porsche is still in the church's small employee parking lot. Maybe if I wait in his office...

Resolved to do just that, I twist the handle of the door, hoping I'll be lucky just this once. It turns easily, and the fist around my lungs loosens. I sneak inside and gently close the door behind me.

There aren't very many places to hide, but everywhere I look, there's evidence that confirms my suspicions about his relationship with Claudio and men like him. Inside a large wardrobe, Father Lucas's robes conceal a flat

screen TV. At the bottom of the cabinet is a row of name-brand shoes, and on a shelf is a brand-new cell phone. The shiniest computer mouse takes up the entire desk beside the window, and a gold Rolex rests by the mouse. If the priest's fancy car wasn't enough to convince me that he's been bribed, everything in this room would do the trick.

My fingers hover over the Rolex. It'd be dumb to take it as a souvenir, but it sure is tempting. Movement outside flits twilight shadows across my hand, drawing my attention to the scene outside.

Even though it's only late afternoon, thanks to Boston's long winter nights, the sun already kisses the horizon, casting a rich purple and rose haze over all it touches. A late funeral is wrapping up in the graveyard, and people drift around the casket that's still raised above an empty grave. They sniffle and console one another as they place beautiful white lilies on the black lid. One by one, the crowd thins, revealing just the person I wanted to see.

The priest.

His face is more weathered than it was fifteen years ago, and the age spots on his balding head have grown. He's tall and lean, and his face has a look of compassion plastered on it as he awkwardly pats a grieving woman on the shoulder. Her loved ones gingerly pull her away and lead her out of the cemetery, leaving the priest all alone.

I rush out of the office, not even bothering to close the door behind me as I head straight to the graveyard. The icy wind pinches my cheeks, and I tug the white headress forward to protect me from the chill. Thankfully, I used wool for the costume, both for warmth and to hide my true figure from any witnesses.

I slink farther inside the cemetery gardens and try to avoid looking at one grave in particular. Despite my best efforts, though, I catch a glimpse of the bouquet of black tulips I left a few weeks ago, now wilted on the gravestone. Although my *nonni* won't admit it, I know Antonella helped pay for the stone. It's certainly more than either one of my families could have ever afforded. I would normally want to destroy anything that Claudio's money touched, but this was another one of Antonella's acts of atonement. As much as I hate the Vincelli name, Antonella was the only one on my list who tried to help me. I won't take my forgiveness from her now.

By the time I make it to the grave, the last few mourners have all but disappeared between the tall granite statues, graves, and trees. A thrill of excitement buzzes over my skin at the sound of the front main gate squeaking

open and clanking closed. The priest and I are truly alone in the secluded graveyard, hidden from the outside world by the formidable stone wall that surrounds it.

Perfect.

I lurk in the shadows along the main building, thankful that it's already dusk. Gray and white statues of saints and angels stare on in silent testimony like dark omens. The light fog that has settled over the grounds and the thick trees that were planted centuries ago give me the sense that the cemetery itself supports me in what I'm about to do.

The priest and I seem to both be waiting to make sure that no grieving stragglers will return. Once it seems the coast is clear, the priest nods to himself once, crosses himself over his chest, and turns around to walk back into the church.

I step out onto the stone path, my heart racing, wondering if he'll recognize me. All he does is give a cursory smile without even meeting my eyes. His gaze darts to the scar I've left uncovered, and his face twists in disgust.

"Sister," he grumbles, still refusing to look at me as he walks past.

"Father Lucas." I don't mask the anger in my voice.

He halts mid-step but doesn't turn around to face me.

"Sister, did you have something you wish to discuss?" he asks with a labored sigh.

"More like...confess," I hiss.

He scowls at me over his shoulder, and I make my move while he's off-kilter. I pounce on his back and hold on as he collapses to his knees on the stone walkway. Once we're on the ground, I straddle his back and grab him by his white collar. He manages to get out half of a yelp before I hold my blade to his throat, shutting him up.

"Don't. Scream."

"What's the meaning of this?" His growl makes blood trickle from beneath the blade, and he quickly changes his tune. "I-I mean, whatever it is you're enduring, I can—I can help you."

"Oh, like you *helped* me fifteen years ago?"

He stills below me, and confusion wrinkles his brow. "I...I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, my child."

"Let me remind you, then, *Father.*" I lean closer so he can see my face and I can watch his expression. "Does the name Chiara Bianchi ring a bell?"

His frown deepens. “N-no. I’m sorry—”

I scoff. “Figures. It really fucking figures that you plague my nightmares, but I don’t even appear in your memories.”

I’m going to savor this kill so fucking much.

“Nightmares? Ah, I see. The Lord has sent you to me to heal you, of course. I’ve dealt with many disturbed individuals—”

My knife edges into the paper-thin skin of his neck. He whimpers as he bleeds into the hard-packed dirt.

“I’m disturbed, alright. Claudio Vincelli killed my parents, used me, and then he brought me to you so that you could brainwash me into thinking everything that he put me through was all in my head.” My prey’s entire body grows rigid with fear. “Ah, are you remembering all my ‘confessions’ now, Father? I wondered if name-dropping St. Catherine’s largest benefactor would trigger your memory.”

“You...you’re the little girl? I thought you were—oh, heavens, child, I never wanted to go along with it, but he made me—”

“Claudio *made* you? Was that before he gave the church enough money to drip in gold? Or after supplying you with your top-of-the-line sports cars and toys?”

“Watch your tongue when you speak to a man of God, girl! I’ve never taken a bribe, and whatever money Claudio did give me was solely for the orphanage’s food pantry—”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” The blade bites farther into his neck, and he wheezes in panicked breaths. “Don’t give me the ‘I did it for the children,’ bullshit. You did it for yourself. Claudio—and God knows who else—has had you in his pocket for years. You may have fooled everyone else, but not me.”

“Fine! Fine! You’re right! Just please! Let me go.”

“Not before you tell me what I need to know.”

I only have one question, and I’m ninety-nine percent sure of the answer already. After my first failed attempt with the driver, I was overly cautious. Now I’m throwing caution to the wind by acting on the priest out of order, so I want to be absolutely certain of every other step I take from here on out.

“Chiara, I’m—”

“Don’t fucking call me that,” I hiss and yank on his purple vestments. “Chiara is dead.”

His eyes catch on my scar, and he stills.

“It really is you, isn’t it? Claudio told me what happened with those demon dogs. You...you want revenge. Is that it? Revenge is for the wicked, child. You can stop this.” He licks his lips nervously. “W-whatever it is that you’ve done in the name of the devil, confession can set you free—”

“No, Father, it’s time for *you* to confess.” I wrench him up and slice the knife underneath his Adam’s apple.

He shrieks, but it ends with a choking gasp. “I-I won’t tell you anything. All confessions are given in confidence. I won’t break my vows.”

“All confessions except for mine, right? Fine, suit yourself.” I drag the blade slowly along his neck, giving him time to reconsider.

“Wait!! Wait! G-God wouldn’t want me to die like this, so, um, ask your question.”

I roll my eyes but ease up on the blade. “I need a name. Years ago, I told you about the man that came to my room. He was a judge. What was his name?”

“Th-the judge...” I hold the knife very still and let the quiet graveyard tell him how alone he is. “I’m not sure—”

“Liar.” I tighten my grip on his vestments, and he slaps his hands on the ground before finally sputtering the name.

“R-Richard! H-his name is Richard Blunt!”

“Good. You answered correctly.”

“Y-you knew it, already?”

“Of course, I knew. You tried to make me think I was crazy, but you failed. You could have saved me, but you kept your stupid oath to save the devil instead. I might not remember everything, but I’ve learned everything I need to know, including the names of everyone who deserves damnation. You happen to be the seventh.”

“Y-you must forgive, child! Forgive me and those who wronged you, and you too will be forgiven. You will be blessed from this if you remember that everything that happens is God’s will.”

I shake my head. “Your sins against me are too much to forgive.”

“Sins against *you*?” Anger suddenly reddens his pale skin. “You’ll go to hell for this, you know. God will never forgive you—”

“I don’t need forgiveness, Father. I need justice.”

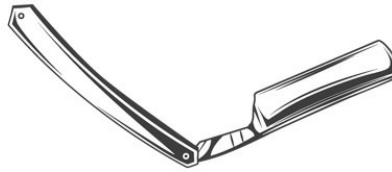
I slice my blade across his neck, spilling the rest of his throat into the dirt. His life leaves him in gurgling spurts out of the cut that nearly split his head from his body. I drop him and his head rebounds off the ground with a

satisfying thud.

“Forgive yourself, Father, for you have sinned.”

Scene 24

THOUGH THIS BE MADNESS



Sever

I'm stunned, stone-still in shock, as I admire my *vipera's* gruesome murder. I'd be impressed by her methods if I wasn't so fucking confused.

Why Father Lucas? Why anyone, for that matter? I wasn't able to get close enough to hear anything they said, but if her issues are with Claudio, why is she going after the men underneath him? I'm sure there's a reason behind the madness, this was obviously no spur-of-the-moment kill, but I'm still at a loss.

Whatever it is, he won't be missed. Everyone in the Luciano-Vincelli family knows this "man of God" is about as corrupt as they come. Hell, I found myself glancing around the graveyard and through the church windows to make sure Tallie wasn't spotted as she took him out. Even the Catholic Church has been trying to get him to quietly retire for years. But why would he when Claudio gives the man everything he could ever desire? All the priest has to do in return is report any damning confessions to Claudio.

I continue to watch in silence as she staggers off of her prey. The greatest miracle in this cemetery right now is that it looks as if she didn't get a drop of blood on her. Her decision to attack him from behind was a wise one, and it's clear someone trained her how to take down an opponent.

A spark of jealousy ignites at the realization that she might've trusted someone else with her secrets. That flare of weakness pisses me off almost as much as the thought itself. She still has me under her spell.

I shouldn't still want her. I should despise her for using me to get to

Claudio. She's just like everyone else in my world, stepping on people to reach their greedy goals.

But I don't hate her. In fact, as she grins down at the brutal slaying she just committed, satisfaction wells within me. All I want to do is bend her over and fuck her against a gravestone as a congratulations.

My cock thickens behind my zipper, but I don't dare so much as shift to ease the pressure. She hasn't noticed me behind this Lazarus statue, and I plan to keep it that way. For now.

After this, there will be no more hiding or waiting for her to come to me. Once I have her alone again, all bets are off. I'll punish a confession out of her, but it'll be much more enjoyable than it was for the priest. At least for me anyway. Especially if I end up having to kill her after.

My stomach churns, so I focus back on the present as Tallie begins to roll the priest's body toward the premade hole in the ground. It only takes a few turns before she squeezes him underneath the raised casket. The corpse falls into the grave, eager to start its descent into hell. She pushes off her knees to stand again. Once she's up, she glances around before using her sleeve to press the button on the gravesite's lowering device, hiding the evidence of her murder.

Clever, clever little viper.

If I've learned nothing else from this horror show, it's that Talia Amoretti is a dangerous enemy to have. I don't know what motivates her, but if she'd come to me, we might've even joined forces. Instead, she used me, and while we have a common foe, she destroyed the possibility of an alliance when she destroyed my trust.

I've seen enough, and I'm mentally mapping out my exit when the whirl of the lowering device halts. When I peer around the monument hiding me, the casket is still above the ground, but Tallie has left its side. My brow furrows, and I huddle closer to the Lazarus statue as she walks over to another gravestone.

She kneels, closes her eyes, and touches the dead grass in front of the stone. Her whisper to the grave puffs a cloud of warmth into the winter air. Fuck, I'd go back in time and kill the priest *for* her, just to know what she's saying. But before I can sneak closer, she rises and takes a flower from the wilted bouquet on top.

Its dried petals can't possibly have any scent, but she still reverently lifts the dark flower to her nose and breathes it in. It's a moment of grief that

aches in my chest. Her face is soft and at peace as she carries her prize back. A little smile lifts her lips as she fits the flower into the crevice between the casket and the empty grave. There's no sound as it falls, but I imagine its impact reverberates through her all the same.

She returns to the lowering device mechanism and presses the button to begin the casket's descent again. This time, she stops it when it closes the gap.

Once again, fucking smart. She's positioned it so that the grave diggers won't see the body when they come back later tonight to finish the job. When she's finished, she straightens her habit and winds through the cemetery to exit through a back gate.

The costume, the knife, the lack of hesitation...Father Lucas's murder was decided well in advance. But what triggered it today of all days? Did Tony's murder set things in motion? What does she plan to do next? If Claudio is one of her targets, I want to force her hand.

An idea forms in my mind, and a Cheshire smile grows across my face. I already know her show schedule by heart. She might intend to take time off to mourn her *nonno*, but if I dangle the prize in front of her, will it entice her out of the shadows again?

My mother has been messaging me off the hook, begging for my forgiveness after the disastrous dinner with Claudio and Judge Blunt. I could use her guilt to my advantage. Then I could use the neighborhood gossip mill to covertly spread the word about where Claudio and I will be. If all goes well, though, everything I've been working for will fall right into my lap.

Anticipation buzzes underneath my skin, but before I go back to my motorcycle, curiosity gets the best of me.

I have to lean so heavily on my cane that it sinks into the ground despite the freezing cold dirt. Once I get to the gravestone Tallie knelt before, I study every detail to find out why she was so interested in it.

Wilted Queen of Night tulips rest on top of the plain, upright granite headstone. A cherub sits in the center with a flower in its hand. Three names are etched in the stone: a mother, father, and daughter. But the hair on the back of my neck stands on end at one name in particular.

Chiara Bianchi.

She had the same first name as the girl who sacrificed herself for me and the same last name as the butcher who died to keep his family safe. According to the dates, this seven-year-old girl passed away with her parents

fifteen years ago...somehow weeks before I met her.

I'm standing in front of the grave where my savior is buried, more shocked and confused than I've ever felt. Emotion knifes through me just as sharply as any dagger, and I have to use both hands on my cane handle to keep from falling to my knees. Even then, I can't ignore the way my injured muscles tug at my stab wound. My body aches inside and out, but one question is more agonizing than all of it combined.

Why the fuck was Talia Amoretti at this grave?

I don't know, but I'm going to find out.

Once I get my bearings again, I yank my phone from my pocket.

Got another cleanup. My vipera has been busy.

It looks like she had a clean kill, but I want another set of eyes on the scene for me to ensure she doesn't get caught. Whatever punishment comes her way will come from me, not the authorities.

I don't wait for him to respond before I'm dialing to make a call. She answers on the second ring.

"Hello? Severino?" The hope in her voice would've tricked me years ago. Not anymore. She's used me countless times. It's time I get payback.

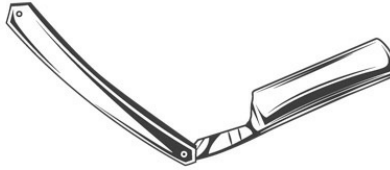
"Mother," I begin, buttering her up already by using the endearment. "I'd like to mend a few fences, but it'll take your finesse to make it happen."

"Of course, dear. Anything you need."

"In that case, how would you like to see an encore performance?"

Scene 25

WHO'S THE SNAKE NOW?



Talia

“Has no one seen Percy?” Our director, Deon, wrings his hands together as he paces in the hall outside the small dressing room.

“I haven’t heard from him,” I answer. “Not since Saturday night’s show. But you know...I think he left the afterparty in a hurry.”

“And I *warned* him something would go wrong!” Deon’s dark-brown skin creases between his perfectly manicured black brows until his fingers smooth the wrinkles away. “We should *never* invoke the Scottish play, and yet he said it in front of everyone!” He groans dramatically. In the next second, though, he bounces back and snaps the air at me. “Alright, then, the show must go on. Talia, dress our understudy—wait...”

He steps closer, and his voice lowers. “Are you really okay to work tonight? You know you didn’t have to come in today, right?”

“I know.” I blink back the tears that have been nearly constant the past twenty-four hours. “I...I need this, though.”

I didn’t realize how much I thrived in the familiar chaos that being backstage brings until I got here.

Deon studies my expression before nodding once in return. He sheds his compassion like a second skin and resumes his stern, slightly stressed default setting. It’s just what I need.

“Okay, then. You’re prepped, right?”

“Always.”

“Good. I’ll tell them they’re up. But if you see Percy before I do, tell him that when I get a hold of him, I’m going to wring his neck.”

Well, what do you know? Sever already did that for you.

I keep steaming the understudy’s gardener costume without looking up until Deon disappears through the door. I usually have an excellent poker face. In this instance, though, there was no way I would’ve been able to hide the smug satisfaction on my face.

Knowing that Percy will never hurt me—or anyone else—ever again gives me the same pride I felt yesterday when I killed the priest. Not to mention that seeing Sever kill in my name woke something dark and carnal deep inside me. With everything that’s happened, I still haven’t fully processed those feelings. Now that I’m going through my list at full speed, I probably never will. Especially since it seems that Sever has taken himself out of the equation entirely after leaving me and Gio behind yesterday.

It stings that Sev hasn’t tried to contact me in some way, but I was harsh when I dismissed him. Maybe he thinks steering clear of me is for the best right now. Who knows, he’s probably right. I’ve been teetering between rage and sorrow every moment since.

After I got back from the church last night, Gio was my sole concern, and I’d gone straight to my *nonni*’s apartment. But it was empty. Hollow. Everywhere I looked, though, I still saw Tony.

In my mind’s eye, he was finishing the Christmas decorations. He was neatly folding the rest of the clothes in the hamper into stacks on the small dining room table. He was chewing the end of a pen as he mulled over a half-finished recipe for a new dessert he’d been concocting the past few weeks. I could almost hear the “I Love Lucy” rerun in the background like a ghostly soundtrack.

My chest had caved in, and I’d fled the room, slamming the door shut behind me.

With only one other place to look, I ran downstairs to the kitchen and found Gio sitting in the tall chair he uses to reach the top tier of wedding cakes. He sat there, holding Tony’s apron to his chest. His cheeks were damp, and his eyes were red from hours of crying.

“How many more are on your list?” he’d asked. It was all he wanted to know and all I was willing to tell him. I don’t want to implicate Gio in this anymore than he already is.

“I think two...maybe three. I haven’t decided.”

He nodded. “Make them count, *dolce nipotina*.”

I wanted to call out sick tonight and stay home with him, but I couldn't. Whether we can make rent in the next few months all depends on my job at the Revere now. We need all the money we can get with the shop being out of commission for who knows how long.

The crime scene investigators need to study the scene, file their reports, and catalogue all the evidence. Everyone knows Claudio has something to do with this, but they still have to go through the rigamarole to prove they did their due diligence. Plus, they've got to cover their tracks.

Once they finish and Gio reopens the bakery—

Sorrow slams into me again. I'm not sure it ever left, yet I remember it's there when it randomly hits me like a freight train without warning throughout the day.

Will Gio want to return to that kitchen after all this? What will happen to us now that Tony is gone? He told us to live, but what does that look like without him?

The questions are too heavy to bear, so I focus on my other motive for being here. Gio heard through the grapevine that my biggest target will be at this show. My list is all out of order, though at this point, I'll take my opportunities where I can. Revenge has always settled me. I've never been able to fix heartache, but rage is an emotion I can handle. I'm hoping to access that tonight so I can get one step closer to finishing my list.

Determination settles in my bones as I get ready for the understudy to come in. When they arrive, their light skin is flushed with excitement. They are humble and kind, and shorter and less bulky than Percy was. I don't even have to evade wandering hands, leering glances, or lewd remarks. All that together makes resizing the costume a damn breeze.

I mentally check out as they make nervous small talk. It's nice, mundane, and predictable. I can go about my business, letting my mind wander and my steady fingers do all the work. Over the past several weeks, I've learned to embrace the nice, mundane, and predictable when I can.

The priest is the third death on my hands. Each one has been easier than the last. Will I be callous and cold by the time I get to the end? Will it still be rewarding? Will I be okay if I don't finish the list?

I've amended the list once before with Antonella. My Medusa tattoo still has a few snakes that I haven't filled in yet, but she's the only white one. Lately, I've been wondering if my sense of justice would be sated if I tattoo

the last one in white, too.

Of course, I might not be lucky enough to finish the piece at all. Completing the symbolic ink on my arm isn't what matters. My list is my main goal, and now I'm not just finishing it for me, I'm doing it for Gio, too. We've always been cut from the same cloth, he and I. If revenge is what he needs to be made whole again, then revenge is the least I can give him.

I put the finishing touches on the understudy's outfit just in time for their courtesy call to the stage. They hop out of the dressing room, ready and eager for their debut. I'll have to learn their name one of these days. Or maybe I won't since my future is up in the air. My best-case scenario is that Gio and I flee town after this is over. Worst case? An enforcer puts a bullet through my skull before I can finish.

By the time I've tidied up the dressing rooms, set out late scene costume changes for the other actors, and reorganized my needle and thread collections, the show is almost over. The final curtain call buzzes over the backstage broadcast system, signaling the end of the show, and my nerves go up in flames.

Up until now, I've been putting off looking into the crowd, apprehensive about potentially taking out the most dangerous name on my list. I'm not sure if I'm excited or terrified that Claudio could be here, but I know it's time to check before it's too late and I miss my chance. When I peek out from behind the act curtain, I find him instantly in the VIP section...with his nephew.

Panic shocks through me.

What the hell?

Sever sits in the same seat, front-row center. This time, though, he's alert and sitting forward with his fingers steepled on top of his cane handle. It could be just the bright stage lighting that's darkening the audience's faces, but with his narrowed eyes and his hands partially hiding the rest of his expression, I swear he looks pissed off. Part of me wants to go to him and figure out why. The other part of me can't get past the fact that he's sitting with not just one, but *two* names from my list.

Why the fuck is he with them? Here, at *my* job? I thought he and Claudio couldn't stand each other. And the last time I saw the other man, Sever was poised to tear him from limb to limb. I guess they made up.

The fact that Sever might still be Claudio's "guard dog" makes my stomach churn. Bile creeps up my throat, but I swallow it back. I hang onto the curtain in front of me to keep my balance, and it ripples up the ceiling.

The actors trip over their lines, and I realize way too late that I've stepped out onto the stage. The spotlight isn't on me, so I don't think anyone else is paying attention, but I've set the actors off-kilter. My mind shouts at me to run backstage. Someone behind me harshly whispers my name, trying to rein me in. But I can't stop gravitating toward Sever.

Then he glances at me.

And smirks.

It's not the sexy, flirty grin he's gifted me ever since he caught me at the bakery. It's vicious and triumphant, like the cat that's got the cream. His eyes flick down the row at his mother, Claudio, and the judge before meeting my gaze again. He's...*taunting* me.

I'm going to be sick.

"Talia!" Deon grabs the sleeve of my sweater dress and snatches me away from the stage. "What the hell are you doing? Are you out of your mind?"

Yes.

He knows it, too, and his large brown eyes soften. "Oh, honey, you look like you've seen a ghost. Are you okay? Do you need to sit down?"

Yes.

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

His lips purse. "Here's what you're gonna do. Make sure everyone has everything they need for the night, and then head home, alright? Grief is tricky, Talia. Don't underestimate it, or it'll drag you down to the pits of hell and keep you there."

Already there.

"Yeah. Right. I'll just, um, take care of things and go."

I don't hear his reply as I stumble past him toward the dressing rooms. My blood rushes in my ears, my mind races, and an iron vice squeezes my lungs tighter and tighter.

All my plans. I almost ruined them for a *man*.

No, not "just" a man, my heart whispers.

A man who made me feel safe enough to relax in his embrace. A man who sparked more hope than I've ever dared to have before. A man who has caught me every time I've fallen—

My heart keeps trying to chime in with objections, but logic brutally stabs it to death.

He had no right to make me feel anything. No right to make me question

all that I've strived for. He had no right, and yet, I nearly gave him the power to ruin *everything*.

And he's ruining it in the most spectacular of ways. All that I witnessed at dinner Sunday night made me think he hated the Boss and the judge as much as I do, and now he's inviting them to a *musical*? And not just any musical, *my* musical.

My steps stutter, and I cling to the edge of my sewing counter to stop from collapsing. My gaze shifts up to the mirror in front of me. Fear has dilated my pupils, and I get lost in their green-gold depths as my world finally comes crashing down.

Sever knows.

Something about the drive-by yesterday must have tipped him off, and he didn't like what he found out. It's probably why he ran away so quickly and why I haven't heard from him since. And now he...what? Brought Claudio and Judge Blunt here to taunt me?

Yes. That's exactly what happened. I feel the truth of it in my soul. His sick, twisted smile told me everything I needed to know.

I've been played for a fool. He never should've gotten past my defenses, but I literally opened the door. I even had the chance to finish him off, but I stupidly saved his life instead. He's always been rotten to the core. Anyone who could do what he did—

I shake my head and glare at the scar I concealed with makeup out of habit this morning. I've been ashamed and hidden the evidence of what happened to me for so long that invisibility has become part of my identity. But while hiding protected me for a while, it also protected the ones that *should* be ashamed. They think they've gotten off scot-free, and now they flaunt their immunity right in front of my face.

But I haven't been their victim since I was seven years old. *Tallie* has never been a victim, and I won't be one now. If Sever thinks he can screw with my mind by bringing the two people I hate most in this world to terrorize me, he thought wrong. I won't let him have the satisfaction of getting to me. If he wants to serve my enemies on a silver fucking platter, he can be my guest.

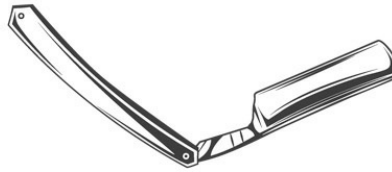
I grab my coat and loop my bag over my shoulder. My hand dips into a canvas pocket to grip my knife's cool, pearl handle like a lifeline.

I should've killed him when I had the chance. I should've killed them all when I had the chance, superstitions and list order be damned.

“I won’t make the same mistake twice, Severino Luciano.”

Scene 26

A VIPER LYING IN WAIT



Talia

While the actors take their bows back in the theater, I scout out the parking garage for Claudio's black Rolls-Royce Ghost. It's on the first floor in the same spot I killed his driver a few days ago. I can't imagine the happy company all riding in one vehicle together, but I don't see Severino's motorcycle. How he got here doesn't matter, though. I'm praying they congregate near the Rolls-Royce before going home, so I'll just wait in the nearby alley like I did Saturday night.

I pull my hood farther over my head and duck away from security cameras as I text Gio that I'll be home late. I normally don't have to, but considering he's all alone without Tony—

My heart wrenches, and the sudden ache makes me suck in icy cold air. I press my hand to my chest to try to ease the pain that worsens the more I push it down.

"It's okay," I whisper. "It'll all be over soon."

One of the men in the front row was responsible for Tony's death. Making him pay is the only way to make this agony go away.

There's a white van blocking the alley this time, but I hide behind the same dumpster that I used to spy on Severino when he killed Percy.

Wait...

Why *did* Sever kill Percy? He told Percy it was because he touched me, but why would Sever so willingly work for Claudio and the judge if that

mattered to him? He didn't know who I was before he attacked Percy, right? Or does he even know who I am at all? Dammit, what on earth *does* he know?

I need answers, and I'll find them at the edge of my knife.

Questions race wildly in my mind, reminding me of how busy it felt up there before I had my list to focus all my energy on. I try to shove them aside, so my thoughts are crystal clear when it's time to strike.

While the audience filters out slowly from the building and into the parking garage, I mentally map out my plan.

I'll stay in the shadows, and once they come out, I'll jump out and slice all of their throats, one by one—

No, that's sloppy. Messy. I'll get caught or killed before I can make my first cut, and I can't do that to Gio.

I could sprint to the car now and see if it's unlocked—

No, too many people are already out here to see me loitering around an ultra-expensive car. And even if it is unlocked, Severino's entourage could return at just the wrong moment. Then I'd get caught or killed.

What about...

As I wait for my prey to finally surface, I run through a million different scenarios. In every single one, I get caught or killed, caught or killed, caught or killed. It's exhausting just thinking about the failed possibilities, and my nerves are so fried that throwing caution to the wind starts to feel as good an idea as any.

There's no afterparty this time, so I don't know what the fuck is taking them so long, unless Severino's mother insisted on meeting the cast again anyway. I wouldn't be surprised about that, actually. She seems the type to insist people perform for her on her time.

Antonella never said a bad word about anyone around me, but she never said a good one about Gertrude Luciano, either. After my first few minutes of recon a couple of months ago, I could tell why. The woman likes foxglove, one of the deadliest flowers known to man, for God's sake. She's crazier than I am.

The masses continue to slowly trickle out until the ramps that wrap around the building are completely empty.

I frown and glance toward the parking lot. The Rolls-Royce is now one of the only cars left. Anticipation thrums through my veins. Fewer cars means fewer witnesses, which could work in my favor. But what the hell is taking

them so long?

Not a second later, four figures finally emerge from around the corner on the ramp leading from the front door.

Claudio and Gertrude walk side by side like a stoic bride and groom cake topper, while Judge Blunt marches along behind them. Severino takes up the rear, and the rhythmic taps of his cane echo across the pavement.

They sound slower than usual. His ankle looked pretty swollen the other night, and the pitiful wrap job I did with muslin and cotton swatches couldn't have helped much.

Guilt twinges in my chest. What if he's still in pain—

Stop it.

Once again, my heart is trying to get me in trouble, and I have to tamp down its pathetic need for a happy ever after. I tighten my grip on my knife to remind myself why I'm here. The handle is slippery in my sweaty palm after waiting for so long, and I clutch it so hard that my hand cramps.

I slowly inch forward when Severino calls to his mother. The whole entourage halts, and I freeze with them. He says something to her, and Claudio's voice booms across the parking lot.

"You mean to tell me we waited for you to hobble out of the theater only to have you slow us down and then take a cab? Fucking ridiculous. Get out of here, boy."

I shouldn't be shocked when Severino listens and turns around to head back to the front of the theater. If he's under Claudio's thumb, being ordered to go home is the least of his worries.

Even from here, Claudio looks pissed that Severino doesn't argue back with him. The Boss finally resorts to waving the whole incident off like a gnat and leads his party of three down the ramp to the parking garage.

Frustration flushes my cheeks. I wanted to get all of them at once...but maybe this is a stroke of luck after all. Taking on three men with one knife are never great odds, especially when one of the men can whip his cane around better than a prized fighter can throw a punch. But with Severino gone, the odds have tipped way in my favor.

The trio finally enters the parking garage, and I glance around for places to hide and flee now that most of the cars are gone. I might have to jump over the short railing, but I did it before.

Wind flutters a curl in my eyes, and I pull my hood around my face. It'll be the last time I can wear this jacket since Gertrude will see a killer wearing

it. If I avoid the lights and security cams, she shouldn't be able to identify me. It's a pity that none of them will see my scars, and it's a tragedy that Claudio and the judge might die thinking this is a random act of violence.

No. Fuck that.

The thought rankles, and I spit in my hand before wiping my palm over my lower jaw. It won't be enough to remove the professional-grade makeup completely, but hopefully I'm revealing enough of the scar, so they know their maker when they meet her.

When they get ten yards away from their car, I finally prowl out from behind the dumpster toward them.

One step. Another. Another. I'm slinking along like a cobra waiting to strike. They talk among themselves, having no idea that this is the last conversation that the three of them will have together.

"Are you sure we shouldn't wait for Severino?" his mom asks.

"He said he'd take a cab, Trudy. What do you want me to do about it? He's a grown ass man."

"Yes, but you saw him. He was struggling just to walk."

The judge grunts, and the sound rips like a jagged knife down my spine. I stop in my tracks beside the van and cling to its side mirror. My teeth clench to keep the sudden nausea at bay. It's only made worse when the judge begins to speak, and his words slur thanks to the concession stand's unlimited drinks.

"Serves him right for trying to attack me. He's lucky I didn't kill him with that steak knife."

"It was a flesh wound, Dickie. I've always admired you for calling it like it is," Claudio huffs. "Don't pretend you ever had the upper hand with one of my men."

Gertrude clears her throat primly. "Well, *I* think that my Severino's offer to take us to the theater tonight was a lovely gesture, don't you, dear? And Judge Blunt, didn't Severino say that his cousin, Orazio, has offered to give you a luxury shave and a haircut at Luciano's Cuts? It's quite an exclusive barbershop. Orazio has to book clients months in advance."

"The 'Gangster's Paradise,' he called it," the judge scoffs while I have to stifle my laugh. "What an immature name."

"Yes, um, I suppose the name could use some improvement," she murmurs. "Orazio comes from the more...*uncouth* side of the Luciano name, shall we say. They're not the brightest bunch, but it's all in good fun."

“Hmm, I do have court next week. I might take the boy up on the offer.”

“See, dear?” Trudy smiles brilliantly at Claudio, who doesn’t even care enough about either of them to look up from his phone. “Everyone’s turning over a new leaf.”

“Those boys have always been unpredictable,” Claudio harrumphs. “It’ll take more than a goddamn musical and a haircut to prove their loyalties.”

My brow furrows. The way that the judge and Claudio are talking about him, it doesn’t seem as if they like Severino at all. But if they still hate him, why were they all together tonight?

What is going on?

As much as I’m burning with unanswered questions, the two men have reached the car, and it’s my do-or-die moment. I let go of the van’s side mirror to clutch my knife in my bag and slowly bring it out of its pocket. But my hand stops halfway to hear the judge mumble again.

“Just keep your attack dog away from me, Claudio. I’ll kill the bastard if he tries to threaten me again.”

“You have my word, Dickie. Just do what you’re told, and I’ll keep my dogs in line.”

Claudio still calls his nephew—technically his stepson—his guard dog? They eat Sunday dinner together, go to musicals together, and Sever is just a *dog* to them?

Ugh, forget it. You don’t care, my mind hisses, and I take another step closer.

“To tell you the truth, Dickie, I should’ve put him and the rest of us out of his misery when my brother died. We’d all be better off if that menace was in the ground.”

“Claudio, dear, don’t say—”

“Don’t deny it, Trudy. The boy has been fucked in the head ever since—”

My wrist is suddenly squeezed to the point of pain, forcing me to drop my knife back into my bag. Before I can even register what’s happening, a gloved hand wraps around my mouth and yanks me back against an even harder chest. I quietly try to fight out of the hold so I don’t draw my prey’s attention, but something sharp nicks my neck, and I go completely still to keep it from cutting me.

“Don’t fucking move, *vipera*.”

I’d assumed the sharp, pointing thing digging into my neck was a blade, but it sinks into my skin with an aching pinch. A gentle rush of fuzzy

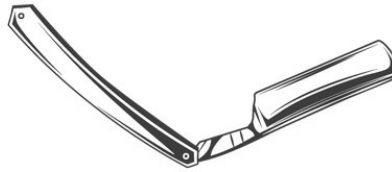
relaxation flows like a wave through me as Severino depresses the plunger of the needle into my neck.

“You thought you could betray me, you lying snake? Use me as a pawn in whatever little fucked-up game you’re playing with my uncle? If you wanted to play Talia, all you had to do was ask.” He bites the scarred side of my neck, but thanks to the drugs, all I feel is a masochistic throb of anticipation in my core. “We’re about to have some fun, *mia bella, vipera.*”

The world spins and fades, and I vaguely hear the doors to the van behind me open. I watch helplessly as the two men I hate most in the world drive away. Then the third one gingerly lays me on thick blankets, like I’m precious and fragile. Despite carefully handling me, his sadistic smile is the last thing I see before he slams the van’s door closed and his poison drags me into darkness.

Scene 27

WAKING UPSIDE DOWN



Talia

The cold, damp ground presses against my side, and light shines brightly through my eyelids. Something cozy and soft covers my ankles and silk wraps around my wrists against my chest. Hard links squeeze around my arms, shoulders, chest, waist, and legs. I try to shift, but I'm stuck, and a moan falls from my lips.

A dark, sexy chuckle wafts over my skin, and my core flips.

"Time to wake up, *vipera*."

The rich voice makes me smile...until everything splashes back into my memory.

Severino with my arch-nemeses. Me poised to strike. A hard embrace enveloping me. A pinch of darkness sending me to oblivion.

"Good. You're up. You've been asleep for hours. I'm not a patient man."

My body might enjoy the sound of his voice, but my mind knows just how dangerous he is, and my eyes snap open wide.

"I've been asleep for hours because *you* drugged me!"

Severino's face is directly above mine from where he's sitting. His handsome, hard edges make my stomach flutter, but his sinful smile sends my pulse racing. The black long-sleeved Henley he's wearing strains against his biceps as he rubs a washcloth down his cane in long, slow strokes, not breaking eye contact. I bite my lip, and his eyes drop to my mouth.

"I wish I didn't have to do this, Talia, but fuck am I going to enjoy it."

"Wh-What're you going to do?"

He smirks, but his knuckles lighten as they squeeze his cane harder.

I brave glancing away to take in my surroundings. The room is as cold as a refrigerator and just as bland aesthetically. If I didn't still have my warm sweater dress on from earlier, my teeth would be chattering. At first, I can't place the stark white walls and polished concrete floors, but then it all hits me. My pounding heart stops.

We're in his meat locker. The one my...

I try to sit up, but my wrists are bound in between my breasts by his tie, and the metal links wrapped around my body are actually a thick silver chain keeping me still. They keep my legs spread apart and behind me. With my arms bound and my ankles tied to the chain around my waist, I'm not quite hogtied, but I still can't move more than a wiggle.

"What have you done to me?"

"It's called shibari. From what I researched while you were unconscious, I've apparently been practicing my own twisted version of it as torture for years." A dark, sardonic laugh rolls from him and flows over my skin. "It's rope bondage, or chains in this case. I never thought to do it for pleasure. I've strung plenty of my enemies up to get them to talk, but never quite...like...this..." He lets the words linger in the air. "And I would've never guessed I'd have to do it to *you*. But that's what happens to people who lie and betray me, Talia. They end up here." He holds up his gleaming cane to inspect it in the light. "Fight and scream all you want. No one will hear you, and the sound is music to my ears. But just know, you won't get out until I'm done with you."

"Did you say *betray* you? Ha. That's rich."

Despite his warning, I still squirm and try to kick myself free. All I do is rub against the soft layer of fabric that protects the bare skin of my ankles from the chains.

"I didn't have anything to keep the metal from irritating your skin, so I used scarves." He huffs a harsh laugh. "Isn't that crazy? You betray me, and I still worry about your pain. I'm so fucking *weak*."

"Let me go, now," I hiss.

"Now, why would I do that? You've proven to be a formidable opponent. Hell, I watched you kill Claudio's driver *and* his priest. Your methods are a thing of beauty, almost as well done as my own."

He saw me?

My eyes widen, and he smirks. "Don't worry. You weren't exactly discreet, but no one else was around. I made sure of it."

"Why? Why protect me like that?"

“Because I’ve always hated Father Lucas, and I wanted to see what you were up to more than I wanted to save that bastard.”

I glare at him, but my mind races. My instincts were correct back at the theater. He knows what I’ve done, and he was taunting me over it. I keep my mouth shut in the face of his accusations. From my understanding, Severino only brings people down here on Claudio’s behalf. There’s no way I’m spilling my secrets this close to the end of my list. I’d rather die than admit defeat.

“But what I don’t know, sweet Tallie, is *why* you did those things. And why did you stop at Chiara Bianchi’s grave? Do you want to skip all this back and forth and just fill me in?”

Hearing my old name *and* my *nonno* Tony’s nickname for me is like two daggers to my heart, sending rage anew through my veins. How dare this monster tie me up and use them against me?

“*Vaffanculo*, Severino. Fuck you. I’m not telling you a damn thing.”

His brows rise. “And how long have you known my full name? Actually, you know what? Forget about it. I’ve got my ways of getting people to talk. Granted, no one’s ever received the treatment *you* are about to get.”

He walks over to a panel on the wall and presses a button. My brow furrows as the chains above me begin to clink down the pulley system on the wall. When the links around me shift and pull my body from the floor, panic clogs my throat.

“Sev, what’re you doing?”

“Ah, so it’s Sev, now, huh? Is that because you want something? Sev when you want me, Sever when you need me, and Severino when you bare your fangs?”

“I’ve never wanted or needed you,” I spit at him as I rise, even though my body trembles, silently begging him to let me down. Air wafts against my legs, and I silently curse the fact that I wore thigh highs instead of leggings today. The fear I had been able to keep at bay starts to filter in, but when Severino takes *my* knife from the metal table beside him, it comes in full force.

“Found this in your purse. You were ready to use it on Claudio. Weren’t you?”

He spins the handle on his finger and catches it in the same hand before it falls. “I’m quite skilled with blades. It’s my thing. Is that why you killed the driver and the priest with a blade? Were you trying to frame me?”

I'm suspended parallel to the ground and high enough so that I'm level with his chest. The chains pull at every part of me equally while bending my legs back and spreading them wide. I'm not uncomfortable, and the lifting motion was slow enough that my body had time to adjust. But terror is still a tangible knot in my throat, and I have to tell myself to calm down and answer him.

"Frame you? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure, you do. You've been studying me for weeks, haven't you?"

"Months actually." I chuckle.

He sits back down, making him level with my line of sight. His jaw tics underneath his short beard, but some deep part of me is pleased at the surprise in his raised brow.

"Why have you been studying me?"

"If you don't know already, you don't deserve to know."

I've been so damaged and hurt by the wrongs he and his family have committed against me. And yet, he's been so blissfully unaware of the pain he's caused that he can't remember me on his own? If that's the case, I have no duty to explain how he hurt me.

And what if he doesn't care?

A pang twinges in my chest. That's the crux of it, isn't it? If I confess how his family destroyed me, and he doesn't care? That will break me far worse than anything else so far. I could handle being broken by the men I've sworn to kill. With Sever? I'll shatter and I won't be able to come back from it.

His smile lifts his lips, making me shiver. "Fine, then. We'll do it my way."

"And what way is that?" I leak venom into my voice so he can't hear the undercurrent of unease there.

"I'm going to fuck the truth out of your mouth. Nice. Slow. Painfully. And you'll love it."

Desire tenses my inner muscles. I should be horrified by his threat, but my body remembers what it felt like to come in his arms, and something about his demeanor is starting to settle me. This position makes me feel like I'm flying, and Sev is here to catch me if I fall. Maybe I'm an idiot, but I can't help wondering what it would feel like to make him come this time. Plus, if he fucks me to death, what a way to go.

Traitor.

He traces my cheek. A look of awe softens his face as he purrs, “I can’t tell if you like the sound of that or if the suspension is getting to you. Your cheeks are turning the most gorgeous shade of red.”

“Neither,” I snap back. “I can hang up here all day, but I’ll never tell you what you want to hear.”

“But that’s exactly what I want to hear, *vipera*.” His finger drops, and he smirks. “Considering the men you’ve gone after so far, I had a feeling once you saw Claudio last night, you’d be eager to take him out. That’s why I parked the car so close to the dumpster. It seemed like a great hiding spot for you to try to take him out.”

“And yet you protected him,” I sneer.

“I protected him because I want information from you. Like why you used me to get to him. It seems like you’ve done your homework, so why try to frame me? Why bring me into the mix at all?”

I shake my head, but he cups my neck, taking some of the pressure off my chest as he lifts my torso himself and meets my gaze.

“You really are determined to make this fun for me, aren’t you?”

I glare at him. “Anyone who protects Claudio is my enemy.”

“And why is that? He’s screwed a lot of people over, so you’ll have to be more specific when you explain why you hate him.”

I slam my mouth shut. At this point, telling him will only get me killed. Once Severino finds out he’s on my list, too, he’ll take me out before I can get them both.

“Hmm.” He narrows his eyes at my paper-thin lips and tsks. “Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He lets me go much more gently than I would’ve expected for someone who is supposed to torture me, and he steps around me and out of my range of sight. All I have to look at is his chair and the butcher instruments in front of me.

Suddenly, the blunt edge of my cool blade runs down my inner thigh. My knees try to clamp shut, but it’s no use.

“The chains have you spread out exactly where I want you, and they’ll keep you that way. You’ll have to endure what I do to you, and if you’re a good girl, you might even enjoy it. If not—”

The knife blade suddenly kisses my upper inner thigh. My pulse thrums faster. It’s no longer the blunt end.

“This is your femoral artery. One wrong slice, and you’ll bleed out down

this drain. So, which one will you be for me this time? Sweet Tallie? Or a viper? Either way, your life is in my hands. My answers are in yours.”

He drifts the knife’s blunt edge slowly closer and closer to my pussy. The shivers from before are back, and I’m vibrating with anticipation. When he reaches the apex of my thighs, he centers the blade over my entrance with only the thin cotton of my thong to separate us. I don’t dare move, and I try my best to shut off my emotions altogether.

He taps the flat side of the blade over my clit, and I bite back a moan.

“You’re already damp for me, Talia.” I can hear the grin in his voice. “I knew your body craved mine.”

“Go to hell.”

“I plan to. But I’ll take you to heaven before I drag you down with me.” He sniffs deeply. “Fuck, your arousal smells as good as you do.”

The knife trails over my mound, and before I know it, he’s nicked the thin straps of my thong. The material falls like a ribbon to the ground, and cool air licks at my soaking pussy.

“*Mia bella, vipera.*”

The need in his voice flushes heat through my body. With all my fantasies of murder and revenge, I never entertained one where I would be the star of this kind of show. Sev has been a mystery to me, shocking me at every turn. The way he woke us both up the other night was enough to tune my body to his. I want him despite the fact that we both want to kill each other. Hell, maybe it’s *because* we both want to kill each other.

He swipes a finger into my core, sending ripples of pleasure through me. The knife’s blunt edge glides along my curves, snagging my sweater dress as he makes his way back to my face. Once he’s in my field of vision, he pops his glistening finger into his mouth and sucks it clean on the way out.

“Delicious, sweet Tallie. So fucking delicious.”

“You’re depraved for hanging women up just to torture them.” Screw the breathy desire dripping from my voice.

“You bring it out of me. I’ve never been depraved like this before. You’re my first. Are you going to give me answers yet?”

I glare at him in answer, and he shrugs. He walks out of my vision and presses the button to start the pulley again. As my body begins to lower, disappointment dampens my excitement. That is, until I realize that I’m not *lowering*. Sever is turning me upside down.

What the hell?

Once I'm completely inverted, the chains stop. Blood begins to flow to my head, and my dress falls around my waist, leaving my ass and bare pussy exposed to the aging room's chilly air.

"Severino..."

High above me, he flicks the end of my knife with his fingernail and smiles at me. He lets the metallic ting echo against the hard walls before he speaks. "Are you finally realizing you're fucked, Talia? No more talking unless it's answers."

My mind wants to rebel, but my mouth clamps shut. When he steps closer, the hardening bulge in his jeans is all I can see. I get a front-row seat as he unbuckles his belt one-handed, just like he did when he killed Percy. It slides out of the loops in one fell swoop and my mouth waters. In his next motion, he wraps the belt around his wrist, through the buckle, and tightens it with a jerk of his hand. It hangs long and brushes the floor. My curiosity is through the roof until his free hand goes to his zipper.

I've felt how huge he is, but when he unzips and untucks his cock from his boxer briefs, its size shocks me as it hangs heavy, thick, and swollen. It's just at the right height for me to lick him, but I keep that crazed thought in check. My pussy clenches, though, begging for him to fill me.

He blows warm breath over my soaked opening, making me squirm. It takes a second for my mind to catch up to how he's positioned us, but when I figure it out, I gulp.

"Here's what we're going to do. I promised to fuck the truth from your pretty mouth. If you please me with your answers, I promise to make you come."

The idea of having this massive thing in my mouth makes me lightheaded. Or maybe it's from being upside down. Either way, as much as I want to do this to give him pleasure and to piss him off by not giving any answers, I don't know if I can *physically* do this.

Before I hyperventilate from either nerves or inversion, his long, strong arm cradles my back and lifts me up. My head and chest are parallel to the ground again, but I'm facing the ceiling this time and my legs are still high. The new position makes the blood that had been rushing to my head slowly drain back to the rest of my body. Warmth washes underneath my skin, and a soft smile crests my lips. Sever shifts so that his head blocks the light. I frown in confusion as I meet his gaze. The knife glints as his index finger brushes a curl out of my eyes.

“Breathing will get harder at this angle, but I’ll be watching you for any cues that it gets too much for you, and you’ll have two options at your disposal to tell me yourself.”

“Okay...”

“The first is a safe motion. I’ll give you the tip of my belt and you’ll yank on it if you need me to stop. You should have just enough freedom of movement to give me the safe motion so that I can get you out of the position if you want me to.”

Annoyance makes me snap back. “What do you care? Aren’t you trying to torture information from me? Do your worst, Severino Luciano.”

He shakes his head and huffs a dark laugh. “You’ve never seen my worst, Talia Amoretti. But you’re right. What was I thinking? Let’s cut to the chase. Your second option will be your safe word. When I fuck your face, I’ll allow you moments to breathe. That’s when you’ll use it.”

“Like hell I will. I can handle whatever you give me.”

A slow smile creeps into a smirk. “I’m counting on it. Pick now—”

“Tulip.”

His brow furrows, and an emotion I can’t decipher flickers over his face. I don’t know what came over me to choose that word, but it’s done. Now that I’ve chosen it...it feels perfect.

“Tulip.” His voice is hoarse. “Why?”

He’s still holding me with his arm around my back, and I shrug against his hand, trying to play off the tension that’s growing thick between us.

“Because of the tulip cookies I made the first day we met.” I meant it to sound carefree and nonchalant, but my words came out as just a rough whisper as his did.

“Fine. Tulip it is.” He lets me go, and the blood flows back to my head again in pulsing waves. His cock is nearly close enough for me to bite when he must read my mind.

“Oh, and no fangs, *vipera*...”

“Once you’re in my mouth, you’ll be at my mercy, Sever.”

He chuckles and cold metal kisses my clit. I stop breathing entirely.

“Sever...”

“Shh, don’t worry, *vipera*. I’ll only use this if you use teeth. In the meantime...” He centers the cold weapon over my entrance and swipes it through my arousal. Sheer panic takes over until I realize he’s not using the blade at all. It’s just the handle.

“Breathe, *dolcezza*,” he murmurs.

I inhale, and the cool pearl-white handle I’ve held while taking three lives enters my pussy.

“Damn, you must be tight.” He gently sinks the weapon deeper into me, and I whimper with need. “I can’t wait to fuck you with my cock and split you wide open.”

His dirty words make me moan, spurring him on. When the handle ends and the edge of the blade begins, he stops. Exhilaration and fear swirl through my belly at the thought of getting cut with just the wrong move.

“The sharp side is positioned toward your ass, and all I have to do is push this blade”—he taps it and I inhale sharply—“and it’ll slice through this gorgeous cunt. Now I don’t want to ruin something so beautiful. But is that what you want, Tallie?”

“N-no,” I answer quickly.

“Smart girl. Normally I don’t give a shit what my victims want. I’m just as fucking confused about the way I feel right now as I am about you betraying me to get to my uncle. Believe it or not, even though I hate you for using me, I want to make us both feel good before one of us inevitably tears the other to shreds. You’ve been my obsession, and I think I’ve been yours. Although for very different reasons it would seem. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you from the moment I saw you.”

I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since I heard your voice...

Granted, he’s right. My obsession has *very* different reasons.

“So if I’m right, suck my cock like you don’t want to kill me, and maybe I’ll spare your life. But first, take my belt. It’s long, but I’ll be able to feel the movements if you use it.”

He feeds the tip of his belt into my palms, and I tug for good measure. His hand wraps around the leather and tugs back. There’s plenty of slack, so he’ll be able to move his hands freely, but if I can’t use my safe word, this will be effective in signaling that I need him to stop. Although, I don’t think I’ll want him to.

He lets go of the belt to take himself in hand and cradles my head with his other.

“Open for me, *dolcezza*,” he murmurs, making my chest and pussy flutter around the handle of the knife.

If we didn’t hate each other, this would almost be a sweet moment. I meet his warm caramel eyes and open my mouth before his thick cock blocks my

view.

“Wider, baby. If your mouth is anything like your pussy, it’ll already be a tight fit.”

I obey and stretch my mouth to taste the crown. His length curves upward at the end, and the head dips past my teeth. As he works his shaft into my mouth, my fingers twitch around his belt. I wish I could touch him, encircle my fingers around him, but all I can do is focus on the feel of him against my tongue. Precum leaks from the tip, and I moan at the taste.

“Fuck, Talia.” He squeezes my hip almost to the point of pain. “*Fanculo, fallo ancora, dolcezza. È così bello.*”

Fuck, do that again for me, sweetheart. It feels so good.

I moan again and wonder if he realizes he’s slipped into Italian. Something about him losing that control feels powerful, and all I want to do is be good at this for him. He easily hits the back of my throat at this angle, and my gag reflex pushes against him.

“You’re doing so good for me, *dolcezza*. Keep taking me like a good girl. Even if you want to bite me, suck me dry instead. If you relax your throat, I should fit.”

Barely.

He pulls out, revealing his cock, gleaming with my saliva. His thumb massages a muscle in my jaw that I didn’t realize had been clenched. He gives me plenty of time to suck in a breath, showing him I’m okay. I close my eyes and focus on relaxing my jaw, tongue, and throat.

I’m ready for him when he guides himself in again, this time breaching my gag reflex before sliding down my throat. He hisses with pleasure, and I hum mine in response. His fingers squeeze my ass cheek before he lets go of my head, leaving me hanging with his cock gingerly thrusting in and out of my mouth. I grip the leather belt for dear life, but I promise myself I will go to my limits before I use my safe motion. And just as he promised, I get brief respites of air and a chance to say my safe word between thrusts. After a few pumps where I remain silent, he holds my waist to steady me and picks up his rhythm.

“*Cazzo*, Tallie, you feel so fucking good. Do you enjoy giving a blow job to the man you hate?”

My teeth scrape over his shaft in warning, and he hisses. Suddenly the knife inside me moves, making my jaw go completely slack.

“Remember what I told you, *vipera*. Your pussy is mine, and I can

destroy it how I please. I gave you a safe word for a reason. If you fuck me over instead...”

To finish the rest of his sentence, he lifts the knife up and down, pushing the handle in and out. My blood pressure skyrockets, but when his cock leaves my lips, the safe word doesn't leave with it. Instead, a lusty moan comes out, and I round my lips around my teeth to show him I've been tamed. Sort of. As soon as he's inside again, I hollow my cheeks and tighten around his shaft as hard as I can. My pussy flutters against the handle, and I can't help marveling at the fact that giving him pleasure is almost enough to make me come, too.

Eventually, his constant movements calm me down. I'm bound and suspended, but trusting Sev is freeing. The shallow pulses he performs with the knife are nowhere near the depth he plunges into my throat. The blade hasn't touched me once since that last threat, and the tip of the handle draws pleasure from deep within me. I moan against his cock, and he curses above me again.

“You love me fucking your throat, don't you? I need to taste how much you love it.”

Before I can register what he means, a warm swipe across my clit makes me shiver and cry out against his cock.

His cock plugs my throat and pulls out swiftly, letting me get some air as his tongue tastes me again.

“After I get my taste, you're going to tell me everything I need to know.”

No. I won't.

My mind makes the silent vow, but my body is still eager to please. I keep sucking him, massaging the tip and shaft with my tongue. He curses and laps at my clit, all while mimicking his motions with the knife handle in my pussy.

The moment isn't sweet anymore. It's still intimate, but now it's hot and raw, exactly what we need to get our hatred out. He face fucks me, making me sputter and choke for breath, and yet I still refuse to give him my safe word or tug on the belt.

I'm too focused on making him feel good and riding my own orgasm to the top. My muscles tense and my sensitive nipples rub against my bra. The cold air kisses my bare skin as he devours my clit, flicking his tongue back and forth. My heartbeat thrums underneath my skin and pounds in my head. Stars shimmer behind my eyelids—

His cock suddenly pops out from between my lips. The knife stops moving, and his tongue leaves my clit. I cry out in frustration, but he wraps his arms underneath my back and slowly lifts me into a slight sitting position.

“Wh...what...the hell...Severino.”

“Sev or Sever. Never Severino.” Worry creases his brow, and his eyes dart over my face and body. “You were having difficulty breathing.”

“Who cares...it felt good,” I whine breathlessly. “I want to keep...going.”

“You really weren’t going to use your safe word, were you? Do you have a death wish?”

I shrug, and he shakes his head. “Yeah, that’s it. We’re done.”

“What?! We can’t just be done!”

“I’m new to this, Talia, but one thing I know is that you *have* to communicate. I won’t keep doing this if you don’t.”

I bite my lip, and desire darkens his gaze before he looks away.

“Promise, Tallie. You may have been on a suicide mission with Claudio, but I won’t let you die sucking my cock.”

“Fine. I promise I’ll communicate.” This angle is already giving me back normal breaths, and the rush feels like I’m flying.

His eyes narrow on me. “If you don’t, I’ll never let you come.”

“Okay, okay! I promise.” I’m shocked that I actually mean it this time, and whatever expression I have must be convincing because he nods once before slowly letting me down. That blood rush hits again like a rolling wave, and I moan.

“That goddamn mouth is going to be the death of me,” he mutters and holds himself to guide into me. “I’m going to come in you, but don’t swallow, *vipera*. Hold my cum in your mouth until I tell you what to do next.”

“Okay. I’m ready.”

He gives me one more sip of breath before driving back into me. His hands are tight around my head, holding me with reverence even as his cock ravages my open mouth. At this angle, I can see around his shaft to his feral expression. His eyes are intense on me, his face reddening, and the veins in his temples protrude as he exerts all his energy into fucking my mouth.

Drool collects at the corner of my lips, and he stretches his large hands to swipe it away with his thumbs. His hips are wild with abandon, and my vision grows hazy at the edges. I think I’m on the verge of passing out when he suddenly pulls out of my throat but keeps the tip just inside my lips. He

grabs his shaft and holds my head still as he angles himself against my tongue.

“Don’t swallow, *dolcezza*.”

He gives my mouth small thrusts before he moans, and hot jets of his cum splash against my tongue. It’s salty and musky on my tastebuds, and I’m enthralled by the look of utter ecstasy on his face. His hips jolt against the air, begging to plunge deeper into my throat, but he stays at the front of my mouth.

When he finishes, he gazes down at me with some feral emotion hardening his features. I’m too confused to identify it, but once again, my body knows more than I do, and my chest aches. I’m so intoxicated by this intimate, undivided attention, I almost forget that I still haven’t come yet.

Hey, wait—

His cock pops out of my mouth, but I keep his cum pooled on the roof of my mouth. He tucks his cock back into his jeans without bothering to zip up and yanks his belt off of his wrist and slings it to the back wall. Once his wrist is free, he bends low to meet my gaze and cups his hand in front of my lips.

“Spit.”

Confusion wrinkles my brow, but I do as he says, gathering his salty seed and spitting it into his hand. My aim isn’t perfect. Actually, it’s a fucking mess, but he uses his other hand to clean my lips and cheeks, wiping off the remnants of him.

When he’s finished, he stands up and disappears from my vision. All I have to look at is the semi-hard bulge behind his boxers. The head pokes out of the elastic waistband, and a droplet of cum still rests on the tip. I jolt forward and lick it off before he has a chance to move away.

He hisses with pleasure, and his hips jut back. “Fuck, you drive me mad, *vipera*. Here I thought your fangs were coming out.”

“Not yet.” I giggle back.

My brain shouts at me to quit fawning over the man who has me bound and just gagged me with his cock. But once again, my body is in control around Sev, and he has something I still need. An orgasm. I wriggle around the handle of my knife, trying to get it.

“I thought you said you were going to make me come.”

My heartbeat has been able to slow down after all the action, but it’s getting harder to catch air in my lungs. If he doesn’t turn me upright soon, I

might pass out, but I don't want to give in just yet.

"Patience, *dolcezza*. I said I would make you come. I didn't say when. And it certainly won't be until you give me my answers."

"What? That's unfair—"

He pulls out the knife from my pussy, and edged pleasure makes me choke on the rest of my sentence. My eyes widen at the blade just above the pearl handle, now stained scarlet.

"Did you cut me?!"

"What? No." He looks down and opens his hand to show the knife. The white handle glistens with my arousal, but shallow cuts slice across his palm, and the corners of the blade are tipped with blood.

"You...you protected me? But why?"

"Because that knife should only be soaked in the blood of your enemies. Not yours."

"And you're my enemy?"

"We haven't figured that out yet, have we?"

He sets the knife on the tray behind him and returns to wrap his arm around my waist. Warm liquid drips onto my pussy before his fingers swipe through my entrance.

"What're you doing?"

"Have you ever thought about having kids, Tallie?" he murmurs, and my heart aches. I push the feeling aside and answer at least this question for him.

"Um...no. And I'm not sure why you want to think about it *now*."

"Because whatever happens to us, anytime we're together, every drop of me is going into this cunt."

Madonna mia, why is that so fucking hot?

"Anytime? So, this isn't the last?"

"Why haven't you thought about kids?" he asks instead of answering, and I huff.

"Because I didn't think I'd live long enough to have them."

He stills. The honesty seems to shock us both. His fingers slowly push his cum into my pussy, mixing it with desire.

"I feel the same."

"But what do you have to be afraid of? I thought you lived the cushy life of being Claudio's nephew."

He scoffs. "There's nothing 'cushy' about being the son of a dead Boss. And it's deadly if the current one suspects you'll overthrow him."

“If it’s so deadly, why were you at the theater with him? And having dinner with him the other night?”

He steps back to meet my eyes with a Cheshire smile. “I fucking knew that maid was you.”

“Uh, what maid?” I wince, but I know it’s too late.

“I saw you in your costume on the CCTV. If I hadn’t installed all those cameras throughout the North End on my properties, I might have never caught you. But you’ve been quite busy, conspiring against my uncle and using me to do it. Why? After the drive-by, you have plenty of reason to go after him. But before that? Why did you leave a trail of bodies on your way to him? And what role did I have in all this besides to be some sick pawn of yours? I’ve been used enough in my life. I won’t let it happen again, not even with you.”

The genuine pain in his face leads me to nearly give in. But everything he’s saying is confusing the hell out of me.

“Answer my question first. If you hate Claudio, why do you play nice with him? You could take him down way more easily than I could.”

He sighs. “You seem to forget that I’m the one in charge here. You’re the one hanging in my aging room—”

“It’s not *your* meat locker. It was my—” I clamp my mouth shut. He almost got me, and he doesn’t even know it.

“So goddamn stubborn.” He shakes his head. Rage takes over his expression, and my heart stutters. “No. You know what? No more fucking around.”

He snatches his cane from the wall and spins it with one hand before catching it. A thrill shoots up my spine again, but this time, my body is ripe for pleasure. It floods my pussy and my body flushes with need. My mind screams, though, pissed and enraged that the man I just trusted could hurt me like this.

“Tulip. Remember your safe word.”

The command shocks me. Why would he want me to use it if he was going to kill me...

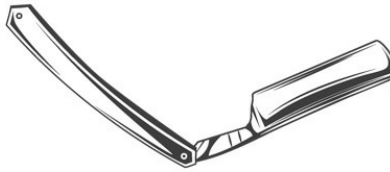
“You still want me to use my safe word?”

The anger in his expression softens to desire, but an evil smirk widens across his face. When he lifts the cane, anticipation flows through me. I bite my lip and brace myself for impact.

“Yes. I do.”

Scene 23

CANE-FESSING



Sever

Tallie looks perfectly edible upside down in front of me. She won't last too much longer in this inverted position, but I don't plan to let her continue this charade for much longer. Caning her was supposed to be my last resort, because I'd thought she would've given in by now. I don't know what I'll fucking do if I can't get her to talk this time.

I've used my cane to break enemies before, but never like this. It's another limb to me, though, so I focus on my instincts as I aim just beneath the apex of her ass cheeks. Using all the restraint I have, I lightly tap her thick flesh and watch the ripple of her skin in response.

"Ah!"

My eyes dart down to analyze her expression. Her face is red from the inversion, but the surprised euphoria in her expression is new.

This is going to be fun. I almost hope she holds out on me as I ask my first question.

"Why are you after Claudio?"

"I said do your worst, Severino, and I meant it. I won't say a damn word!"

She keeps yelling, until I tap her ass again with the center of my cane. It's about a quarter inch closer to her thighs, just underneath the first mark. Her objections become a shocked yelp, and I wince.

Was that too much?

But as soon as I ask myself the question, she moans and bites her lip. My spent cock shoots back to life, and I roll my cane over the area I want to aim

for next.

“Have you been using me to get to him?”

“I-I’m not telling you any—oh, *merda, Sev.*”

Sev, not Severino. She wants this. The choice behind what she calls me is a subtle tell that I taunted her about, but it’s so second-nature to her that she hasn’t fixed it yet. She’s trying to act like she hates this, but she has a safe word that she still hasn’t used, and she confesses every time she moans my name.

I raise my arm higher, and the gentle thud of the rod right above the last pinkening stripe blooms more quickly than the others before it. Already I can see the lines from my cane, and my cock stirs at the thought of my marks on her delectable skin.

“Alright, maybe something easy, then. Why did you kill the gardener?”

She snorts. “Don’t forget the maids and his butler before that.”

“You didn’t kill them.” My brow furrows. “They were fired.”

The stab wound in my chest has begun to ache again, so as I wait for her to clarify, I switch my cane from both hands to my dominant hand.

“That’s what they deserved.”

“Deserved...and the others? They deserved death?”

Her lips flatten into a line again, thin as a paper cut.

“Answer me.”

This time I tap her before she can respond. Her inevitable sassy remark disappears with a deep moan that has my cock rock hard again. Her needy breaths have become constant, but I don’t let up. Instead, I use light wrist flicks for two more strikes.

“Oh, my god, please, Sever. I need...I need to come.”

“Not until you tell me what I need to know.”

“I...I can’t. Please, just let me come.” Her body vibrates with desperation. Mine sympathizes, in tune with hers at the sound of her begging for me. Even upside down, the cum I pushed inside her to claim her leaks from her pulsing cunt. I barely resist the temptation to take her down and fuck more of my seed into her.

The fact that she’s never even thought about having children shocked me, but it shouldn’t have. We’ve both expected our lives to end in a suicide mission. I’ve known for years that if I kill Claudio before I have enough evidence to sway the Family over to my side, that I wouldn’t have a future. That I’d never experience the joy of seeing my child grow inside the woman I

love.

I'd thought I had snuffed that hope out entirely, and yet, it sprang to life after meeting Tallie. Over the past couple of weeks, she's flipped my worldview on its axis, and she was the first person I've thought I could live for. It was a useless dream, though. She used me to get to Claudio, just like everyone else. I hate her for that...but I'm realizing I hate even more that she's never hoped for a future.

I roam behind her so she can't see me and add to the building anxiety of what I'll do next. My cane brushes over her clothes. I raise the rod and roll the shaft down her inner thighs. She trembles as I rest it over her pussy, before I slide it back and forth, making sure to tease her clit. Her glossy arousal soaks the shaft, and she only gets wetter the more I play.

"Sev...Sever, please—"

"I'm afraid I've given you the wrong impression. I've let you think that I'm weak enough to use. You've underestimated me. Do you think I'm *sweet*, Tallie? I thought that about you. But neither one of us is sweet, are we? I see you, *vipera*. You're the snake in my garden—"

She laughs outright, making me pause. "Your garden is full of death, Severino, and you don't even see it. I've watched you enough to know who's the *actual* snake in your garden."

"Who, then? Tell me."

I'm still behind her, so I can't see her clamp her mouth shut. But the way she stills all over tells me what I need to know.

"Nothing? Hmm, maybe I should up my game." I withdraw my cane and walk around Tallie to face her again. Her eyes widen at the bulge in my jeans that I can't hide anymore. When I roll my cane over her center again, I only focus on her clit, playing her like a bow to a violin. Her moans tell me I'm on the right track. "Why did you kill the driver, Talia?"

"Why did *you* kill the capo?"

My hand stills. "How the fuck did you know about that?"

I should've played it off, but I'm too shocked to pretend right now.

"It was a hunch, but you just confirmed it. I was your maid the other night at your little 'family dinner.' Claudio asked you about Vinnie. You looked away when you answered."

"So?"

"It's one of your tells." She swallows heavily, and I know I'll need to right her soon. I'm surprised she's lasted this long, but I'm getting

somewhere, and I don't want to move her yet. "You can't hide your emotions when you really care. And when you lie, you never meet someone's eyes. That's what happened at the dinner. I haven't been able to find him, and you weren't able to say when you last saw him. I put two and two together."

"A clever little spy, aren't you? What else do you know?"

Her breasts rise and fall underneath the wool of her sweater dress as she tries to catch her breath.

"Ask...ask the right questions, and maybe I'll tell you."

"*Madonna mia, piccola vipera testarda.*"

"Stubborn little viper." She laughs. "Cute. That's another tell, by the way. You slip into Italian when you're emotional."

I shake my head and move my cane from her pussy to her ass cheeks again, right on the rounded flesh just above where her cheeks and thighs meet. My gentle slap of my damp cane against her skin apparently makes the strike more deliciously painful because she hisses into a groan.

"Sever...enough...I need...to come."

Fuck, she's finally hit her limit. She won't use her safe word, but I won't have her passing out on me, not when she's finally started talking. I can't let up, but I can't keep her in this position anymore.

"And I think we need to escalate things." I press the tip of my cane on the two buttons that will lower her slowly. Before the chains can move, I position myself underneath her body to hold her bridal style as the chains loosen. Once she's resting in my arms, her head lolls against my chest.

I want to say to hell with all of this and take her up to my bedroom so I can care for her properly. But she is the second-most stubborn person I've ever met, and I *need* her to answer me. I'll do what I can now to keep her dripping and needy for me enough that the answers flow from her. After that, I'll give her exactly what she deserves.

The chains that held her up clink against the concrete. I hold her parallel to the ground just a little bit longer so her body can properly adjust without passing out or causing her a pounding headache. Her breaths finally normalize, and her gorgeous green and gold eyes flutter to look up at me again. Satisfied that she's okay, I clench my teeth to bite back the groan for the pain in my chest and ankle as I lower her to kneel on the ground. She slouches without me holding her, and I use her exhaustion to my benefit as I quickly reposition the cuffs and chains.

When I press the buttons again, the chains slowly lift her by the waist and

arms, keeping her upright without forcing her to do it on her own. Her knees are still spread apart, and her bound hands hang above her head. The hem of her dress drapes over her upper thighs, hiding her vulnerable cunt from me, and she rests against her bicep. She's nearly spent, and I haven't even made her come.

Yet.

I pull out my razor from my pocket, and her breaths still. A satisfied smile lifts past my grimace as I kneel on one knee. Once I'm settled, I take the hem of her dress and begin to cut upward.

"Sever...no."

There's a pitch to her voice that wasn't there before. She's been on the edge of fear and pleasure this whole time, but right now...right now it feels like the scales have tipped.

"You don't like this? You have the power to stop me. Safe word or answers, Talia."

She bites her lip hard enough to lighten the deep rose shade. The redness in her face from the inversion blanches away. I wait with the blade ready to slice up her sweater dress. Just when I think she's going to give in, she shakes her head.

Frustration tightens my jaw. "Have it your way, *vipera*." I cut up the center of her dress all the way to the chain around her waist. The blade slices through the fibers like butter, and the two halves of the skirt splay to the side, revealing her eager pussy dripping onto the concrete. As much as I want to stop and sate us both this time, I move to the top of her dress and take her neckline between my fingers, readying the razor to split the garment in two.

"Sever, please don't do this..."

The ache in her voice makes my heart twinge. "Answers, Talia. Why were you going after Claudio? Why did you go after his men, and why did you use me to do it?"

"I didn't use—" She groans. "You should know!" Pain drips from her voice, and her eyes are watery, but she rages against the chains holding her up.

"What, Tallie? Tell me, what should I know." I can't stop my voice from softening with concern. Her head hangs low now, and she refuses to look at me.

I don't want this, but my emotions have made me weak with her before. I've given her options, and she can't take more than what I've given her

already. Her body is slack in the chains, but she's still refusing to say her safe word.

"Just fucking answer me, Talia."

She shakes her head and glares hateful daggers that pierce my heart. "If you haven't already figured it out, you don't deserve to know. Be prepared to kill me, Severino, but I'll die before I explain anything to *you*."

"You stubborn little viper." I finally rip the razor through the neckline of her sweater dress. As I move down to the chain she's wearing like a belt, angry, growling accusations spill from me as I go. "What is it about Claudio, hmm? What could we all have done to 'deserve' your wrath? You went after his butler. His maids. His gardener..." I pause as the words play over my mind like a memory. I shake my head before continuing. "The driver...and apparently the capo was on your list—"

The razor's blade clinks against a chain and the fabric falls to the side, revealing her soft belly. She blanks her face and slams her eyes shut, stopping me from seeing any emotion on her face. When she starts to hum, my brow furrows, but I keep going.

"The...the priest."

I rip the fabric over her shoulders. My eyes widen at the mottled skin, and I jolt away as if it's burned me.

Dark red indentions tear across the right side of her chest and neck and disappear under makeup. That upper half of her was torn open, with some areas more purple than others, as if she'd been punctured and those wounds were deeper than others.

"Goddammit, *dolcezza*, who did this to you?" Heat flares over my face and down my neck. Every muscle in my body wants to fight who—or what—did this to her so long ago, but my fingers are gentle as they hover over the painful-looking scars. "You're not getting out of it this time."

Her humming gets louder the closer I get, and as soon as I realize that fact, I stop mid-air. The tune that's ravaged my dreams for years floods to the forefront of my mind.

"That song..."

Tears glisten at the corners of her eyes, and she sinks deeper on her knees, pulling the chain. Her sleeve falls down to her bicep, and a flash of deep purple catches my gaze.

My eyes widen at the tattoo she's hidden so carefully. I brush my fingers along her inked forearm, where Medusa hisses at me from a bed of purple

tulips. Her stunning stone face looks remarkably like Tallie's, and her piercing yellow-green eyes feel like she's watching me even at this angle. Snakes writhe in the lighting, five are filled in with color, while the others are empty outlines on either side of one white snake. The design is beautiful, and I have no doubt she drew it up...

My heart stops when I finally realize what I'm looking at, and Raze's voice echoes in my mind.

"The client has a Medusa tattoo...lots of sexual assault victims get them as a symbol of their survival."

"A Medusa tattoo? Tallie...why do you have this?"

She's rigid in front of me, but she doesn't jolt her arm away.

"It sounds like you already know." She's challenging me, daring me to say something wrong. There's only one thought raging through my mind, and I barely recognize my own voice as I ground out my question.

"Who?"

"You *know* who. You found out the other night at dinner."

The judge.

"Talía?"

She shakes her head and begins to whisper the song again. Every verse rises in volume, but I still have to strain to hear it, until suddenly, I don't need to hear the words. I *know* them.

I've heard only one other person use this song like a lifeline, a shield when things were unbearable. But that little girl is dead. Isn't she?

Fuck. What if—

"Tallie, sweetheart, answer me. Who did this to you?" I already know the answer. The implications are howling and screaming inside my skull. "Why...why did you stop at that girl's grave yesterday?"

She lifts her head slowly, her eyes full of an ache that pounds into my own chest. Memories collide with the present, filling in the blanks I've blacked out due to trauma, pain, and shame. I'm back in that bedroom, fifteen years ago, planning an escape with the girl with no name. But I know it now, don't I?

"Chiara?"

She shakes her head hard. "I'm not...I'm not that girl—"

"Chiara—"

She hums the song again, but I say the words out loud.

"The butler, the maids, the gardener... The driver, capo, and priest... The

judge—”

Her eyes snap open and plead with me as she continues, “Godmother-and-father—”

“To them, I beg to leave.”

“Tallie, *amore mia*, what the fuck have I done?”

I scramble to unlock the cuffs on her hands and feet, freeing her from the chains I trapped her in. When I quickly gather her in my arms, I bump the cart behind me and land against the refrigerator’s cold wall. Trying to soothe us both, I rock her against my chest. My movements are slow, the weight of her revelations making me sluggish. Incredibly, after everything, she wraps her arms around me and tucks her head into my neck. Her tears burn my skin and sear straight into my soul.

“The butler, the maids, the gardener, the driver—”

“Shh, shh. It’s okay. I’ve got you, Chiara—”

“That’s not my name!” she hisses and shoves away from me.

Her rejection is so quick that I don’t even register she’s gone until the cold, empty air slaps my skin. My chest aches with every inch she puts between us. The distance yanks the invisible hold she has on my heartstrings.

She glares at me, her eyes red. “That’s not my name. Not...not anymore.”

“Okay.” I hold my hands up. “I’m sorry, I’m just shocked. Fuck, I thought you were dead. What happened—”

“What happened?” A forced laugh bursts from her chest, but tears stream down her cheeks. Her eyes lock in on something on the cart beside me, and she snatches it from the table. She points at me with the sharp end of the knife blade that I’ve seen her use on at least two of her enemies. Venom laces every word.

“*Madonna mia*, save me from selfish men with short memories. What happened is I *didn’t* die. I survived with the memories of everyone who wronged me, their voices, their faces, their scent, my emotions, *everything* playing in my head nonstop. The only thing that has saved me is silencing them with justice.”

“Your song...that’s why you began all of this with the butler.”

“He didn’t feed me. The maids ignored me. The gardener...the gardener *pleasured* himself at my expense—”

“What the fuck?” I growl, but she talks over me.

“And then he had the audacity to rat me out, which nearly killed me in the process. The driver killed my mother.”

“What? Why?”

“All because your father and that sick stepfather of yours wanted my dad’s shop.” She startles at the sentence, as if finally registering where she is. “*This* shop.”

“Your father was the butcher?” My heart stutters, and I watch her knuckles whiten as she grips the knife harder.

“I was never allowed to come visit him at work. He said there were monsters down here that would give me nightmares. I never realized he meant literally.”

Her brow raises as she looks me up and down. I can’t even defend myself. She’s right.

“Then Claudio retaliated,” I continued.

She nods. “My dad tried to appease Claudio. He thought making him my godfather would show his loyalty. But that wasn’t enough. Claudio ordered his driver to run into the car. The accident killed my mother instantly. That’s when the capo kidnapped me.”

“He’s dead,” I reassure her. “I killed him right in this room.”

She narrows her eyes before darting her gaze around the room, as if she could map the scene out herself.

“How?”

“I hung him like the *porco* he is, severed his neck, and washed his blood down that drain. Oh, and if you like justice? You’d *love* where he’s buried, *vipera*.”

Her shoulders relax slightly, but her knife stays trained on me. “You know who else was killed here? My father.”

The blood drains from my face as I rack my brain for every single name and face that has arrived alive and left this room dead.

“Vinnie said Bianchi died in that crash.”

She snorts. “I ‘died’ in that crash, too, thanks to your uncle’s connections. I already know who murdered him.”

“Who?”

“*You* did.”

“Tallie, that’s not—”

“Don’t lie, Severino.”

“I’m *Sev* to you, Tallie.”

“You’re ‘the boy’ to me! You’ve always been the fucking boy! Ever since the night you left me for dead!” she screams at the top of her lungs. The

insulated walls swallow the sound, ending the confusing statement with finality even though I'm still bewildered. I want to ask what the hell she means, but she keeps going, and I don't dare stop her now. "What is it you say? *La verità è bella*. Speak the truth, Severino. They could be your last words. My father nearly died in that car crash, but my information says that he was locked away down here. Once you left Claudio's, he was your first kill. What was he? A celebration on tricking a girl into dying for you?"

One face in particular flashes through my mind, and my heart freezes. The man my father brought in as a consolation kill after I escaped Claudio's. He was beaten beyond recognition before he even got to me...

"I don't know your 'intel,' but I promise I didn't kill your father, Talia."

"Liar."

"I'm not lying, Talia. You heard rumors. Rumors my father fabricated and perpetuated. You're right, I was there. But I said no to him for the second time in my life, and I'll never forget it."

"You were here when my father died?"

I gulp and nod. "I didn't kill him, but I watched him die. My father 'gave' him to me because mob politics meant I couldn't kill Vinnie and Claudio like I wanted to. I didn't know his name or what he'd done...I couldn't do it. So, I said no, and my father made me pay for my insubordination. I've never regretted that beating."

She grimaces on my behalf and shakes her head slightly. "But if you didn't kill him, who did?"

I inhale the cool air of the aging room and let it out before answering. "Claudio. He shot him. I'm so sorry, Talia. It was quick in the end."

"Claudio killed my father, too?"

She stumbles back, and I'm up in half a second to catch her, despite the pain in my ankle. I grab one hanging chain for balance and wrap my arm around her waist to hold her close. The tension in my chest loosens when she clings to me with weak arms. Her knife begins to slip from her hand. I take it before it falls and place it on the tray table behind me. Her beautiful hazel eyes glisten with pain and hatred as she meets my gaze.

"He's taken *everything* from me, Sever. I know he's behind the drive-by, too. I just don't know if it's because we were late in our payment, or if I was caught, or—"

"Or he was after me. Which means it could've been Judge Blunt, too. He's the one who stabbed me at dinner because I tried to attack him. I'll

check my security cams as soon as I can. Once I find out, I'll take my blade to the men who hurt you. Let me help you do this. For years, I've needed justice for you."

I nod to her tattoo and mentally count her snakes and line them up with her song.

"The butler. Three maids. The gardener. Driver. Capo. Priest. Judge. Godmother. Godfather...who's the thirteenth snake? Who do you have left on your list?"

She holds my gaze as if she can give me the answer with her snake eyes alone. My stomach begins to churn, and unease simmers just underneath my skin. I know what she's going to say before the accusation falls from her beautiful lips.

"The boy...you."

"Me." It's a statement, not a question. Somewhere deep inside, I've known this all along. But words spoken have power, and my heart is sick hearing that I've hurt her. What she says next burns away any second thoughts I have.

"I've known it was you all along."

The pieces thunder into place in my head.

Delivering desserts and fliers to the barbershop beneath my apartment. Spying on the shop and my comings and goings. Her shocked and standoffish behavior at the bakery when I caught her off guard. Her hesitation to help me when I was bleeding out. She stalked me, watched me, studied me. She used me, too, but not in the way that I assumed. I'm not a stepping stone to the top. I'm another rat in her trap. Another monster she needs to cut from her world.

But I won't run from her.

I've suffered my own shame over what happened that night, leaving her behind, not being able to do anything when she was attacked, not fighting my father more to go after Claudio. If she's suffered even a fraction of that pain because of me, I deserve whatever she has in store. If she needs to do this to ease her tortured mind, I'll do whatever it takes to atone for my sins.

When I let her go, I grab my cane from its resting spot on the wall and turn to face her again.

"Love makes a man weak."

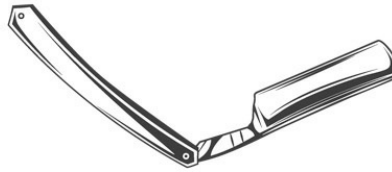
My own words echo in my head. I fall to my knees and raise my cane in offering.

If kneeling for her is weakness, then I'll gladly hand over all my strength

to help her heal. The woman I love deserves nothing less.

Scene 29

DARKNESS IN FORGIVENESS



Talia

My heart races as Severino Luciano kneels in front of me. His movements so sudden, every thought and feeling in my body stalled out. My knife gleams on the cart in my periphery, but I won't chance looking away from him. I confessed that he's on my kill list. I brace for whatever is coming next.

His head bows as he raises the cane into the air...presenting it to me.

"Ever since I failed you, I've needed justice. Retribution. It haunts me in my waking hours and in my nightmares. I deserve my recompense, just like the rest of your list. Do what you think is best, Talia. My life is yours."

"Sever, what is this?"

He jerks his weapon toward me, insisting I take it. "I'm the last on your list, Talia. I hurt you...unforgivably, irrevocably. I left you behind instead of going back in there. I should have fought harder for you, but I failed you. I'm ready for whatever punishment you need to give me to make this right."

His voice is thick with emotion. When I told him he was the last name on my list, I don't know how I expected him to react, but it wasn't like this.

What are you doing? Get up. Don't kneel for me. Don't let me hurt you, too.

"Sever..."

But this is your chance...

The final voice is dark, twisted, tempting, and what ultimately leads me to take the cane from him.

I've wanted revenge against *the boy* since he left me to die at his uncle's

house. But now that I have the opportunity, unease churns my stomach.

“You’ll accept any punishment?” I ask. When he nods, I gulp. “Even if I...even if I kill you?”

In answer, he grabs the back of his Henley with one hand and tugs it over his head. His muscles flex and relax as he drops the shirt to the side, and his tulip tattoos along his ribs roll with every movement. My needy core clenches at the thought of my tongue sliding up the inked flower stems. If I could, I’d taste every muscle’s hill and valley from the Adonis belt peeking out of his jeans all the way up to his pec...

...just below the wound I tended only a few nights ago.

I saved him then, but now I’m willing to take his life?

When I saw Sev suffering in my hallway, the thought of not helping him had flitted through my mind. It’d disappeared almost as soon as I acknowledged it, and I didn’t question my decision until I saw him at the theater with his uncle.

He’s on the list, he’s been on it as long as the rest of them. It’s the only way to get the voices, the nightmares, the anger to stop.

But my thoughts are calm around him. There’s no song raging in my skull. And he’s the one that chased my nightmare away the other night, holding me through it.

Indecision battles throughout my body and mind as I pace around him, and my hands shake around his cane.

Before I can question myself, I aim for the top of his large, defined shoulder muscles. He pushes them back, readying for impact. I use the same small wrist flick that I witnessed him use on me, careful not to hurt him. Yet.

The shaft of his cane pops against his upper shoulders, and he grunts.

“Goddamn, *dolcezza*.”

My inner muscles contract at the thought, but I ignore them and keep going.

“Shut up,” I growl.

The muscles I just struck are so thick that his spine is nestled safely between them, nowhere near the cane’s impact. I do it again just below my other strike and revel in the light thud. His medium olive skin remains unblemished, making me realize I’m not doing this nearly hard enough to cause him the deep, delicious bruising I can already feel on me. But when I move the cane back to give him more pain...I can’t. Instead, I use the same cautious wrist flicks down his shoulders, finishing just above where his

shoulder blades end.

His grunts have become growly moans, and I can feel my pulse throbbing in my pussy. It's flooded with desire again, soaking the inside of my bare thighs. His long, hard cock juts out from behind his half-zipped jeans, despite the fact that he came in my mouth just moments ago.

Deciding to give his back a break, I walk around my prey and slide the tip along his skin until I'm standing by his side. He's trying to remain still, but his body is tense with anticipation. I roll the shaft over his nipples and tap them so gingerly that I wonder if he'll even feel it. He shudders, and his cock jolts in response.

"Fuck, this is torture. I should've let you come when I had the chance."

"You should've done a lot of things," I hiss, even though the anger I usually feel...doesn't rear its head.

I tap him again, a little harder this time. He nearly doubles over, and his low moan of agonizing need ripples through me. Knowing I'm bringing this potent man to his knees with pleasure makes me feel more powerful than any kill.

The strikes on his lower chest are lighter than the others, but rosy stripes are already beginning to bloom. My mouth waters when his cock peeks out from his boxer briefs, the tip swollen and weeping with need. I bite back a moan of my own, but Sever notices anyway.

"Let me make us feel good, *dolcezza*. Let me take care of you."

His plea makes me pause.

Pleasure isn't what I want, is it? If we fuck, then what? He's still a name on my list, still Claudio's nephew, and still part of the evil that has ruined my life.

"No. You kidnapped me for answers? Well, I have some questions of my own. And you deserve *actual* punishment. Not whatever the fuck this is."

The muscles in his jaw tic underneath his short beard and he nods, but his eyes soften as he meets my gaze again.

"I'll give you whatever you need."

He's truly ready to accept his fate, and yet, my heart aches at the mere thought of hurting him. The boy has been on my list for so long, but now that I'm confronted by the man, I can't help feeling that the boy is already gone.

He must notice me hesitating because he clears his throat and levels his serious gaze on mine.

"Do it, *dolcezza*. I'm on your list. You're right. I've deserved it ever since

—” His voice cuts off and he swallows. When he speaks again, it’s quiet and hoarse. “Ever since you screamed for me.”

I suck in a ragged breath. “You were still there when those dogs attacked me?”

“I was. But none of that matters now—”

“It matters!” My yell ends sharply. The insulated walls quiet the echo even though the question reverberates between us. “Answer me. If you were there, why...why did you leave me?”

His head bows.

“Look at me, Sever!” The hook of his cane is suddenly lifting his chin, and it takes me a moment to realize I’m the one forcing him to meet my rage. I’ve buried the wood underneath his jaw, right above his Adam’s apple, partially choking off his airway.

“When I reached for you, I fell.” His voice is rough like gravel as he answers, and his golden-brown caramel eyes burn with shame. “I tried to get back over, but I’d broken my ankle on the sidewalk.”

“That’s how you got hurt? It was from that night?” I slowly lower the cane from his neck, and he nods.

“My father refused to let me see a doctor until the heat had died down. By the time I went to the hospital, my bones couldn’t be set correctly. I never truly healed.”

Neither did I.

“But how could he do that to his own son? You were just a boy.” The words fall heavy between us, but he doesn’t seem to feel the same impact.

“It didn’t matter. The Family mattered. I tried to go back for you after it happened. That night was the first time I told my father no. I tried to fight him, but I was in too much pain to handle his beating—”

“My god, Sev, you were just a boy,” I repeat. The words ring inside my head, but once again, Sever doesn’t regard them.

“Ever since that night, I’ve been haunted by it. As I’ve gotten more autonomy, I’ve tried to find out more about you. I killed Vinnie for it, but it wasn’t until that dinner that I even found out your name. That night has plagued my nightmares, but between the pain, guilt, and the pills my mother shoved down my throat, I was missing too many pieces of it. They became jumbled, and what I could have probably used to learn more about you was lost.”

“I know what you mean. I don’t...I don’t remember everything that

happened to me those nights because I was drugged every night except that last one. That Sunday dinner was when I could finally put it all together. I knew their guest was a judge, but I wanted to know if he was *the* judge, so I went because I had to be sure. Throughout that night, though, his voice..."

"I heard it, too. The more he drank, the more familiar it became. Then Claudio confirmed it."

"I wish I'd realized it sooner, but my list has a specific order, and it *needs* to be followed...and even though my body *knew* it was him, a part of my mind wouldn't let me believe the man who tormented me was right there, just feet away. I kept trying to convince myself that I didn't remember properly. That last night was the only one that I could remember details from because I used the drugs he gave me to make him pass out instead of me."

"You sang that night, but you were quiet all the others," Sev whispers. "Fuck, Tallie, I'm so fucking sorry. You did that for us, and I—"

"He'll get what he deserves. I'll make him pay if it's the last thing I do. Everyone who has earned my wrath will get it."

"Then use me, Tallie." He juts his chin toward his cane, making me realize I still have it in my hand. "Punish me. Take whatever you need from me to feel whole again."

My heart stutters.

I can take out the boy, right here, right now—

The boy...

My eyes slam shut, and I shake away my doubts. When I open them again, Sev is still looking up at me, waiting for me to dole out his punishment. I glare at him and hold his cane straight, keeping my distance between us, as I walk around him in a circle again slowly. The rubber tip drags against his bare chest, his shoulder, his back. He remains absolutely still, until I begin to trace the tulip.

I swallow before whispering, "Why a black tulip?"

"You know why."

"Humor me."

Pain etches the edges of his eyes. "They were the sign of our escape, and the memory of me leaving you behind. I've regretted every step I've taken away from you. Call it penance. It's a reminder of my need to atone. To bring retribution."

But you were just a boy.

No. Don't think that way. Focus.

I land the cane's tip into his bandaged wound. Pain hisses from his clenched teeth, but his hands stay loose at his sides as he takes my abuse.

"And this?" I press harder, and he exhales through his mouth. "You say you hate the judge, but you went to the theater with him and Claudio last night. I was rushed out before I could see him stab you at dinner. But you could have killed a man like that with one swift blow from your cane. Why didn't you?"

He shakes his head. "Claudio had ordered my cousins to hold me back. I couldn't shake them. Believe me, I tried. And I almost died doing it. You had to have heard some of it."

"Would Claudio, or your mother, really have let that happen?"

He snorts. "My uncle probably wishes I'd died a long time ago. My mother would let Claudio do anything he wanted to me, so long as my urn matched her decor."

Rage fills me again, but it's different than the kind I've been harboring for years. I've felt it for myself, for my *nonni*, for Antonella, for my parents. And now, I feel it for Sev. My enemy.

The realization hitches in my chest. I blink rapidly, trying to make the tears in my eyes go away. Sever's eyes widen as one drips off my cheek.

"Fuck, *dolcezza*—"

"All these years, I've tried to get justice for the girl I used to be. Your uncle has tried to take everything from me. But...but he's done the same thing to you, too, hasn't he?" I prop his cane against the cart of butcher tools and step closer to him.

"It doesn't matter what he did or didn't do to me. *I* wronged you." Grief and shame lace his words, and his rough voice cuts into my heart like a knife. His burnt caramel eyes are red with emotion. "You nearly sacrificed your life for mine, and I didn't even have the courage to fight for you—"

"But you were just a *boy*, Sev. It...it wasn't your fault." I collapse to my knees and cup his face in my hands. Tears stream down my face with abandon now. My body trembles, and he leans in to hold me. Our foreheads touch as I whisper the words we both need to hear. "None of this was your fault."

He wraps his arms around my waist and tugs me to him. "I'm sorry, Tallie—"

I collide my lips with his as my emotions pour into a scorching kiss. My lips are wet with tears, but his need is just as feverish as my own. His tongue

seeks the seam of my lips and I open for him, tasting him and hints of me inside. The kiss becomes something more as soon as our tongues caress. It unlocks something in him, and he suddenly stands and sweeps me off the floor.

“Sev, your ankle. I’m too heavy—”

“I want to carry my woman, Tallie. Don’t worry about my pain. I’m only concerned with making yours go away.”

He grabs his cane, and I wrap my legs around his waist, clinging to him. When he secures his arm under me, my core rubs against his half-zipped pants, and his thickening cock brushes against my clit. A combination of a moan and a hiss whispers from my mouth, and he chuckles against my lips.

“Soon, *dolcezza*.”

He kisses me and holds me firmly against his chest, stopping me from grinding against him. His steps are labored at first, but I don’t second-guess him. With the help of his cane, he makes it out of the meat locker and into the antique elevator just fine.

Once inside I try to slide down, but he grips my ass cheek to bring me closer. I yelp, confused at the ache there, until a satisfied groan rumbles his chest.

“You’re warm to the touch where my cane kissed your skin, Tallie. I can’t wait to do the same.”

He yanks the sturdy copper scissor gate closed and presses a glowing button for the top floor. As soon as it starts moving, he pushes me against the gate and hooks his fingers into a metal diamond above my head. He grinds his cock into my center, massaging against my swollen and needy clit.

“Oh, Sev—”

He crashes against my lips, cutting off my moan. I’m intoxicated by him, and even though we arrive at the top floor in no time, it feels like an eternity.

Once we get there, he carries me out of the elevator and through the apartment. I glance around the room, but it’s nearly pitch-black thanks to the thick curtains over the windows. I’m curious to see how Sev lives, but he doesn’t give me enough time to savor it and whisks me through the room.

I’ve soaked the exposed portions of his boxer briefs, and I hum my appreciation when the tip of his long cock slips out of the elastic and teases my clit. I roll my hips against him to make it happen again, but he sets his cane aside and gently lays me down on a soft, thick comforter. He crawls over me, and we both quickly tear off the rest of my shredded clothing.

My dress gives little resistance before it's gone completely. Sev sucks my nipple into his mouth and releases it with a pop. I moan and thread my fingers through his hair to keep him there. He tweaks and massages one breast while his tongue laves at the other. When the taut peak underneath his fingers becomes too sensitive, I whimper lightly. He immediately switches between them to bring it into his warm mouth and gently flick the wet one with his fingertips. It feels good, but my core is pulsing for him to fill it already.

“More, Sev. Please, I ache.”

“Don't worry, *dolcezza*. I'll take care of you.”

He leaves a light kiss over my heart before trailing his tongue along my scars, all the way up my neck and jaw. The new sensations there shock me, but I lean into his touch.

I've always been self-conscious about people seeing the evidence of the worst night of my life. The scars made me feel weak, ugly. But Sever's attention is sensual and desperate with need, like he can't get enough of me. He's loving a part of me that I haven't, and that makes me feel like a survivor rather than a victim. The already sensitive skin becomes even more so as he nips and licks, making me tremble.

When he sits up, I can't take waiting anymore and claw at his jeans, pulling them and his boxers over his round muscular ass. He quickly helps me by sliding off the bed and finishes the job. Once they are off, he stands tall and ready in the dim light. My mouth waters as we both take the other in.

He's breathtakingly huge in every aspect, and shadows define his muscles even more as the light plays across everywhere I want to be. His abs end in a “V,” pointing the way to his cock, heavy and weeping with arousal. He fists the shaft and strokes it up and down, and I bite my lip, barely holding back my moan.

Our gazes lock as he steps forward and positions himself at my entrance. His free hand wraps around my neck, and his thumb brushes over my scars. The touch is gentle, but his jaw is set in a serious line.

“No more of this suicide mission, Tallie.”

“What?” Confusion flickers over my mind before anger explodes in my chest. “What the hell, Sever? You can't tell me to stop—”

He squeezes the sides of my neck, and desire floods my core as he tames me with one firm hand. The determination on his face captivates me, and I keep my mouth shut as he continues.

“This is no longer a suicide mission. You’re not going to have to do this alone anymore. I’m going to help you. Which means...you need to start thinking about a future. With me.”

He removes his hand from my throat to guide his cock inside me, but I yank his hand back to my neck, guiding and then forcing him to squeeze the sides again. He stills instantly, and his eyes narrow to where my hand covers his. When his gaze returns to mine, I swallow against his palm, trying to push aside the shame I know I don’t deserve to feel.

Sev won’t judge me.

“Um, this is...this is the first time I’ve *wanted* it—”

Horror replaces his confusion.

“Fuck, Tallie, I’m so—” His grip loosens immediately, but I slap both my hands back over his and squeeze.

“No...don’t stop.” I don’t know how I know it, but my instincts are telling me the way he was in charge downstairs is the way I need it.

“...you’ll crave my firm hand as much as I already crave your soft touch.”

He knew it that day in the dressing room. He knew what I needed before I did. It gives me the courage to try to explain.

“I want you, but I’m afraid to want this. I need you to...I need you to take control. I need the pain, the fear. And I love that I can trust you to give me all of that. So please—” I squeeze his fingers.

Understanding and determination soften his features, warring with the fierce need that he’s struggling to contain. He clamps the sides of my throat with immediate pressure, cutting off my blood supply. It sends a thrill through my veins, and his promise warms me to my core.

“I’ll take care of you, mia bella vipera.”

His grip tightens, and he kisses my lips as his cock pushes inside me. My pulse skyrockets at all the sensations flowing through my body. On instinct, my hips lift to accept him. He sinks into me the rest of the way as we both moan. He’s massive, but I’ve had so much foreplay that there’s no resistance as we merge.

“Goddamn, you’re so ready for me.”

His hips thrust in and out, and I wrap my legs around his waist. He keeps the pressure on my throat, but he uses his free hand to hook my arms around his strong shoulders, showing me what we need. The muscles there move underneath my fingertips as he continues to pump into me, and the leverage

helps me move with him.

“Oh, Sev...”

“I’m claiming you, Talia. You’re mine now. Your burden is my burden —” He punctuates each point with long plunges. “Your dreams are my dreams. Your goals are my goals. Your family is my family. Your heart is mine. My heart is yours.”

There’s a fluttering in my chest, and it’s not just because it’s getting hard to breathe.

“But we don’t even really know each other.”

He thrusts harder, curving the tip of his cock deep inside me.

“Don’t we, though?”

He doesn’t let me answer this time and starts to roll his hips, pounding faster. My pussy clenches around his slick movements as he slides in and out, in and out. He lifts my thigh and bends over me, crowding my space, becoming all that I see. I tighten my grip on his shoulders and move with him, meeting his every stroke. His grip on my neck gets tighter and tighter, fading my vision at the edges. My nails dig into his skin, and he groans as he drives into me, hitting just where I need him. Every. Single. Time.

“Please, Sev. Please let me come this time.”

My plea is barely above a whisper, but his body responds instantly. His fingertips dig into my throat, and his grip just beneath my ass begins to sting, stoking the pleasure-pain I need.

“I wouldn’t dream of denying you right now, *dolcezza*. Come for me.”

His command sends me to the peak.

When he releases my throat, I careen over the edge.

When he bites my neck, I tumble down.

“Sever!”

I scream and moan as every inner muscle clings to him in a rhythm of need and satisfaction. His teeth sink deeper into my scars, and I cry out as waves of pleasure roll through me. His thrusts are wild and deep, until I dig my heels into his lower back.

“Merda, Talia.”

“Come in me, Sever.”

He plunges into me one last time, seating himself deep as he obeys my own command. His groan of pleasure vibrates between us, and his cock jolts against my pulsing inner muscles.

“Goddamn, Tallie.”

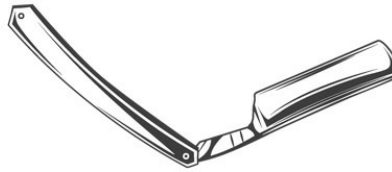
He wraps his hand around my nape and brings me up to kiss him. My raw lips still greedily meld with his before he pulls away to press his forehead against mine. His voice is intense and speaks straight to my soul.

“You’re mine, Talia. We *will* have a future together, a happy ever after waiting for us after this. I swear to you that we’ll get these bastards, but it will *not* be the last thing we do.”

Act 5

Scene 30

I'LL TAKE CARE OF YOU



Sever

My apartment is dark and cold when I wake up. But for the first time ever, I'm waking up with the warmth of a woman in my arms.

Tallie's sweet scent settles me as she sleeps on the uninjured side of my chest. I should get up. There's a lot to do today now that she and I have joined forces. But I've been laying here for the past ten minutes, and every time I so much as shift, Tallie's long limbs tighten around me, and I suddenly have zero urge to do anything other than squeeze her back. So instead of leaving, I caress her curves back and forth while I wait for her to wake up.

My rough fingertips memorize every hill and valley wherever they go. She shivers, so I wrap my gray satin sheets around us both to trap our heat in. With the fabric snug around us, she scoots even closer, and her foot brushes my brace.

I'm thankful I had the foresight to put it on last night. An orthopedic surgeon designed and modified it specifically for the slight bend in my ankle, so it's comfortable, but the titanium bracing does most of the work for my foot. To avoid muscle atrophy, I only use it when I have to lift bodies quickly or when I'm anticipating a fight. Both applied last night with Tallie, and after Claudio's little stunt, I've needed the added pressure to compress the swelling. That has lessened, *and* I carried my woman up to my bedroom, so the brace has been a win-win this time.

Eventually, but still entirely too soon, she stirs, stretching first before her sleepy golden-green eyes blink up at me.

"You're here."

“Where else would I be?”

She shrugs. “People leave. The promises you made last night...they’re the kind that seem too good to be true in the daylight. I kind of expected you to be gone this morning.”

Her gaze leaves mine, but I lift her chin to keep her focus on me.

“They’re the kind of promises that you deserve. I’m not going anywhere.”

A small smile deepens the dimple in her right cheek. “I like the sound of that.”

I kiss her forehead and go back to brushing the back of my fingers over her skin. Neither one of us is in a hurry to leave, so we rest with our thoughts in the quiet moment. My fingertips trace one of the snake outlines of her tattoo, and I count the rest.

“Twelve snakes,” I murmur. “Five filled with gray-green scales, one white. I’m guessing the ones without ink represent the names in your song that are still left?”

“Yup.” She turns her arm in the dim light, making the white snake seem like it’s shimmering. “I already have an appointment to fill in two more. Now that I know you killed the capo, I’ll have your cousins fill in his, too.”

It’s crazy to think that Roman, Tiero, and Raze all knew Tallie before I did. She’s been here this whole time, on my *street*, no less. I was too blinded by grief and revenge to see that the person I mourned was always right in front of me. I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for lost time.

My thumb brushes over the sole white snake. “And this one? Why isn’t it gray-green like the others?”

Her face softens. “She was forgiven.”

It takes me a moment to go through the song in my head before I whisper the answer out loud. “Antonella.”

Tallie nods. “She pretended I was dead. Took me to my *nonni*. Then Tony and Gio saved me by confiding in that customer who’s a doctor. All the secrecy kept me alive, but I was left with scars, and Antonella was murdered anyway.”

My blood runs cold. “*Murdered*? No, my *zia* Antonella had a stroke—”

Tallie’s face softens with sympathy. “I heard you at that dinner, Sev. You *know* what happened to your father. Why wouldn’t it have happened to Antonella, too?”

“You think—” I suck down a deep breath. She’s confirming a fear I’ve held for a long time, one I’ve been afraid to say out loud, terrified that

accepting the possibility would make it true.

“I don’t think. I *know*. There are reasons why the Vincellis kept their peeping Tom of a gardener around for so long. Not only did he know *everything* about the plants that grew there, he no doubt knew what they were used for, too.”

“What do you mean?”

She cups my cheek, and I can feel her empathy rolling from her and into my chest. “Your mother has always had a hand in that garden—especially the greenhouse. She planted some of the deadliest flowers in the world there, and she still does if that bouquet the other night was any indication. Hemlock, snakeroot, oleander, nightshade. That last one—nightshade, or *atropa belladonna*—is the one I bet Claudio ordered for Antonella.”

The implications swirl in my head, but I can’t piece together a full picture. “But...why? Why would he have her killed?”

Tallie’s heavy, sad sigh wafts over my chest. “I was in and out of consciousness, but I vaguely remember Antonella telling Claudio I was dead. One moment I was in the Vincellis’ garden, the next I was in Antonella’s lap in the middle of the graveyard at St. Catherine’s. She held me tight against her, probably to ensure no one else knew I was alive. When it was time to dump me into a grave, she ordered the gardener to give her privacy and took me to my *nonni* instead. I don’t know what happened after that, but my theory is that Claudio thought Antonella’s behavior was suspicious. He didn’t trust her, so he had her killed, and he did it in one of the most fucked up ways possible. Poison from the garden she loved so much.”

Fury burns under my skin, but one word sticks out. “Poison...Vinnie said my father was poisoned, too.”

“Sev...I have to tell you. I was the one who put your mother’s flower arrangement together on the table at dinner the other night. I’m sorry...but I don’t think Claudio was the only one behind that order.”

Dread fills my stomach as I remember the bouquet my mother was so proud of.

“Foxglove?”

She nods against my chest. “*Digitalis lanata*. It’s used to make heart medication...Digoxin.”

“The same medication my mother claimed my father died from. *Fuck*.”

“I’m sorry, Sev.”

I want to be angry, but after everything I’ve learned in the past forty-eight

hours, finding out my mother killed my father is more validating than heartbreaking. I've hated her for a long time. I told myself it was because of her antics, but I think part of me knew.

"She didn't react the way I thought she should. I know grief is different for everyone, but she jumped into bed with my uncle less than a few weeks later. She claimed she was protecting me from Claudio, but I never for a second believed that was her only motive. I hated my father, but he was still my *father*. If she were anyone else, I'd kill her for murdering him out of principle alone. But she's my *mother*. As much as I'd want her dead...I don't think I could do it myself."

Tallie remains silent during my confession, but when I go back to tracing her white tattoo, she finally speaks again.

"When I was a kid, I thought Antonella *let* those things happen to me. Now I understand that she was trapped like we were. She did what she could to save me the first chance she got."

"Now what?" I mentally go over the song again. "We go after the judge next, right?"

At the word "we," her eyes dart up to me, and that soft smile comes back as she nods.

"You know? I like the idea of you helping me. I thoroughly enjoyed watching the way you handled Percy."

"You saw that?"

"Yup. Loved it so much that it gave me that final push I needed to mark the driver off my list."

A cheeky smile of my own lifts my lips. "Is that why you moaned my name when you came that night?"

Her eyes widen, and she props her head up to see me better. "You were in my apartment? How did I miss that?"

"You were a little busy if I recall. The real question is how did I stop myself from joining you?"

She bites her lip. "I'd never come before that night. You're the only person who's made me...who's made me feel those things."

Pride inflates my chest. "And I'll be the only one who does if I have anything to say about it. You'll have to put me back on your kill list to get rid of me, *vipera*."

She barks a laugh. "That's right, Severino Luciano, you remember my kill list next time you try to piss me off."

I squeeze one of her ass cheeks, making her hiss at the bruises my cane left last night.

“And you remember *this* next time you try to piss *me* off, little *vipera*.”

Desire flares in her eyes, and her gaze darts to my lips. Not wanting another second to go by without answering her need, I kiss her. She moans into my mouth and melts into me. Her fingers run through my hair, making my scalp tingle at the light tug she gives it. My grip inadvertently tightens on her bruises, but she whimpers against my lips this time, and a pang of guilt twinges in my chest.

“*Cazzo*, I’m sorry, Tallie. I promised to take care of you last night and all I did was fuck you.”

She giggles. “That *was* taking care of me.”

I shake my head. “There’s more to pleasing my woman than just making her come.”

“Well, let me just say that orgasms are a *great* start.”

“So is this. Here, straddle me, please.” I scoot out from underneath her and sit back against my ebony headboard.

“‘Please,’ hmm? After all the begging I did last night, it’s nice to hear that word come from your lips for a change.”

I huff a laugh and help her as she gets to her knees to climb on top of me. The dim light through my window highlights a shadowy stripe across her upper thigh. I instantly grip her hips to stop her from moving so I can get a better look.

“Sev?”

Desire ignites in my veins at the three light rose bruises just below the crest of her ass. My cock jolts as my hand reverently grazes the marks I left.

“Fuck, would you look at that...”

I keep my hold on her and turn on the lamp on my bedside table. The light reveals the mirror over my dresser, where it illuminates Tallie’s bruises perfectly. She twists in my grip, and her lips part in awe at her reflection.

She loves my marks as much as I do.

We can’t take our eyes off of her body as she lifts her leg to straddle me. But when her arousal drips onto my cock, my attention snaps to her glistening cunt settling over my hardening shaft. My hips buck underneath her, sliding along her opening, and she moans lightly. Her nails lightly graze my pecs before she gasps.

“Look at yours.”

My gaze drags away from the goddess in front of me to see the dark purple stripe on my lower pec. The pride and hunger in her expression send a zing of pleasure down my spine.

“Goddamn, if you look at me like that, I’ll never be able to focus long enough for aftercare.” I brush my thumb over her bottom lip.

Her gaze darts to my mouth. “If you’re trying to get me to stop, Sev, this isn’t the way to do it.”

“Fuck.” I swipe my face and shake my head. “No. Not yet. I need to do this first.”

She pouts, but I ignore the temptation to kiss her again and open the drawer in my bedside table. I grab the tube I need and squeeze a generous amount into my palm. I’m using way more than I ever do on my own bruises, but I’ll buy this by the pallet if she likes my cane as much as I think she does.

“What’s that?”

“This...” I set the tube aside and rub my hands together. “Is Arnica cream. Grab the headboard, *dolcezza*.”

Her anticipation radiates like an aura as she obeys me. Thanks to the new position, her breasts fill my vision, and my mouth waters to taste them. I resist the urge for now and lift her hips with my fingertips. The cool air that wafts over my drenched cock feels icy cold compared to her warmth, but the small gap between us gives me just enough room to gently smooth the pain relief cream over her ass and thighs.

“This should help with the pain.”

“Will it, um, make the bruises go away?”

Disappointment tinges her voice, making my cock twitch underneath her again.

“It could...at least until the next time we do this.” I massage her a little more forcefully, making her moan. “Do you like my marks on you, *dolcezza*? Do you like feeling what I did to you every time you move?”

Her eyes close, and her hips begin to tilt back and forth in my hands. “Mhmm.”

“Every time you feel these bruises, you’ll remember I’m the one who made you come when I gave them to you. You’ll be sore for me here.” I dig my fingers into her upper thighs and raise her higher. “And you’ll ache for me...” I line my cock up with her entrance. “*Here*.”

She sinks down my length, and her gasp of pleasure steals the breath from my lungs. When she slowly begins to ride me, her eyes close and her head

tilts back in euphoria. I settle against my headboard so I can watch my goddess move as I roll my hips up to meet her. She moans low, making my cock jump inside her.

“God, Sev, why does this feel so good?”

I lean forward and whisper against her lips. “Because this is what it feels like to let me take care of you. Now we’re both finally getting what we want. What we deserve.”

Her lips part, and I steal a kiss. She opens wider for me eagerly, and her velvet tongue slides against mine. I let her dictate our pace above and below, and with every rise and fall of her hips, I smooth the relief cream over her bruises. Her pussy’s tight inner muscles stroke my cock, making it nearly impossible to focus on my task, especially when she begins to ride me faster.

“That’s it, *vipera*. Take what you need.”

She moans in response and digs her nails into my pecs. The next time she slides down my shaft, I push up, thrusting deep.

“Sev, yes!”

She tries to move up again, but I clamp my hands on her hips, stilling her so I can grind into her pussy and against her clit. My mouth captures her nipple, and my tongue twirls around it. Her little noises of appreciation are punctuated by my thrusts. I graze her breast lightly with my teeth and gingerly let it slip from my mouth. When I move onto the other, my tongue once again swirls around the tawny peak, giving it the same attention.

“Sev, please...” She drifts off, but we both know what she’s begging for, and I literally can’t wait to give it to her.

Her nipple pops from my mouth, and I glide my hands up her waist and along her arms, traveling to where she’s holding onto my headboard. I wrap my hands around her grip on the top of the wood. My smirk is sinful when her eyes narrow in question.

“Hold on tight, *dolcezza*.”

Desire lifts her lips, and her arm muscles flex as she does what I ask.

“So obedient for me,” I murmur.

Her submission is too much for me to handle, and I don’t give her time to respond as I take the lead. I hold her just above her hips and begin to piston inside her.

She’s soft and warm around my cock. A fever heats the back of my neck, and sweat pricks my brow as I pound up into her. The visual alone is almost enough to make me come. My cock is slick as it drives in and out of her. Her

full breasts bounce with every thrust. Her half-lidded eyes lock with mine. It's fucking incredible. Our bodies tense together, and my spine tingles as my abs, arms, and quads contract, building up for our climax.

The sensations are too much already, and I know we're both about to combust. My ankle brace makes it hard to gain purchase with that leg, and I shift underneath her. She whines and I murmur low.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of you."

I lift my uninjured leg so I can gain leverage with my foot on the bed. The new position instantly provides me a better angle, and I don't hold back anymore. My hands lift her slightly so I can shove up and deep inside her, hitting that spot that she confessed she's never felt implode with anyone but me. The head of my cock is aching to come in her, and I dig my fingers just above her hips. In no time at all, she's moaning my name and I'm gritting my teeth not to come before she does.

"Sev...Sev, I'm going to...."

"Do it, Tallie. Trust me enough to let go. Come with me."

Before I can even finish my command, a high-pitched noise keens from deep inside her chest. I quicken my pace, making sure my cock's slight curve glides the tip along her G-spot with every stroke.

"Sev, yes, oh my god. Don't stop."

"Never."

Rapture transforms her face, flushing her olive skin. There's no longer a hint of worry or stress on her as she cries out my name one last time, igniting my own release. Her tense muscles melt underneath my fingertips and right before my eyes, giving me my cue.

I let go, too.

My own ecstasy rips through me, relaxing and contracting my muscles in waves as I come inside her. Every drop of cum sends another jolt of bliss through me, and I grind on her clit as I fill her with my possessive need.

She collapses against the uninjured side of my chest, and I catch her in my embrace.

We only just officially met, but I feel like I've known Tallie forever, and I've wanted to bring her justice for a lifetime. Our hearts and passions are intertwined, and we've been reunited by rage and forgiveness. I have her in my arms now. I won't let her down this time, and I won't let her go.

For several long, peaceful moments, our breaths are the only thing you can hear in my soundproofed apartment. Eventually, her fingers stroke my

tulip tattoo on my side, and I grin into her hair, enjoying her gentle caresses. When she speaks, it's breathy and sated.

"You're going to kill me with orgasms, aren't you?"

"You've wanted to slit my throat for fifteen years, so it's only fair."

She chuckles against my chest, and quiet falls over us again before she clears her throat.

"I'm not on birth control."

"Good," I murmur as I stroke her back. "I've been tested, and I haven't been with anyone in a long-ass time."

"Same," she replies. "But you're...you're okay with me not being on birth control?"

"I don't want it any other way." I tilt her chin. "You're mine, Tallie. I want everything that comes with that."

She swallows and nods before I let her go to lay against my pecs again. She strokes her fingers down my abs and her breaths even as she gets lost in thought. I think she's fallen asleep when her hand stops.

"Those are real, aren't they?"

I lift my head to see what she's talking about, and my heart stutters as I realize her gaze is fixed on the shrine in the corner of the room.

A pyramid of skulls grins back at us from my macabre sculpture. Several are stacked on top of a purpleheart wood table. Its rich, deep purple color is in beautiful contrast with the pearl white and gray bones sitting on top of the surface. Each one nestles in between the head of another. Their hollow eyes stare at nothing, their gruesome smiles can't confess how they met their untimely death. The stack is evidence that those men will never screw over or hurt anyone else, and they'll never come back to haunt me.

I wrap my arms tighter around her.

"Yes. They're real. But I assure you, every single one of them deserved it."

My grip is tight, and she has to know that she'd have to fight me if she wants to flee. But she relaxes in my hold instead.

"That doesn't scare me."

"No? It should," I whisper, fluttering one of her curls.

"Are the capo and Percy in there?"

"At the top."

I can feel her smile against my chest. "Good. I want...I want the rest there, too."

Excitement buzzes through me. “Then we’ll make it happen.”

“When?” She looks up at me, and that small smile I felt deepens the dimples in her cheeks. I’m tempted to kiss them, roll her over, and keep her in bed for the rest of the day, but I have something for her I don’t want to miss.

“Sooner than you think, *vipera*.” I kiss her chastely on the lips. “In fact, I have plans for you today.”

My phone lights up on my bedside table right on cue, and I glance at the text message’s preview on the screen.

RAZE

First shave of the day is on its way.

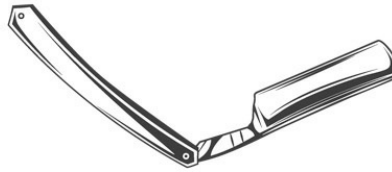
“Your present should be here in about fifteen minutes. Give me a moment to set it all up, and then come downstairs.”

“Go downstairs? For what?”

I wink at her and grin. “It’s a surprise to die for.”

Scene 31

ONLY WORTHY OF REVENGE



Talia

Less than twenty-four hours ago, I wanted to kill Severino Luciano for betraying me. Now I'm perusing his apartment in one of his black zip-up sweatsuits after he thoroughly fucked and sated me. Before he left, he claimed the "gift" he's giving me somehow rivals all the orgasms I had combined. I highly doubt it, but anticipation still buzzes in my veins as I wait the ten minutes that he asked.

Sever's apartment is huge, so I have plenty of room to snoop around while he's gone. It may technically be a studio, but it takes up the entire top floor of the building. He's obviously knocked down all the walls to make the space wide and spacious. Or because he's paranoid and afraid someone will get the jump on him if there are different rooms. I'm betting both.

The room is dark and masculine, with a color palette of black, gray, silver, and purples that are so deep they're almost black. The four corners consist of an industrial-style kitchen, a sectioned-off bathroom, his bed, and the shrine of skulls. In the center is a living room with a TV, and a wall of computer monitors takes up most of the windows. Everything is quiet, but for the hum of the electronics.

My curiosity gets the better of me, and I swivel the computer's mouse around. All the screens light up to reveal a neighborhood. *Our* neighborhood, the North End. All of the surveillance videos are in motion except for one. I step closer and see it paused on a point from yesterday.

I'm in the shot, wearing my coat and the nun's habit I designed. I chuckle and shake my head. He wasn't lying when he said he caught me using the

cameras in the neighborhood. I underestimated him when I set out on my mission.

“Well-played, Severino.”

I step back to take in the rest of the screens. Everyone in the neighborhood is going about their business, and I search the monitors until I find the one that shows Sweet Tallie’s.

The picture window has plywood boarded over it, and there’s crime scene tape out front. My heartache barrels back into my chest at full force.

Tony is gone from our lives forever, and Gio is in pain. I would’ve never left his side if he hadn’t insisted I finish my mission. Getting dismissed like that might hurt some people, but Gio and I are birds of a feather. Not only do we both need revenge right now, but we’re also solitary creatures. We like to process our emotions by ourselves or with the ones we love. He’s made it clear he wants to be alone right now in his grief, and thankfully I’ve found solace in Sev—

Wait...

My heart flutters, and without the man in question to look at, my gaze falls to the skulls in the corner as my mind stutters over one life-changing thought.

Am I in love?

It feels insane to even think, but when two people are drawn to each other the way Sever and I are, I can’t deny that I’m feeling *something*.

When I began this mission, I was totally at a loss of how to deal with “the boy.” It’s why I left literal breadcrumbs with his cousin to hopefully draw Sever closer. I always thought I’d come up with a plan eventually, and planting the seeds would come to fruition, but then Sever walked into the bakery unexpectedly.

I was nervous as hell, but we touched, talked, *laughed*, and any plans I had went up in smoke. Falling in love was never on the agenda. Hell, I didn’t even expect to like him. Love was absolutely out of the question.

But now...

I set those thoughts aside and continue to watch the other monitors until I see Luciano’s Cuts. The anger I had over the fact that it no longer boasts “Bianchi’s Butcher Shop” is gone. Vincelli was the *bastardo* who killed my father, and Sever is going to help me do something about that.

A smile lifts my lips until I see a car park outside the barbershop. And it’s not just any car. It’s a black Rolls-Royce Ghost. A Vincelli car.

I watch, stunned, as Sever's cousin, Orazio, gets out. My blood boils at the sight of him. The last time I saw Raze, he was nearly tackling his own cousin to the ground at Claudio's order. Now I try to rein in my anger and watch as he opens the door for someone in the back seat. My eyes widen, and my blood runs cold as the man gets out.

"What the hell?"

Is Sever in danger?

I sprint out of the apartment, smash the elevator button, and step inside the metal gate without even registering that I'm still barefoot. There's no way I'm stopping now to go look for my shoes, though, and I press the first-floor button at a staccato pace until the elevator shifts to life.

The machine looks every bit an antique, but it moves swiftly and silently down to the barbershop. I'm already poised to open the metal gate when a rough voice grates against my skin.

"Severino? I didn't expect you to be here. Little casual even for this job, aren't you?"

The judge.

The wooden door that separates the elevator from the barbershop conveniently has a one-way mirror that allows me to see inside the shop. I imagine Sever installed it to make sure he isn't caught unaware when he leaves the elevator—that's why I would install it anyway—and I'm thankful for it now. I can clearly see Sever wearing the same black zip-up sweatsuit that he laid out for me, using his cane with one hand, while the other holds open the door for Judge Blunt to walk right on through. I'm glad I didn't just barge in, but rage and confusion simmer in my veins where anticipation flowed just a few moments ago.

What the fuck is the judge doing here?

"Don't worry about my outfit, Dickie. I can still cut and shave with the best of them."

"Hmph. Orazio said he would be my barber and that the luxury cut included *privacy* as well. He made no mention of you. Now, where did he go..."

The judge glances out the door for his driver, but Sever turns the client chair around and pats the seat with the handle of his cane.

"He'll be in shortly. He asked me to get you started. Have a seat, he won't be too long."

Is this a trap? And if it is a trap, who's the hunter, who's the prey, and

who's the bait? And which one am *I*?

As soon as I ask the question, my instincts push my fears away. Sev has proven time and again that he's on my side. Whatever it is that he has planned—this “gift”—I need to trust him for once and not jump to conclusions. Especially since last time, I ended up suspended upside down. Granted, that wasn't such a terrible outcome.

Focus.

I try to do just that, and I watch through the glass as one of my greatest enemies sits in front of the man I might've accidentally fallen for.

The judge grunts as he settles into the chair. He's scowling underneath his gray mustache, and he stares at Sever's reflection in the mirror, watching his movements as he sets aside his cane and grabs a rolling knee walker from the side of the room.

Sever seemingly ignores him as he travels around with his injured leg resting on the walker's black cushion. He sharpens his razor on a strap of leather before laying both down. Then he sets out the shaving cream and grabs a white apron.

The judge sits up in the chair and glances out the window. “Ah, there he is. Your cousin is right outside, boy. No funny business, right?”

Orazio is indeed right outside the door, albeit he's not facing the window and he's on the phone. I don't know what Sever has planned with that traitor around, but if he leaves Orazio in the room alone with me, he might be down one more shitty family member.

Sever sighs as if he can't be bothered. “Of course, judge. No ‘funny business.’ My uncle has me on a tight leash...remember?”

The judge grunts and seems to relax at the reminder. “The important thing is that *you* remember.”

“How could I forget? My poor mother is under Claudio's spell. I'd never do anything to hurt someone who's innocent in our world.”

“Hmm. You never did apologize for your outburst, though,” the judge points out.

“I meant to talk to you before the musical last night, but my mother was a little protective over both of us, it seems. She doesn't like conflict.”

“She's smart for preventing you from making another scene. Your uncle always said you were a slave to your emotions,” the judge grumbles and leans his head back so Sever can drape the white cloth apron over his chest. “It's a good thing he took the reins after your father died.”

Sever's jaw tics, but it's the only sign that the judge's observation irked him.

"You might be right about that. It seems that Claudio knows best these days."

"Mhm. He proposed taking us to the winery for the holidays. The hills are supposed to be beautiful with the snow on them."

"It is, as I recall. I haven't been there in years, though. Something about my father dying after drinking my uncle's wine made me not want to go back to the place."

The judge's eyebrows furrow up at the ceiling as Sever sharpens his blade against the leather again.

"Shame. Coincidences happen, though. Your mother wouldn't have married Claudio if she thought something was amiss."

Sever scoots the knee walker over to the towel warmer in the corner of the room. He removes a thick white hand towel and rides back over to the judge.

"In any case, thank you for coming and letting me make up for my behavior."

"I *came* because Orazio said he'd give me a cut and shave on the house. I didn't realize the two of you would do a bait and switch. No matter, though, I'm due for a good shave, so I might as well hear you out while you give me one."

"So gracious of you. Here, this will be warm." Sever drapes the towel over the man's face, and the steam rises to the ceiling.

"Mmm, this has always been my favorite part of a good shave."

Sever smirks in the mirror. "Mine too."

His eyes cut in my direction, and he nods. I know he can't see through the one-way mirror, but he knows I'm here. My heart leaps in my chest, and I quietly push the metal elevator gate aside. I cringe at the squeaky sound, but as soon as it's open, I push through the door that separates the elevator from the barbershop and enter the room.

"What's that? I thought you said we'd be in private, Severino."

"We are, sir. It's this old building. It clanks and clambers when you least expect it. Some people think it's part of the charm, but I swear there's a ghost here half the time."

"Nonsense. Silly superstitions."

"So silly of me." Sever glares at him through the steamed towel before he

juts his chin at the razor lying on top of a towel. His expression is intense, but excitement lights his eyes. I imagine mine look the same. I go to grab the razor, but Sever clears his throat and I glance back. He narrows his eyes at the towel with more dramatic emphasis this time. I frown at him as I pick up the towel, hoping this is what he wants.

Underneath the cloth is the knife my *nonni* gave me. Gratitude flutters in my chest as I grip the pearl-white handle, and I mouth, “Thank you.” He smiles back at me and nods again, this time indicating for me to come to him. He keeps the towel over the judge’s face and shifts so that I can get beside him and behind the judge.

“How long is this supposed to be on my face, Severino? I think I’m quite steamed now.”

“Almost ready, I just need to open you up. Your pores, I mean,” he replies with an evil grin at me in the reflection.

He watches me for a signal. I take a deep inhale and a low exhale as I position the blade just under his jugular. My other hand hovers over the judge’s wispy hair, and I mouth, “Now.”

Pure malicious delight brightens his face, and his voice lowers. “You know, speaking of ghosts and superstitions. Do you ever think about that girl you raped repeatedly? You know, the one who allegedly *died* escaping from Claudio’s house?”

“What? What girl—”

The judge screams as I yank on his hair, tugging him backward in the barber’s chair just as Sever pulls the steamy washcloth away with a flourish. The man’s pale skin is flush with the heat and his eyes are wide as I force him to look at me in the mirror.

“‘What girl,’ Judge Blunt?! Don’t tell me there were others,” I hiss and tug his hair so hard he has to use the armrests to hold on. Sever depresses the lever of the chair, dropping it down with a thud so I have a better angle on the judge’s neck. The blade cuts him as he tries to squirm, but I just dig the knife into his neck and watch the blood drip down onto the stark, white bib over the judge’s clothes.

“Hmm, can’t have you moving around so much you get cut, Judge,” Sever tsks with a mocking tone before retrieving more leather straps from a nearby cabinet.

“Severino, what’re you doing? Who is this madwoman? Let me go! Both of you!”

The judge's eyes are locked with mine in our reflection, frozen with terror. He tries to wriggle out as Sev ties him down, but my prey quickly realizes the more movement he makes, the more likely his head will be sliced off. Sev continues to work, and in no time, the judge's arms are secured to the armrests and his legs are tied to the metal footrest.

"Answer me! W-who are you? You've had your fun, now I demand you let me go this instant!"

"You don't know who I am? Pity. I was hoping Severino's question and the scars I got from the vicious dogs that almost killed me would tip you off. For some reason, I thought a man with a job like yours would be able to put evidence together. My mistake."

"The dogs...you..." the judge sputters.

Sever pushes my hair over my shoulder and lovingly caresses the scars from my jaw down to the neckline of my sweatshirt. There's a new bruise there from where he bit me that makes me smile, and that expression must scare the shit out of the judge because he begins to writhe in the chair.

"Oh, my god, it's *you*! B-but you're supposed to be dead!"

"I keep hearing that, but you know, life is a funny thing. Sometimes it takes wanting to die to realize you deserve to live. That's what you did all those awful nights. You made me want to *die*. But the next morning, the boy in the room next to me helped me remember that I wanted to live."

Sever's face softens in my periphery, making my stomach flutter, but I keep going.

"Each day I grew more determined than ever to survive you. When I survived that night I tried to escape, revenge was what kept me going. You tried to ruin my life and helped make sure the world forgot about me, but I've fought for my life back every step of the way."

"L-look, I don't know what you think happened all those years ago—"

Sever suddenly stabs the judge with his razor in his—

"—*ahh!*"

"Try again, Dickie. And make sure you tell the truth this time. You only have one ball left."

My eyes widen at the blood spurting out of the judge's crotch.

Sever stills at my expression and gives me a semi-apologetic look as if to ask, "Is this okay?"

I nod quickly. I've never done it his way before. Frankly, I'm not sure I'd have the stomach to do it myself, but I sure like watching him in action.

He grins, and I do the same until the judge's scream registers again.

"Shut up." I slice his skin, making him swallow down the rest of his cry. "I already killed one gaslighter this week. You're well on your way to being the second."

"No, I never did anything to you! You're c-confused, and this is one big misunderstanding. I-I don't even know you! I just heard about you from one of Claudio's friends. Whatever you think you remember, you're wrong. You think you knew me as a child? How do you know? Children are terrible at remembering things. They make for unreliable witnesses in my world! Do you know how many cases I've had to throw out just because a child remembered the wrong defendant?"

As angry as I want to be at what he just said, his words needle my mind, causing me to hesitate.

What if I am confused, or even crazy? Every time I'm stressed, my mind runs a mile a minute questioning everything. I have terrible nightmares that feel real. I thought they were memories, but what if...

Did I make it all up?

The gardener didn't know who I was at first, and neither did the driver or the priest. Did they ever know who I was? Did I convince myself that I had the right people? It has been fifteen years, what if I remembered it all wrong? The priest has always said I was a liar, did I make everything up? I thought all those men were gaslighting me, but what if I'm the one who's wrong?

Every doubt and fear I've ever harbored screams to the forefront of my mind. What if I am crazy and all this was in my head? I've always believed I was sure, but sitting here, right in front of the man I think did this—

Sev's hand rests on my shoulder. "Breathe, *dolcezza*."

My mind quiets.

When he speaks again, Sev's voice is full of hate as he glares at the judge's reflection.

"She's telling the truth."

Someone else believes me.

Everything comes into focus.

It was real.

I know I should trust my own memories without Sev's help. But my mind plays tricks on me sometimes, and God does it feel good to hear that someone else believes me and I'm not alone.

"You only believe her because you're fucking her!"

Sever leaves my side in an instant and yanks out the razor from the judge's testicle, only to stab it into the other one. Blood spurts from the wound and leaks down the chair and onto the floor. The judge shrieks and thrashes again, but Sever pulls the razor out and points it at the judge's weepy face.

"I believe her because I believe the innocent. I believe her because I believe *survivors*. Not only that, but Claudio already told you I was there, too. I heard it all. Whenever you're drunk, I recognize your voice, and Father Lucas confirmed it to Tallie...right before *she* killed him. You say children are unreliable in your world, but I think your people call Father Lucas's confession a 'dying declaration,' am I right?"

I press the blade deeper into the judge's skin again and slowly drag it along his pockmarked neck.

"Okay! Alright! I remember you!" He breathes heavily as he tries to gather his words, and his face is already flushed from blood loss. "B-but how are you here? You're supposed to be dead!"

"I hated you too much to die." I look up and see Sever's face in the reflection, watching me with pride. "And now I have something to live for."

I face the judge again and let all my rage into my expression. "You and Claudio tried to ruin my life. But now I'm going to end yours." I bear down on the knife and steady my hand.

"Wait! Wait!! Y-you hate Claudio, too, don't you? How about I give you some information on him? I know ways to bury him in the court system."

"Ha! I couldn't give a shit about the 'court system.' What has your kind of justice ever done for me? Killing you and Claudio is the only way to end this."

"No! No, no. Listen! H-he loves that winery of his more than anything! He's planning on spreading his restaurant business and opening up his personal winery to the public. He's also using it to hide his bribery and money laundering from the drugs he's been peddling here. The winery will be a front for all his business as they grow up the northeast, and the whole thing will be a gold mine. If you destroy it by revealing his money laundering schemes, he'll be done for. I-I'll even testify if you let me go!"

That last part makes me nervous that Sever will be tempted, but one look at his smug face eases my fears. He chuckles and flicks his razor at the judge's face, splattering him with his own blood. "Trust me, Dickie. I already have the winery covered."

My brow raises, and he shrugs at me and smirks.

Oh, I can't wait to hear about that one.

"P-please, Severino! Be reasonable. Don't let her do this!"

"I'm not *letting* her do anything. You're lucky my woman doesn't play with her food like I do, judge. If I had my way, you'd be downstairs swinging from a hook in a meat locker and dickless. But..." Sev waves the razor before moving toward the judge's bloody crotch. "The last one could still be arranged—"

"Sev, don't!"

He stops mid-stab.

"Thank you, oh, thank—"

"I don't want him to pass out before I kill him."

Sev grins, but the judge looks like he's going to pass out anyway.

"Please, I beg you, Chiara—"

"Don't *call* me that!"

"Chiara, you were always such a devout little girl! You confessed with your godfather every Saturday. I-I've found God, too! Grant me mercy!"

The reminder makes me sick, and my stomach churns. Sever stands and places his hand on my back, giving me silent comfort and permission. I lean into all of it.

My eyes narrow at the judge's reflection, and I shake my head. "Forgiveness is for the worthy. You've never been worth anything more than my revenge."

I put all my force and strength behind the blade and slice across the judge's throat. It's so quick that blood doesn't even have time to spurt out. Instead, it waterfalls down the white bib around his neck. The shock and fear in his face slackens, and he goes flaccid in the barber's chair. Peace washes over me as the light leaves the bastard's eyes. He was the last man that hurt Chiara. She can finally rest knowing that her nightmare is dead.

"It's done," I whisper.

Almost.

Chiara can rest...but Tallie still has one more to go.

~~Butler. Maids. Gardener. Driver. Capo. Priest. Judge. Godmother.~~
Godfather.

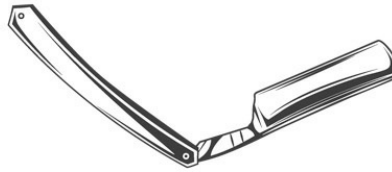
I've been alone every other time I finished marking off a name on my list. This time, I lift my eyes from the corpse, and Sever's pride gleams back at me.

“You did well, *vipera*. He can never hurt you again.”

I return my gaze to my dead prey. Satisfaction, relief, and gratitude fill my chest as I nod. “He can never hurt *anyone* again.”

Scene 32

YOU ARE FORMIDABLE



Talia

After several more minutes of savoring the sight of the judge's life bleeding out of him, soaking onto the chair, and dripping to the floor, Sever's hand encircles my wrist. He takes my knife and slowly pulls me into his chest in a warm embrace. When he kisses the top of my head, my lower belly flips, and I squeeze him back, letting all my emotion and gratitude flow out of me and into him.

"Thank you, Sev. Best present ever. Aside from the knife my *nonni* gave me, of course."

"Of course," he chuckles. "I had to make sure you had that, too. You wouldn't have been able to fully enjoy your gift without it."

"You know me so well."

He smiles down at me. "I think I know my *dolcezza*."

"You do, don't you?" I agree and stand on my tiptoes to kiss him.

Every time our lips touch, something takes over me. My heart beats rapidly, and my body flushes with need almost instantly. It happens again, now, but knowing there's a body right in front of us drains any desire from my system. I clear my throat as I pull away.

"So, um, I...what should we do with this? It's a mess."

"Not as messy as you think. With the bib catching most of the blood, the scene isn't nearly the worst I've dealt with."

Sever grabs the white hand towel and wraps it around the gaping gash in the judge's neck. It's immediately soaked in crimson, but it seems to catch any further rivulets as Sever unsnaps the white apron from around the man's

neck. He lifts it away, and for the first time, I notice that while it looks like a simple cloth, there's a layer of latex on the other side. The design allows liquid to soak the fabric layer and keeps it from spilling down, while the rubbery material prevents the blood from staining everything underneath.

"Do this here often?"

"The apron actually is dual purpose. It helps barbershop clients stay nice and dry just as well as the bodies we 'tend to' here."

He carefully rolls the apron like a scroll before wheeling away behind the curtain partition in the back of the room. A sink faucet squeaks on, and part of me wants to go back there and help him. But the other part is transfixed by the scene in front of me.

Blood leaks out from underneath the washcloth and down the judge's black business suit. I peel the cloth away and inspect the neat line I gave him. It's gruesome, but it gives me a sense of peace to know I've finally done it. My mind is quiet, and it feels permanent this time. I'm almost done with my list.

"You're a little fucked up, huh?"

Cazzo.

Somehow, I completely forgot about Orazio, and I whip around to face him. He and Sever look like brothers, but Raze is broader and maybe an inch taller than his cousin. Some might even say he's more attractive, but he does nothing for me. Right now, my mind short-circuits at the sight of him. This man betrayed Sev.

"Traitor!" I grab a random razor off of a barber's booth and throw myself at him. Something zooms across the room at the corner of my eye before two strong arms capture me from behind.

"*Vipera*, it's okay," Sever murmurs soothingly in my ear, but I'm not having it.

"Let me go, Sev!"

"Damn, she really is a viper, isn't she?" Raze grins, infuriating me more.

"Severino, let me go! He betrayed you! He kept you from attacking the judge, *and* he let you get hurt!"

"Ouch, so the truth bombs are flying, huh?" Raze grimaces and rubs his chest.

Sever squeezes tighter but chuckles at his cousin, confusing me and taking some of the wind out of my sails.

"See what you did, Orazio? This is what you get for going along with

Claudio's bullshit without telling me. I should let her after you."

Raze's eyes widen, and his hands raise apologetically. "If she did that to Judge Blunt, no thanks. I'm out."

"Believe me, Tallie deserved every drop of blood she spilled." He kisses my temple and tightens one arm around my waist while he snatches the razor out of my hand with the other. "I'll take that."

"But Sever—"

"He's on my side, Tallie. My cousins had to hold me back to stay in Claudio's good graces. And honestly to keep me alive. If I'd killed the judge, I wouldn't have served as Claudio's 'guard dog' anymore, and he would've happily killed me."

"But your ankle," I insist and point at his leg, still propped up on the knee walker. I'm glad he has it, but it's the first time I've seen him have to use the mobility device the entire time I've spied on him. "And you were *stabbed*."

Raze sucks breath through his teeth, "Yeah, that fucking sucked. I owe you...I don't know what, but I owe you. Or you owe me because it could've been worse? Whatever, we'll get square on that somehow."

Sev huffs, "On second thought, maybe all your apologies through texts shouldn't be enough. Maybe I should let her go wild."

Raze's grin falls suddenly, and his medium olive skin tone blanches as he backs up to the door. "Sev, man—"

"See, Tallie? Look at how afraid he is. Of *you*. You're formidable, *vipera*."

I'm formidable. My chest flutters at the thought. This giant of a man is literally scared that I'll slice him open. It feels good to have that power, and something about it settles my anger, and I fight Sever's hold less and less as he continues to talk.

"He's always been on my team, and he always will be. Not only did we grow up together, but his side of the family *hates* Claudio. Lots of people do. We have more people in my corner than Claudio has in his stolen kingdom. Raze helped convince the judge to come here, knowing what we were going to do, and now he's here to help us clean up."

"You're going to help us?"

He shrugs. "It's my barbershop after all. I can't let my customers come into blood and gore for a shave. It's bad for business."

I'm still scowling despite their reassurances and Raze's cheeky smile, but I quit pushing against Sever's hold, and he loosens his grip on me. When I'm

free, though, I rush at Raze before Sever can stop me and stab my pointer finger into the man's chest.

"If you ever betray Sever, I will kill you. *Hai capito?* That's a promise." His eyes widen, but I'm not done, and I jab him again. "And you shouldn't sneak up on a woman like that. One of us is bound to kill you one day."

"I have no doubt that you could." Raze's brows rise for emphasis at the corpse behind me. "I've only seen carnage like that from my cousin. Nothing a little Luciano bleach can't fix, though."

"We'll bring the body down for processing if you clean up here," Sever offers. My stomach lurches, but I try to keep my face from showing my disgust at the thought of touching the judge's corpse as Sever continues. "I left the bib in the back room. It might need tossing because it definitely wouldn't pass the luminol test."

Raze glances from Sever to me before explaining, "That's the one CSI uses to test if blood has been spilled."

"Please, I know what the luminol test is."

He smirks. "I bet you do. How could I forget that chicks watch murder shows as a hobby?"

"*And* she's a bloodthirsty killer, but yeah, let's blame murder shows," Sever jokes.

Raze barks a laugh, making me jolt. "Who knew the bakers' granddaughter had such a violent side?"

"I should have," Sever replies as he rests his hand on my shoulder, giving me reassurance.

"Fair enough. Well, not a goddamn thing in this place would pass that test if we didn't have our own methods." He goes to the door and changes the time on the "Closed. Be Back In:" sign to noon before sliding blackout curtains over the glass. "Don't worry about the body. Your woman may be a stone-cold killer, but she got a little green when you mentioned clean-up. I've got this. You guys go shower up. I'll have a skull for you by next week."

Relief flutters through me.

"You sure? She can go up and I can help," Sever asks him, and I panic that Raze will change his mind, but thankfully, he nods.

"I'm sure. We'll call it even though, right?"

"Definitely," Sev and I say at the same time, and we both flash grins at each other.

He leaves my side to switch out his knee walker with his cane. When he

returns, he places my hand on his bicep and leads me into the elevator closet.

Once we're inside and the door to the barbershop is closed, my hand refuses to leave the knob. I hold onto it and watch through the one-way mirror as Raze works.

He peeks out the black curtains and jiggles the door handle. Apparently deeming everything secure, he pops in some headphones and snaps on gloves. Then he bounces to the beat as he rolls out a mop and a large metal vat of bubbling solution.

"It's our special concoction. It cleans up the blood so thoroughly not even CSI will be able to identify it. Don't worry about Raze, Tallie. Before you, he was—" Sev catches himself and clears his throat as he wraps his hand around mine on the doorknob. "He was the only person I could trust."

I let go to squeeze his hand. A light, airy sensation fills my chest. The weight I've carried since childhood has lifted. The girl I once was has been avenged, and all I have to do now is kill the mastermind. Sever made this happen, and that same question I wondered earlier gets answered with an audible *click* as he closes the elevator's metal gate.

"What happens next?"

He presses the button for the top floor with his knuckle, and the elevator shifts to life. "Raze will take the body to the aging room downstairs, cut off the head, and process the skull for my—*our*—collection. Then I'll join him to go bury the corpse. You could come if you'd like. It's one of my favorite parts."

I nod and hold my breath as I watch the judge's body disappear from view. The last thing I see is Raze plopping it onto a sheet, and then they're gone.

"Talia..." Sever turns me around and cups my cheeks. "You had no forgiveness for that *bastardo*, but you did for me. How was I worthy?"

My chest tightens at the pain and hope filling his expression. "You were just a boy, Sev. A boy who gave me courage. I don't think I ever would've tried to escape without you. Now you're promising me a life after revenge." I brush my hand lightly over his cheek, loving the feel of his soft, short beard underneath my fingertips. "How could you not be worthy?"

Emotion brims in his eyes, and he kisses me, slowly and sweetly. After slaying one of my last monsters, the innocent, protective, *loving* gesture is perfect, and just what I need. Like everything Sever does for me.

He breaks away and presses his forehead to mine. His sandalwood and

aftershave scent fills my nostrils, settling me.

“As for what happens next with us. We have some planning to do.”

“Planning?”

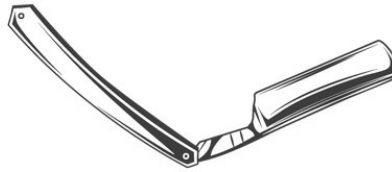
He nods. “First, you’re going to spend time with your *nonno* Gio. Then we’re going to tackle the last name on your list.”

“Together.”

“Together,” he agrees and smiles. “It should be fun. I’ve always enjoyed a little drama at our family dinners.”

Scene 22

THE REVELATION DINNER



Sever

We're having steak for Sunday dinner again. Claudio loves it with his red wine and basically ignores my mother as she makes small talk between the three of us. I play with my food, pushing it around my plate while trying not to think about Tallie. It's a mirror image of the dinner I attended only a week ago, except there's no special guest of honor, and a *lot* has happened since then.

I haven't seen my *vipera* since she left to mourn with Gio, and I miss her so damn much. But everything so far is going exactly the way we planned it. It all ends tonight.

I smile at the thought.

"What's so funny about flowers, boy?" Claudio grumbles at me.

My mother has been going on and on about the plants she's been cross-pollinating in her greenhouse. Apparently she's figured out how to mix nightshade and foxglove, forming the arrangement before us with pink, bell-shaped flowers with deep purple-black berries on the stems. They "match the black Frette tablecloth," which is supposed to impress me, but all I can think about is how she has betrayed me and my family over and over again.

There's no shame or even hesitation in my mother's tone as she casually discusses her murder weapons. Then again, they've also been on display for years, mocking me. Why would she grow a conscience now? It's another crime to add to Claudio and Gertrude's list, and when Tallie and I take them

down, it's going to taste so sweet. Right now, though, it's taken every ounce of self-control to just calmly sit here, so I've retreated into my thoughts.

"Severino, your uncle is talking to you, dear." My mother's voice wavers at the end.

"Nothing's funny," I answer. "Just had a thought is all."

Claudio's eyes narrow. "And what kind of thought might that be?"

I shrug. "Just wondering about your winery. How's it doing these days, Claudio?"

He sighs. "My winery is none of your concern. Unless..." He frowns and tilts his head at me. "I haven't been able to get in touch with Judge Blunt the past couple of days. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

I take a swig of the bottled water the maid gave me. "Nope. Can't say I know anything about that. You're the one he was close to, and I knew my orders."

"Right...well, my plans required his contacts, and I'm afraid I'll have to make some new ones to fire up an expansion plan in New York. The winery finally has produced enough to distribute widely. The bottom rows have been especially fruitful this year."

"And you certainly won't be able to launder all that drug money like you planned to do without a judge in your back pocket, right? From what I gather, you'll need that government insider when you're building a wine empire in New York on the backs of addicted Bostonians."

"Severino!" my mother snaps. Dramatic worry lines crease her forehead as her gaze darts from me to Claudio and back. "We don't talk about such things at the family dinner."

I roll my eyes. "I don't know when the hell we'd talk about them, then. Maybe you'd like another dinner and a show?"

"What're you going on about, boy?"

"That's what you wanted last Sunday. You pulled the judge into your web and then sicced me on him to show us who's boss, right? If that's not dinner and a show, I don't know what is."

"Listen here, Severino, you're on very thin fucking ice. If you did something to Judge Blunt, I have no use for you anymore."

"Oh, dear. Butler?" She snaps her fingers at the man in the corner, even though he's looking right at her. "More wine for the table, please. It seems my son and husband need a little encouragement to behave, and wine will do

just the thing.”

The butler does as she ordered and floats around the table with a wineglass. When he tries to pour for me, I hold up my hand again.

“I bring my own, thank you.”

“Apologies, sir.” He nods, unbothered—and not surprised—by my refusal.

I pull out my unopened bottle of liquor and glance at the maid in the corner to my far left. She doesn’t look at me now, and she hasn’t this whole time. Good.

“Will you get me a glass, please, ma’am?”

She bites her lip and nods, but Claudio snaps at the butler in the opposite corner. “Our butler does bar service. How many times do we have to tell you that? Get this man a rocks glass.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Would you like one as well, *zio*?”

“No. The *merda* you gave me last time got me sick. You’re on your own.” He sips his wine, and my lips twitch.

“Suit yourself.”

It’s the same song and dance as last time, as the butler retrieves the glass and hands it to me. I untwist the cap on the bottle and set it aside to sniff my glass.

“Here we fucking go again,” Claudio grumbles.

I ignore him and pour a double. It’s all for show. I’ll barely take a sip, but I do this every Sunday dinner, and I certainly won’t go off-script so early on the one night that will change everything.

“Is that the same kind as last week?” Claudio asks.

“Nope. This is one I’ve saved for a while.”

“Hmm...what’s the occasion?”

“It just seemed like the right time. Mending fences and all that.”

I lift the glass in a mock salute before taking a sip. The whiskey’s vanilla and spice flavors burn on their way down my throat, and a slight taste of something fruity and sweet teases my tongue. I’d love another gulp, but as always, I don’t want to take my chances being off my game here.

“What a kind gesture that Severino would offer you a glass, Claudio. Don’t you agree?”

“It’s the least he could do. It’s about time he showed some gratitude in this family.” He gulps his wine before setting the glass down.

“And what is it that I have to be thankful for, exactly, uncle?”

Claudio scoffs. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe be grateful that I kept my dogs outside so you wouldn’t cry like a fucking baby again. Or maybe because I still tolerate these dinners your mother forces us into. Or *maybe* because I’ve let you live at all, hmm? Not many in the Family would have let the son of a Boss survive. You were direct competition to me and had a following of your own. I could have, and *should* have, put us both out of our misery when your father died. And after what I’ve learned the past week, I’m afraid that kindness has gone and bitten me in the ass.”

“What do you mean?” *What does he know?*

“Severino, are you alright, dear? You look a little pale.”

My heart begins to pound as I take another sip just to hide my confusion behind the glass. Once I’ve finished, I place it back on the table and ask him the question more directly in the best nonchalant voice I can fake.

“How has it bitten you in the ass, *zio*?”

“It seems that I may have a snake in my garden.”

I prop my elbows on the table and steeple my fingers in front of my mouth. My cane leans against the table leg beside me, my razor jabs my thigh through my pocket, and I wish like hell my cousin, Roman, didn’t have to take my gun when I arrived here.

It was one of the first things that tipped me off that something wasn’t right tonight. He would have let me keep it had Claudio not been watching him like a hawk. My uncle claimed it was because of my outburst last week, but with the change in tension at the table, now I’m not so sure.

“A snake?”

“Yes. You see, I had my suspicions that someone was out to sabotage me last time you were here. But the evidence is irrefutable now.”

His words sound heavy in my mind, but I don’t think he’s had more than one glass of wine.

“Irrefutable?” I sound like a parrot, but he’s goading me into asking questions with his cryptic narrative, and it’s fucking working.

“Severino, your tone, dear,” my mother chides. “Maybe another sip will take the edge off.”

I glance at her and raise the glass to my lips, but my instincts remind me just in time that I’m not safe here, and I place it back down.

“As you learned last week, we’ve had a higher turnover rate than normal in the Vincelli household. I like to keep people on my payroll for as long as I

can. Until death, usually, like a marriage,” he chuckles before his expression sobers. “Unfortunately, there have been a lot of deaths lately.”

He’s speaking too quickly and slowly at the same time, and I strain to understand him. “I know about the gardener and the driver.”

“And it turns out...maybe even my capo.” He fixes his glare on me. My heartbeat is loud and slow in my ears.

“Vinnie’s on a bender,” I say slowly. Too slowly.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

“You know what? Vinnie’s not on a bender. Judge Blunt helped me figure that out. He introduced me to a special security app the feds use. Normally I can’t track Vinnie’s location when his phone is off. But this program can. According to the text I received less than an hour ago, he’s...” Claudio looks at his phone with a dramatic flourish, and my grip tightens on my steak knife handle. “Here in my brownstone. Which means either you have it, or your minion does. All it took was a little questioning, and look what I found.”

He tosses the phone onto the table just as the door to my back on the left swings open. Roman and Tiero burst inside, dragging their limp brother.

Fuck.

They haul him into the dining room and toss him at my feet. Raze grunts as he lands with a *thump*, and I have to school my expression to keep from attacking Claudio.

My cousin is barely recognizable, with his eyes nearly swollen shut and his bottom lip cut. His brothers have done a damn good job following our uncle’s command, which means Claudio was either watching, or there’s more at stake for them than I realized.

The maid sucks in a breath and uses the tray table beside her for support. The butler has disappeared, but my mother gazes on without so much as a hint of concern on her face.

“Thank you, men. You’ve proven your allegiance, and I promise I won’t kill your brother. Yet.”

Ah, so Raze’s life was on the line. What else were they supposed to do?

“That’ll be all. Return to your guard posts outside the house.”

Roman and Tiero do as he asks and leave Raze behind, but not before Roman kicks him to see if he’ll wake up. He doesn’t.

Tiero refuses to look at me, his vivid eyes are downcast, and I can see the faintest blush on his tanned cheeks. His twin, Roman, can’t hide his shame as

he walks out, though. I wish I could let them know that I understand, but I can't give them away to Claudio. The only thing that will help all of us is if this ends. Tonight.

"You would do this to your own family?"

Claudio scoffs. "I've done far worse to far closer relations. Or haven't you figured that out yet?"

My veins fill with hatred. Antonella was a saint until the day she died, and although I never cared for my father, he was still just that. My father. Despite the differences I had with my parents, I'd always hoped there was good in at least one of them. Now I have no hope, because if Claudio killed my father the way Tallie suspected, then that means my mother...

My mind drifts, and my jumbled thoughts struggle to catch up with the conversation.

"Ah, I see you've finally connected the dots. About time. I was beginning to fear my nephew was more of an *idiot* than I thought."

I blink at his blurry smile. It takes me a second to realize it's not just my thoughts that are hazy, it's my vision, too.

Che cazzo!

The world tilts on its axis. I slap my hand on the table to keep me from going with it. My mother says nothing as she watches me struggle. A gleam in her eye takes the place of what should be worry, and fear forces my slowing pulse to speed back up. Damn it, she's behind this. My adrenaline fights whatever poison runs through me, battling to keep me conscious.

"But there's not just one snake in this garden. There's not even just one in this room." Claudio twists in his seat and pierces me with his crystalline stare. "Isn't that right, Severino?"

My eyes widen...or at least I think they do. My tongue is thick, but before I can answer him, he keeps going.

"I was hoping I could take out two birds with one uzi earlier this week." He sits back and dips his hand inside his coat jacket. Alarm bells fire, but I can't figure out what the emergency is. "But alas, an innocent man died instead of my targets."

"You killed Tony Amoretti," I growl.

Claudio's lips curl into a smile. "It's a pity. I meant to kill her."

The shot rings out before I register that he's pulled his gun from his shoulder holster. The maid crumples to the ground, holding her stomach.

"Tallie!" I stand too quickly, knocking my cane to the ground with

numbed hands, and I have to catch myself by leaning on the lip of the table.

Claudio chuckles as he stands up from the head of the table.

“I thought the girl died years ago, but I always knew my ex-wife was hiding something. Thank goodness your little girlfriend came out of the woodwork and made her presence known. Chiara Bianchi. A/k/a/Talia Amoretti. The dead butcher’s daughter. A dead baker’s granddaughter, and now...” He strolls to where Tallie lies and kicks her hand with his loafer. She doesn’t move. “She’s dead herself!” he announces with a clap of triumph. “And you might be, too, if you don’t get yourself to a hospital.”

No.

My heart races, and my chest aches like I’ve been stabbed.

Tallie can’t be dead.

“No.” I shake my head, but the room spins, so I have to stop. “What...did you...do to me?”

“The little cross-pollination your mother was bragging about earlier? You are our first guinea pig.”

I look at her. “Just like my father, huh, Gertrude? And *zia* Antonella?”

Her lips are sealed firmly shut, but her expression is haughty, as if she’s proud of what she’s done.

“Do you think your mother would let you get away with murdering *me*?” Claudio barks a laugh and travels around the table again to stand behind my mother with his hands on her shoulders. “She’d never let anyone take away the extravagant lifestyle I’ve given her. Your father couldn’t provide what she needed, so she came to me, and I was more than happy to oblige. She’d already taken care of one problem for me—my snake of a wife. Why not take out my half brother, too?”

Even before Tallie told me her theories, I’d always known, deep down, that my mother was capable of evil like this. But to have her treachery laid out so openly and used on *me*?

Poison and betrayal literally burn in my veins, and yet I still can’t wrap my mind around it.

“How could you?” The words are sticky on my tongue, but I spit them out nonetheless.

She sits up in her chair and takes a sip of her wine. “Antonella was weak. She proved that when she cared so much about that stupid little slut of yours.”

“Don’t call her that!” I growl.

“Severino! Don’t interrupt. It’s rude.” She clears her throat and preens as if she’s on stage. “Now what was I saying...ah, right. Nightshade in Antonella’s wine did the trick. But your father was still a problem, and I had to suffer with him for years too long. He liked to say, ‘Family over money.’ I was able to convince him of most of the things I wanted. It was easy to sway him to believe you were too emotional and weak to lead, for example. But I could never get him to give me the life I *deserved*. He could’ve easily done it too, with the money he made in his side businesses, but he refused. I gave up my career to be a *rich* mafioso’s wife, not a pauper. Claudio had no such limitations, and what do you know? He was single!”

“How fortunate for you.” My tone is anything but congratulatory, but she beams.

“Isn’t it? I had to bide my time, because I knew someone might ask for an autopsy if your father died mysteriously. But when he went on Digoxin, I had the perfect opportunity. Foxglove in his wine mimicked an overdose. And thankfully, Claudio put off an autopsy for me. I was able to marry the Boss I deserved, and Claudio became the rightful king to his throne.”

She gazes at my uncle as if he’s hung the moon, and I want to wring both their necks. But when my name wheezes from the corner of the room, all my focus falls on Tallie again.

“*Dolcezza*, I’m here.”

I trip toward her and collapse to my knees at her side. Her breaths are labored as she cradles her stomach and tries to sit up, but her eyes are clear.

My panic subsides a fraction, and I draw her up into my arms and whisper into her ear, “*Amore mio*, be still. The pain will ease soon. You’ll be alright.”

“But...you’re poisoned...”

“I’ll be okay,” I murmur. “Don’t worry about me.”

My mother sighs. “Claudio, I think he’s right. I soaked the inside of the glass with the juice of my most potent berries, but it still might not be enough, especially since his adrenaline is overactive right now. You’ll have to shoot him, too.”

Rage burns in my chest at the callous way she talks about killing me and Tallie.

“You might be right, Trudy. I thought you might fail at this task, but you were so insistent.” My mother’s jaw drops, but Claudio keeps going. “No matter. It’s nothing a couple more bullets can’t fix. But Severino, I have a proposition for you first.”

“What?” I growl.

I don't have my gun, my cane is still by the table, and my razor is useless with Claudio across the table. I don't know how to get out of this, but I think my mother is telling the truth, at least. The adrenaline shooting through me makes me feel shaky and strong at the same time as it counteracts some of the poison's effects. I'm not sure how long that'll last or if I'm making shit up in my head, but I go with it for now and pray that Tallie and I can get out of this.

“My proposition is, you tell me where Vinnie is, and I won't shoot you. If you stumble to the hospital in time, you might not even suffer long-term effects.”

“Claudio,” my mother whispers. “I don't think he will. Like I said, I'm afraid I didn't use enough—”

“Shut up, Trudy.” Claudio glares at me again. “How about I won't shoot your cousin, then, hmm? Or maybe your answer can stop me from putting a bullet in your little whore's brain instead?”

Fury heats my skin, and I rack my brain for ideas to help me get out of this. Claudio loves mind games, so in other circumstances, he might have actually let me go. But he won't like my answer about Vinnie.

Tallie shudders in my arms, and I hold her closer. Her face is pale, and her brow is sweating. I think it's just from pain, but I'd need to see where the bullet landed to be sure. Claudio still watches me, though, waiting for my answer.

“You want to know where Vinnie is,” I say more slowly than I need to.

“Yes. Tell me, and maybe I'll spare you.”

“And Tallie?”

He snorts. “Your bitch is a lost cause. I know who she is. I put the pieces together after I followed you to the North End, and I saw her walking to the bakery, too. Antonella always did love those naïve old men. It makes sense that she would take her to them. After the carnage that girl left behind in her little vendetta, I have a score to settle with her. She's not leaving this house alive. But you...” He wags his finger at me. “I may make an exception for you if you just tell me where Vinnie is.”

“Sev...” Tallie stirs in my arms, and I draw her closer, cradling her in my arms, so she can whisper without my uncle hearing. “Sever...I love—”

“Don't you dare fucking say it. You can tell me after this, but not before, *vipera*, got it?”

“Severino, my boy, what don’t you understand about this situation? There will be no ‘after.’ You might as well let her have her last words now.”

“Please listen, Sev.” Tallie’s voice is a mere breath, so I lean toward her until her lips brush my ear. “Do what you have to. He’s giving you an out. Forget the vendetta. Save yourself. Just let me go.”

She clings to my forearm, and I kiss her temple. My eyes burn as I make my vow, and I hope it’s not the last thing I do.

“No. I’m not leaving you. Never again, *mia bella vipera*.”

My mind is still working at a glacial speed, but my mother was indeed right. Adrenaline and hate are helping me push through, and the haze is fading from the corners of my vision. As much as I don’t want to take my eyes away from Tallie, I have to trust that our plan is still solid, and she’ll be alright. While I pretend to keep looking at her, I assess our surroundings in my periphery.

While Tallie and I spoke, Claudio had the audacity to order my mother to move his food and wine to the chair beside her. He chews on a piece of steak as his fingers drum on top of the expensive tablecloth my mother is so obsessed with. His gun lies in front of him. My mother sits smugly beside my uncle, leaning into his space as if he cares at all that she’s there.

Raze still lies motionless on the floor, mere feet from me. He’s breathing, thank God, but my eyes catch on a shadow at his hip where Roman kicked his shirt up. But it doesn’t look like a bruise...

It’s a gun.

Fuck yes.

Roman and Tiero might’ve done what Claudio asked them to do, but they left me a weapon to fight back with. Claudio didn’t make them stow the guns away in his gun cabinet after they frisked me. That’ll be his last mistake.

I kiss Tallie’s temple one last time before gently laying her down on the ground.

“Leaving the girl behind? Smart move. She’ll be dead soon, anyway. But you’re not going anywhere without answering my question. Where. Is. Vincenzo?”

I lunge for the tablecloth and yank it off before Claudio can grab his pistol. Plates and glasses crash to the ground, and I use the chaos to grab the gun Raze is carrying on his hip. I’m shielding Tallie again and pointing the barrel at Claudio before my mother even has the chance to scream.

She leaps up from the table and backs into the wall. All her previous

bravado has disappeared as she inches toward the kitchen door. Ironically, it brings her closer and closer to me, but I don't dare take my eyes off of Claudio.

I don't see Claudio's gun on the table anymore, but somehow his table setting remained intact.

"I thought things like that only happened in movies..." Tallie grunts as she tries to sit up.

"Don't hurt yourself, *dolcezza*," I grit through clenched teeth, biting back my chuckle.

But when Claudio sips his wine as if he doesn't have a care in the world, that simple action does me in, and a laugh barks from my chest.

"What's so funny, boy?" He glares at me over his wineglass. "Where's my capo?"

"He's where I put all the other bodies, *zio*."

"And where is that? I don't have the patience your father did, *bastardo*."

"You want me to be direct? Alright. His head has been stripped, bleached, and processed for my collection. But his body...well, that'll one day be in the wine you're drinking."

A small amount dribbles down his chin. "Excuse me?"

"I buried Vinnie in your precious vineyard, *zio*. You've been wondering why I don't drink it, but you've never questioned where I dump the bodies you've made me kill. I actually got my inspiration from you. Up until recently, I chopped off their heads and dumped them in the river. When my father died after drinking *your* wine, though, I thought to myself, 'How could I possibly get Claudio back?' I've been wanting vengeance ever since I thought Tallie died that night we tried to escape, so I thought it was fitting. Depending on your winemaking production time, you could've been drinking decomposing bodies for weeks, if not months."

"That...that's not possible." Claudio's face twists as the wineglass trembles in his hand.

"Really? You did say that your favorite batch has been from the rows that consisted of my special blend, so you're welcome, *zio*. That happens to be where I've placed most of the kills you ordered."

Claudio's eyes widen, his forehead pricks with sweat, and his skin pales, showing signs of doubt and defeat for the first time in my life. "You wouldn't —"

"Severino!" My mother gags and shrieks. "You have to be lying! How

could you do this to me?!” She falls to the ground and searches for one of her precious dinner napkins before scraping her tongue with it.

“That’s rich, Gertrude, considering you’re disappointed that you both are fucking up trying to *kill* me and the woman I love. You know I’ve never been any good at bluffing. I’ve always said the truth is beautiful, no matter what it reveals.”

“The truth?” Claudio scoffs. “Let’s test ‘the truth,’ shall we? You claim you love your whore, but when it comes down to it, will it be your life or hers?”

In a split second, several things happen all at once. Claudio retrieves his other gun from his shoulder holster, and at the same time, my mother flings herself at Tallie with a steak knife she must’ve found on the floor. It all happens in an instant, no time to make a choice. Claudio raises his gun at me and fires just as I shoot and dive to shield Tallie from my mother.

But I’m too late.

My mother collides with Tallie, who fumbles with something in her skirt and tries to get away. Claudio’s gun clatters to the ground, and he slumps back in his chair with his hand over his chest where my bullet landed. He’s struggling just to breathe, so I risk taking my eyes off of him and twist around to try to help Tallie.

My heart stops.

My mother is draped on top of Tallie, and neither woman is moving.

“Fuck, Tallie?!”

“I’m...here.”

I collapse next to her as my heart stutters back to life. “Oh, *grazie a Dio!* Thank God.”

I quickly help Tallie lift my mother’s body off of her. Blood coats Tallie’s stomach, and a pained cry rips from my chest.

“*Dolcezza*, no—”

I move the bloody apron aside and hurry to unbutton the dress underneath so I can assess her injury. My pulse is wild in my veins, but I hold my breath and try to keep it together.

“The blood isn’t...mine.” She winces as I split the halves of her dress to reveal her torso. “*Cazzo*, it hurts like it is, though.”

“The knife...did she stab you? The vest isn’t designed for that—”

My fingers run over the dent in the bulletproof vest I made her wear. The rest of the vest remains intact, no knife wounds in sight, and Claudio’s bullet

is still lodged in the Kevlar. It was close range, so I bet it hurt like a bitch, and I'm not surprised it knocked the breath and fight out of her there for a little while. But a dent is all it is. A manic laugh bubbles from my chest.

"Shit, it worked. You're okay."

I gather her in my arms and draw her to my chest. She hugs me back all too briefly before pushing against my chest.

"I'm okay...but Sev, your mother...I'm so sorry."

I twist with her in my arms to see where her pained expression is focused on. It's a moment just like the one where I turned with her to find Tony. But in that moment, I felt anguish. Now? Now there's nothing but relief.

Gertrude's mouth hangs open, her eyes are glazed, and yet, somehow hate still etches her face. Tallie's chef's knife is hilt-deep in the other woman's chest, with only the white pearl handle sticking out, and blood spills from her like a sieve.

It's over.

A groan behind me stills us both, but Tallie springs into action.

"No!" She grapples with something on the ground and falls from my arms just as a deafening gunshot rings in the room.

"Tallie!"

I swivel around in time to see my uncle's face go slack from the bullet wound now in his forehead. He drops the gun he was pointing at us and lands face-first into his steak. The wineglass that had survived me yanking off the tablecloth finally tips over and splashes on top of his head.

"Goddamn, what a shot, *vipera*. Where'd you learn to do that?" I laugh and look at her to congratulate her, but Tallie is hyperventilating with the gun still aimed at Claudio.

"S-self d-defense classes." Tears stream down her cheeks, and my heart breaks.

My woman is tough, but from what she's told me—and from what I've seen—every kill she's had so far has been relatively easy, calculated, and gone off without a hitch. She's been through so fucking much already, and this is the first time in a long time that she's had to actually fight for her life. No wonder she's at her breaking point.

"Come here, *dolcezza*." I encircle her waist with my arm and try to gently pry the gun from her hands. "You did good, baby. So fucking good—"

The door crashes open against the wall, and Roman and Tiero burst into the room, pistols ready. Tallie pushes in front of me with the gun raised, but I

yank her back the same way I did when she faced off with Raze at the barbershop and snatch the gun from her hands.

Awe fills my chest, though, as she keeps trying to protect me. No one has ever been willing to sacrifice themselves for me, let alone twice, and here she is fighting me to do it again.

“Talia, it’s okay, they’re my men.” I glare up at them. “Slow as fuck, though. What took you guys so long?”

She relaxes in my arms slightly, still unsure. The duo’s postures sag once they get a read on the room, and she finally settles back against me.

“Hey now, we didn’t want to crash the party too...soon...holy shit.” Roman’s tanned skin blanches at the sight of our dead Boss face-first in his dinner, but Tiero simply holsters his gun with a flourish and grins at me.

“Hell yeah. I knew you’d be able to do it, but fuck man, way to do it in style.”

“Good job, *stronzo*.” Raze’s voice is muffled against the floor. Other than speaking, he barely moves. If he wasn’t talking right now, I’d assume he was still passed out. “Thought I was gonna die three times, but thanks for keeping me alive.”

“Glad you’re awake, bro.” Roman toes his brother in the side, making Raze groan.

“If you’d have been out any longer, you could’ve had brain damage,” I point out.

Tiero snorts. “Roman and I never worried about the dumbass’s *brain* damage for a second. The *idiota* got caught by Claudio’s government stalkerware program. The *government*, Sev. I was hacking that *merda* in fifth grade. He deserved a good kick in the ass for that one.”

“Get him out of here anyway, will you? He needs rest. You might have gone overboard.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tiero waves his hand at me and signals for Roman to help him.

“You get outta here, too, Sev,” Roman grunts as he and Tiero bend to wrap Raze’s arms over their shoulders before standing with him. “Cops don’t play around Beacon Hill. Someone’s probably already called about the gunshots.”

“Fuck, you’re right. Hurry up with him and don’t worry about us. I’ll get Tallie home safe.”

“Will do,” he replies and nods to Tiero.

They're a lot gentler than I expected as they carry their groaning brother out of the dining room and hopefully toward one of their cars. When they're gone, I turn Tallie around in my arms and cup her cheeks. Tiny blood splatters over them like freckles, but she's safe. Safe but worried, if her expression is any indication.

"Sev, I'm sorry about your—"

"Shh, I'm glad you're okay, *dolcezza*. Gertrude was my mother in biology only. She never showed me the type of love that you—" I swallow back the words. She was about to say them earlier in the heat of the moment. I want to hear them when she's actually ready. "You did what I couldn't, and you *lived*. *Grazie a Dio*, you're here with me, and that's all I fucking care about." I smooth her curls out of her face and kiss the top of her head. "Come on, let's go."

"Raze *will* be okay, won't he? He looked pretty bad."

"Psh, Raze has gotten into plenty of worse fights than that with his brothers."

"And his brothers...they're not enemies, right? I didn't think they were. I went to them for my tattoo, for Christ's sake, but then they held you back and beat up their own brother..."

"No. They're crazy, but if I was ever in charge, Roman and T wouldn't be soldiers, they'd be commanding them."

Her face falls slightly, but just as quickly, a small smile sparks back up and she huffs a laugh. "Jesus, I'd hate to get in a fight with your enemies, then."

"You just did, *vipera*." I chuckle and move into her vision so my happiness is all she can see. "And we won."

Her eyes widen as if she finally gets it. I *feel* the moment she realizes...

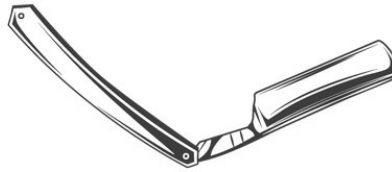
"It's over," she whispers. She looks around me at the table, and tears fill her eyes at the sight of the once powerful monster, slumped over on his throne. She meets my eyes again, and a wide, grateful smile deepens the dimples in her cheeks. "It's over, and we *won*."

I kiss her hard on her lips before I swipe the tears from her cheeks. Relief sparkles in her golden-green eyes. I smile at them as I repeat after her.

"It's over, and we won. Now let's get you home, *dolcezza*."

Scene 34

TAKE ME TO ITALY



Talia

My apartment is a wreck. Actually, the whole building is a wreck, thanks to the bakery still looking like a warzone. A different type of destructive tornado spread to my apartment last night after I talked to Gio. Once I came home from Claudio's covered in blood and still shell-shocked, Gio threatened to hit me with a rolling pin if I didn't confess everything then and there. So I did, right down to every gritty detail.

Tears brimmed in his eyes as soon as I began. By the end of it, pride, fear, and determination had hardened his soft features, and he made the decision for us.

"We're leaving."

It's been almost twenty-four hours, and the words still echo in my head. But that's the *only* thing I hear.

For as long as I can remember, I've had ruminating thoughts that constantly race at breakneck speed. Every time I marked a name off my list, my mind would finally quiet...only to barrel back at full volume once a few hours had passed.

This time feels different. The only thing taking up space in my mind since the bloody dinner yesterday is my to-do list, not my "to kill" list. Granted my to-do list is still rather lengthy and is absolutely stressing me out right now.

We're leaving everything behind. I already called Deon to quit my job and partially told him the truth, that Tony's death has taken a toll on me and my *nonno*. Deon was incredibly understanding, and even though I loved that job, quitting to go on this adventure with Gio was easy.

There's nothing for us here now. After Sever dropped me off last night, he left to "go take care of things," and I haven't heard anything since. He's likely taking his throne right now, consolidating power, and exacting a bloody toll on anyone still loyal to Claudio while I pack as quickly as I can to live the rest of my life on the lam.

Even if Sever can convince the police to look the other way at Claudio's death, there's still the matter of the list of bodies I've already left in my wake. He'll have to make those go away too, and even if I were to get off scot-free somehow, I still can't stay here. I'm doing this for me, and I'm also doing this for Gio. He needs to leave, and I need him. So wherever he goes, I go, and Severino Luciano can live the rest of his days as the Mafia king he always wanted to be.

He cares about you. What're you doing? Just try calling him again—

"No," I hiss under my breath. "He got what he wanted, and so did I. We'll just be adults and end it at that."

If I call him, I'll no doubt make a fool of myself and blather all my pointless feelings. I'm glad he didn't let me tell him how I felt last night. It was a stupid whim of a confession anyway. I thought I was going to die, for Christ's sake. I can't be held accountable for heat-of-the-moment passion like that.

I force a chuckle at myself and shove my favorite sewing kit into the biggest suitcase I own. Once it's lodged tight in the corner, I quickly toss in more items from around the room as I look for my favorite leggings.

"Tallie! Are you ready?!" Gio bursts through my door, and I frown at his outfit.

"Are you wearing five aprons? You look silly."

He glares and points two different wooden spoons at me. "Seven. And look who is talking, hmm?"

I glance down to see the leggings I wanted are draped around my neck like a scarf. When I look up again, we both grin like fools. Together we're chaos, but it's my favorite kind. Little moments like this will be the ones that get us through the hardest times without Tony in our lives.

Our expressions fall as if we both were thinking the same thing. Gio resumes his scowl and points the spoons at me again. "Talia Amoretti, we need to leave! I have a friend down at the docks who said he will take us south. Or north. It was hard to understand him...but we will figure it out once we get there."

“Relax, *nonno*.” I shove a stack of clothes into my suitcase and mentally push down my own stress, too. Nerves have been stealing my breath when I stop too long to think about the future, *and* when I stop too long to think about who I’m leaving behind.

I rub my chest and clear my throat. “I’m moving as fast as I can. I wasn’t expecting to uproot my life and leave everything behind—”

“Like me?”

The deep voice startles us both, and Gio tilts his head back to see the large man’s grim face.

“Sever...” My voice has the same light, hopeful, airy quality that’s fluttering in my heart. But I tamp it back down as hard as I can. “What are you doing here?”

He’s leaning against the open doorway, one hand in his pocket and the other resting on his cane. The longer he assesses me and the state of my room, the lighter the skin on his knuckles get as his hand tightens around the cane handle.

“I should be asking you the same question.”

Gio pops him on the arm with a wooden spoon hard enough to shake Sever’s scowl away from me and onto him.

“You know what we are doing! Or you would if you had talked to her since you dropped her off bloody on our back stoop!”

“*Nonno!*”

“We are running, Severino Luciano. We are leaving all of this city and the...” He waves his spoons around before giving up on the English word he’s searching for. “We are leaving all this *merda* behind and starting over in a place where our hearts have not broken.”

“Starting over?” Sever’s face whips toward mine. “That’s what I came to talk to you about. Both of you. I’ve spoken to some extended family in Italy. There’s no bad blood between us since Claudio acted outside the Family’s best interests. If we go there, we’ll be safe from any blowback on US soil, and I’ll give my oath that I’ll never make a play for power. They saw this as revenge and won’t punish me for trying to overthrow a Boss.”

“*Italia...*” Gio breathes the word like it’s life itself. “Ah! Severino...” My *nonno* breaks into Italian that’s so fast, even I can’t keep up with it. But the happy tears in his eyes make me wince as I try to point out the obvious to Sever.

“But if you leave with us, you’ll never be a Boss.”

He scoffs. “And?”

“You said yesterday that when you’re in charge—”

Sever steps forward and tosses his cane onto my bed. He cups my cheeks with both hands and murmurs low as he meets my eyes.

“I said *if I was ever* in charge. Not *when I am*.” His voice sends a thrill up my spine, and I shiver.

“I, uh...” Gio shuffles back toward my door. “I will be packing. You two will figure it out, but do not take too long. Talia, say yes, or I will hit your head with my rolling pin and stuff you in my suitcase if I have to!”

Sever smiles at me and answers over his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Gio, I have my ways of convincing her.”

“Bah! Too much information!” Gio grumbles in Italian and slams the door behind him, leaving me and Sever alone in my messy room.

My belly flips, and his eyes darken. His thumb brushes my scar as he speaks.

“When I thought my mother had killed—” He swallows and shakes his head. “The moment I thought I lost you, I realized being the Boss was never what I wanted. I wanted to right the wrongs my family committed. Going through your list was everything I needed to sate that. I wanted to give you the justice you deserve, and now? Now all I want to do is spend the rest of my days with you. Come with me to Italy, *dolcezza*. You are what I want.”

“But you...you dropped me off here and left me to wonder what the hell happened to you. I texted and called, but nothing. What have you been doing while you were gone?”

He winces. “I’m sorry about that, but I’ve been dealing with the Family and ensuring this doesn’t blow back on either of us. After I took you home last night, Raze, Roman, Tiero, and I staged the scene to look like a domestic dispute between my mother and Claudio. The staff has been paid off—*handsomely*, I’ll add—and Raze will sell the story to anyone and everyone that asks, including the feds, cops, and any rival families.”

“Raze? You’re leaving all of that to Raze?”

“I’m leaving *everything* to Raze. Orazio was going to be my second-in-command, but now he’s going to be the boss.”

My jaw drops. “Raze will be the Boss.”

Sev smiles broadly. “He deserves it. He’s family and has all the connections already. Claudio didn’t trust anyone enough to have a second-in-command of his own, and you and I have decimated the ranks. No one will

argue with Orazio in charge, either, since he's Claudio's nephew. And if they do, Roman and Tiero are a force to be reckoned with all on their own. The Lucianos will be at their rightful place again, and I don't have to see it to be happy with that outcome."

"Wow." I chuckle. "It almost sounds easy."

Sever laughs outright. "Killing more than half a dozen people, enduring poison, and a gunfight sounds *easy*?"

"Well, when you put it that way."

Sever slides the leggings off of my shoulders, revealing my black button-down tank top, and he rubs his hands down my bare arms. The room is chilly without my makeshift scarf, and I step into his warmth before I even realize it.

"What does Raze think about all this?"

"He was pissed at first. I don't think he ever cared to be in charge, either. But he's already coming around. He cares about the people in the North End, and he's ready to lead. So far, he's been on every phone call and making every decision with me. I'm commissioning a private jet to take us to Europe as soon as possible, and he'll see us off at the airport. After that, he'll be in charge. And we'll live in peace."

Peace.

His promises and his large, strong hands erupt goose bumps of pleasure over my skin. I step into him and press my palms against his hard chest. My fingers grip his black Henley, and he tugs my hips flush against his body.

"*Madonna mia*, that sounds nice...and *easy*," I warn.

He kisses the crown of my head and lifts my chin to gaze into my eyes. "You deserve the break, *dolcezza*. You deserve to be *free* of everything that's happened to you here. You deserve to be happy wherever you want to be."

This time, he leans down to kiss my lips, and I lift up on my toes to meet him. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, making my nipples harden, and I whisper against his lips.

"Free of *everything* that's happened to me here?"

"Well, no." A smile flashes across his face. "You'll never be free of me, Talia." He straightens again so I can see seriousness settle in the hard lines of his face, and my lower belly tightens. "I love you, Talia Amoretti. I've been dying to hear how you feel about me from the moment I met you, but I didn't want to hear it yesterday because I didn't want those words—this *feeling*—to be tainted by death. I want to hear you say you love me when you know

you're going to live and live well. So, say it."

My smile barely contains my giggle. I almost want to argue with him just because he commanded me to confess those three words. But I feel them, too. I don't want to hide anymore in my new life. Especially not with him.

"I love you, Sever—"

He barely lets me finish before he's devouring me. My body catches up to the change of pace before my mind does, and as soon as his mouth crashes to mine, my tongue surges through his lips to taste him.

We're a tangle of limbs as I push his shirt up, and he tears my top in half. Buttons fly everywhere, and when I shrug out of my tank top, he grabs the neckline of his shirt and yanks it over his head. The sight of his chest makes me pause, and my hands immediately go to the dark purple stripe underneath his stab wound.

"I did this," I whisper.

"And you'll do it again if you come to Italy with me." He grins just before he tugs my bra down and dives in to suck my nipple. I unlatch the back hooks and let the garment fall before I thread my fingers through his hair to pull him closer. He picks me up by the back of my thighs, and I hold on to his hair like reins.

"Sever! Your ankle—"

My back hits the bed in a soft landing before I can finish, and I plop down with a giggle. He hovers over my chest, and his eyes smile up at me, but he never breaks away from my nipple as he laves and teases it. His fingers dip into the waistbands of my leggings and thong before tugging them both down past my knees.

I kick them the rest of the way off while he licks his way to my other pebbled peak. His fingers lightly pinch my wet, tawny tip, while his teeth graze the other into a hard diamond. My nails dig into his scalp, pulling him impossibly closer, and my pussy tingles at the sound of his other hand unzipping himself free.

Even though I can't see it at this angle, I feel his cock bob out of his boxer briefs. His length is warm against my inner thigh, and I spread for him as he climbs to his knees on the bed.

"Say you'll come with me, Tallie." His growled plea blows hot breath over my sensitive breasts, and I shiver with delight. "Say you'll come with me to Italy."

He takes in a mouthful and sucks hard. I cry out once before my breast

pops.

“Say you’ll come to Italy.”

“Not yet...” I sing.

“Fine, if you won’t say it, I’ll make you feel so good you’ll be begging to go with me.”

“Do your worst, Severino.”

He disappears from my chest, leaving a waft of cold air behind him before he dives between my legs.

“Sev!”

His tongue curls into my center, and I rake my hands through his hair to try to position him where I need him. But he already knows my body better than I do, and his pointed tongue zeros in on my clit while one long, thick finger pushes into my slick entrance.

I’m on the cusp of ecstasy even before he feathers his fingertip inside me, and my eyes roll back at the new sensation. He’s all tongue and fingers as he massages my most sensitive areas. My body tenses up, my thighs squeeze his head, and just when I’m about to crest the top, he disappears again.

“Sev! What the—”

He fills my vision as he lays over me and spreads my legs with his knees. I wrap around him out of instinct just before his cock plunges inside me.

“*Fuck, Tallie.*”

We both moan, and I scoop underneath his arms to grab onto his shoulders. One long, slow thrust is all we both need to get adjusted and then he goes *wild*. He drives into me at breakneck speed, and I hold on to him as I try to meet his thrusts.

It’s no use, though, and he squeezes the upper part of my thigh to get me to hold still so he can take the reins. His fingers dig right into one of the delicious bruises he left me with, and I cry out.

“Tell me you remember the safe word, Tallie. Just say it and I’ll slow down.”

“It’s our flower,” I answer, not wanting to even tease him with the word that’ll make him slow down.

He falters. His eyes widen, and his face softens at my reply. For two slow, plunging strokes, it seems as though he doesn’t know how to react. But in a flash, a dark, feral need takes over his expression, and he grips my bruises hard enough to ache. The pain goes straight to my clit as he hits that spot deep inside me over and over and over. It all wraps up into bliss, and my

nails dig into his upper shoulders, my legs tighten around his lower back, and my body is one vibrating sensation as all of me tenses and readies to explode.

“Open your eyes, *dolcezza*. Look at me when I make sweet Tallie come.”

My eyes flutter open to see him gazing down at me. “There you are. I’ve missed those eyes.”

His thrusts slow as the length of him slides in and out of me easily.

“They were only closed for a few seconds,” I moan low.

“Seconds without you is a lifetime. I’ve lived one without you once already, and I never want to again. Say you’ll come with me to Italy, Tallie. Say it, or I’ll kidnap you again and have no regrets.”

His face is completely serious, but I can’t help my giggle. “You’re not even trying to pretend like you’re joking.”

He shakes his head. “Because I’m not.”

My heart stutters as his gaze wholly captures mine. I wrap my legs tighter around his back and stroke my hands up the grooves and divots of his muscles, making sure to touch the stem and petals of the tulips on his sides before hooking my hands on his shoulders again. His cock glides along my channel in deep, powerful strokes, curving right where I crave him.

“You don’t have to kidnap me, Sever. I love you and I’m already yours.”

“*Sei mia*,” he growls. “You’re mine, and I’m yours.”

His rhythm increases again but stays at a tempo I can keep up with. Our bodies have always done the best talking and they take over now. His abs move like silk against my soft stomach, and his shoulders are strong underneath my grip. My nipples brush against his chest, peaking into diamonds again at the friction. In my mind’s eye, I can practically see that hill of euphoria I’m about to climb as my muscles strain and my lower belly tightens.

“Sever...I’m going to come.”

“Come for me, *dolcezza*.”

His hand moves to place his thumb over my clit. He pulses against the small bundle of nerves and speeds up his thrusts, sending me right over the edge. My nails carve into his flesh, and I pull him closer with the heels of my feet on his ass. I moan with him as he growls my name right before biting my neck.

The world falls away as my body jolts and trembles with the waves of my orgasm. His thrusts grow shallow until he seats himself inside me, stretching my hips around his broad waist. He moans beside my ear as he comes, jolting

slightly with every bursting release inside me.

“*Fuck, Talia.*”

He collapses around me but catches himself with his forearms on either side of my head. Our breaths are in time with one another. He breathes in as I breathe out, then he breathes out as I breathe in. We settle into our quiet for several moments before he leaves a chaste kiss on my forehead.

“Let me take you to Italy,” he whispers before moving down to my mouth. “I want to hear you say the words.” I try to nip his lip, but he evades me. “No fangs, *vipera*. Not this time. Leave with me, baby. I’ll keep us all safe there. We’ll get married on a vineyard that doesn’t have any of our enemies buried underneath...”

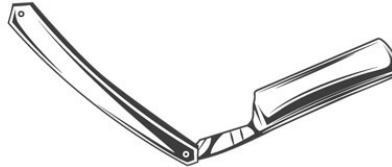
I giggle, but he kisses me into silence before continuing, “We’ll drink good wine. You and Gio will bake me and our children cookies and *cannoli al pistacchio*.” I suck in a breath, and he smiles against my lips, knowing that he’s got me right where he wants me now. “We’ll give ourselves the happy ever after we deserve, just like your musicals.”

My heart soars. We knew what my answer was going to be before we even started this song and dance, but having him ask me like this? How could I ever say no?

I finally nod and grin with him.

“Take me to Italy, Sever. Give us our happy ever after.”

Epilogue



Talia

One month later

Sever kisses my hand as we wait on a nearby bench. The dawn sun is unseasonably warm as it shines on the cliffside of the small Italian village we just started calling home. It's a spot that Gio insisted would be perfect for our purposes. He was right, and Sever and I are now giving him the time he needs alone before we join him.

He's standing near the edge in front of the wooden barrier, gazing over the ocean with the porcelain urn in his arms. It's heavy, and Sever offered to hold it, but Gio insisted on holding his husband one last time.

It's been bittersweet living in Italy the past month. Not only have we been staying in a hotel for the time being, I can't help but be plagued with the memory of Gio and Tony fantasizing about retiring here. Claudio stole so much from us. Too much. I'm grateful I was able to give the *stronzo* the same in return.

From what Sever tells me, Orazio is the polar opposite of Claudio. Sever's cousins, the Luciano brothers, run a tight ship back in Boston, and our neighborhood and "the Family" welcomed their new Boss with open arms. He's charismatic, people flock to him, and he's making alliances Claudio never would have dreamed of. All that will continue as Raze protects people from rival gangs and crime families rather than terrorize them. He'll

be ready to face whatever comes his way, just like he did in the fallout Sever and I left behind.

He and Sever staged the Vincelli brownstone so well that no one questioned the domestic dispute scenario. The priest and the judge were more difficult to cover up. *Somehow* the Catholic Church discovered the priest's bribes and embezzlement, so when word got out that he supposedly skipped town, everyone said good riddance.

As for the judge...after lots of soul-searching, I decided killing him wasn't enough. I wanted to destroy his legacy, too.

Sever stopped Raze before he cut off the judge's head. Then the Luciano brothers traveled with the body in a cooler all the way back to Nevada to create a fake suicide at the judge's mansion. They made it look like the judge burned down his house with him inside it. With his body burned to a crisp, the authorities assumed fire was the true cause of death. The whole scene was made even more believable once they found the pictures on his computer back at his office.

Tiero broke into the laptop to upload the still shots of me that Claudio had been blackmailing the judge with. Sever hated the idea. It was mine, though, so he held my hand as I gave the order over the phone. His lips were sealed tight, his jaw was hard lines of fury, and his knuckles were white, but he supported me, and that meant everything. Once the judge's name was slung in the mud and everyone renounced his "good name" and "honorable" title, Sever understood, and my revenge was complete. My nightmare was over, and Italy has felt like a dream ever since.

Sever has been working tirelessly to find the best home for the three of us to settle down. There's a vineyard not far from here he's had his eye on, and it's been fun to watch my man expand his empire. He gets a glint in his eyes and excitement in his voice when he talks about the booming local real estate market.

Even though I'm trusting Sever will work his magic to find the perfect home, Gio, of course, made his preference loud and clear from the beginning. The day we got here, he mentioned three times that the quaint downtown desperately needs a bakery. And he was the first to point out the local vineyards and the theater in the town over.

He also loves the fact that the townspeople exclusively speak Italian, and he's made the switch permanently himself. It turns out that Sever and I aren't as fluent as we thought, and it's been an adjustment that Gio has teased us

about tirelessly. If it makes my *nonno* tickled to no end that I still can't get certain gendered nouns right, that's fine by me. Sev and I have already agreed to butcher them for the rest of our lives to keep him smiling.

What Gio didn't have to mention about this town, though, is this cliff. We all knew it would be the place where Gio would let Tony go. But if we live close by, we'll be able to sit and commune with Tony to remember the good times. It'll be just what we need, and Sever has been working his ass off to make it happen.

He brushes his fingertips along my forearm, inadvertently pushing my long sleeves back before holding my arm up to the rising sun's rays.

"The new ink is breathtaking in this light."

I nod and turn it so that the snakes look like they're writhing. All of Medusa's hair has been filled in, the purple tulips are just as vibrant as the sunrise cascading before us, and the two white snakes shimmer.

"I'm glad you were able to get this done before we left."

"Me too, it's stunning."

"I think Medusa would be proud of what you've accomplished. I know I am."

I lean against him and lay my arm back in my lap. "I think so."

He squeezes my hand before cupping my cheek and turning me to face him. "Tony would've been proud, too."

Tears suddenly spring in my eyes, and my chest burns with grief. That's the way of heartache. Even when you're prepared, it still takes you by surprise.

"I hope so."

"I *know* so."

One tear leaks out and he kisses it away. When he sits back, rage and sorrow fill the light creases in his furrowed brow.

"If I could, I'd kill your enemies all over again just over that single tear."

I huff. "I'd help you."

Claudio admitted to killing Tony, but Sever double-checked the enhanced surveillance video anyway. It was just as we suspected. The driver wore a black ski mask, but Claudio's rings glinted in the sunlight. He only wore the mask to protect his identity from the public, but he couldn't help wearing his garish rings. Claudio taunted us then, but we got the last laugh.

That painful regret of playing with fire and getting Tony burned will never go away, but it helps to know that Sever, Tony, Gio, and I have been

avenged. The anger that used to flood my veins is gone, but sadness is still an undercurrent in my life. I don't know if that ever goes away. Hopefully today is one step closer to being able to focus on the happy memories rather than the tragic ones.

As if he can feel my pain, Sever tugs me into his strong embrace. I cling to his soft, long-sleeved cotton shirt and let everything go, sobbing quietly into his shoulder. When I lift my head again, there's a damp stain on his shoulder.

"Sorry."

Sever scowls. "Never apologize for your tears. I want all of you, so give me all of you."

"I love you, Sever."

His lips gently brush my forehead as he whispers back, "I love you, too, *dolcezza*."

He rests his arm on the back of the bench, and I lean into him again but keep Gio in my periphery. After several more minutes of quiet reverence, his broad shoulders rise and fall with a weight that I feel in my soul. When he turns around to face us, the sun glitters against the damp streaks on his cheeks, but his voice is strong when he speaks in Italian.

"I'm ready."

I choke back a sob as I nod to him. Sever takes my hand to place it on his bicep and grabs his cane with his other before leading us to the cliffside.

Since we haven't had to fight for our lives lately, he hasn't been in pain in weeks, but this cliffside isn't mobility friendly, and the measly wooden fence is perilous for anyone, so he's using my grip and his cane as security measures more than anything. Plus, I get to hold him this way, and he knows I love that.

When we get to Gio, though, Sever sets his cane down and signals for my *nonno* to let him help with the urn. Gio is mighty but short, and the urn takes up a fourth of him, so Sever takes it and holds it out for me.

I remove the lid and carefully cut the bag of ashes inside with the pearl-handled knife that Tony and Gio gave me. When I'm finished, Gio reaches up and swipes my tears like he's done so many times before, and I do the same for him.

"I heard what Sever said." Gio's rough voice cuts me to the quick, but I tamp down the urge to sob so I don't interrupt him. "Tony *would* be proud of his *dolce nipotina*. You meant everything to us, and you still do."

“Dammit Gio. I’m trying to keep the crying to a minimum.” I chuckle and wipe my tears. He shakes his head.

“Don’t do that. Let all the emotion in so we can let it all go. That’s what we promised Antonio, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

His words are like a hole in a dam, not quite enough to break me, but I give into the fissure. We both cry silently together, comforting each other by accepting the other’s grief. I let him back away first, but we both leave the streaky tears on our cheeks this time. Wiping them away would be pointless. More will come.

Gio looks to Sever, signaling he should start, and my love clears his throat.

“I didn’t know Tony for nearly long enough, but I’ve come to love the two of you. Gio, I’m learning to embrace the depth of my emotions because of you. I’m a better man for it.” Gio pats the middle of his back and smiles. Sever returns it before gazing at me. “And Tallie, you’re the woman you are thanks to your *nonni*. Because of that, I love them both, too.”

Somehow my heart aches more, and I embrace the pain. I grip the back of Sever’s jeans to stabilize him as he pours a third of Tony’s ashes off the cliff and into the wind. When he finishes, he hands the urn to me. It’s lighter, but the emotions in my chest are still just as heavy.

He steps behind me to place his hands on my shoulders and whispers into my ear, “You can do this, *dolcezza*.”

I nod and inhale deeply before I begin. “Gio, you and Tony took me in when I was a broken child. You showed me how to love, and you showed me how to fight for it. You both accepted me for who I was and the darkness I carried. I’ll never stop missing him, and I’ll never forget him. I don’t want to, and I won’t be able to, because I see him in you. The two of you taught me everything good I know. If Sever and I have children, I’ll know exactly how to love them well because I learned it from you.”

Gio’s grief-reddened eyes stream tears, and he motions for me to bend for his hug. I lean into him, still holding the urn, and when he lets go, I step forward, and Sever holds my arms from behind to help me tip it.

When I’ve finished, I hand the lighter urn to Gio. He faces the ocean and steps forward before beginning his eulogy in Italian.

“Antonio and I loved each other fiercely, but that love wasn’t the first for either of us nor was it the last. Italy was our first. And you, Talia, were the last. All three will always be in my heart. And Antonio will always fill my

soul. He was truly my soul's mate and he died saving me. He was a kind hero, an even better husband, and the best grandfather. He deserves to be home. I vow to live the rest of my days happy in his honor, the way he would want, and I'll remember him in everything I do...to Tony."

"To Tony," Sever and I whisper as Gio raises the urn. We watch in silence as the last of my *nonno's* ashes fly into the whipping wind and out into the world. He'll be at peace on the shores of Italy, just like he always wanted.

When the last of Tony drifts away, Gio hugs me on my left, and Sever embraces me from the right. Pain irrevocably united us, but love keeps us together.

Gio is the first to return to the car, leaving me and Sever behind. He turns me to face him and lifts my chin to meet his eyes.

"What Gio said? I promise the same." My brow furrows a little and he continues. "I'll love you fiercely, Talia. You're my soulmate. You never dreamed of a happy ending, but I vow to live the rest of my days by your side, and I vow to love you beyond happily ever after."

Tears prick my eyes again, and I kiss him before making my promise in kind.

"I promise to love you beyond happily ever after, Sever. And a happy ever after with you is all I'll ever need."

The End...unless you read their bonus epilogue below!!

[Sign up for my newsletter and read Talia and Sever's bonus epilogue here!](#)

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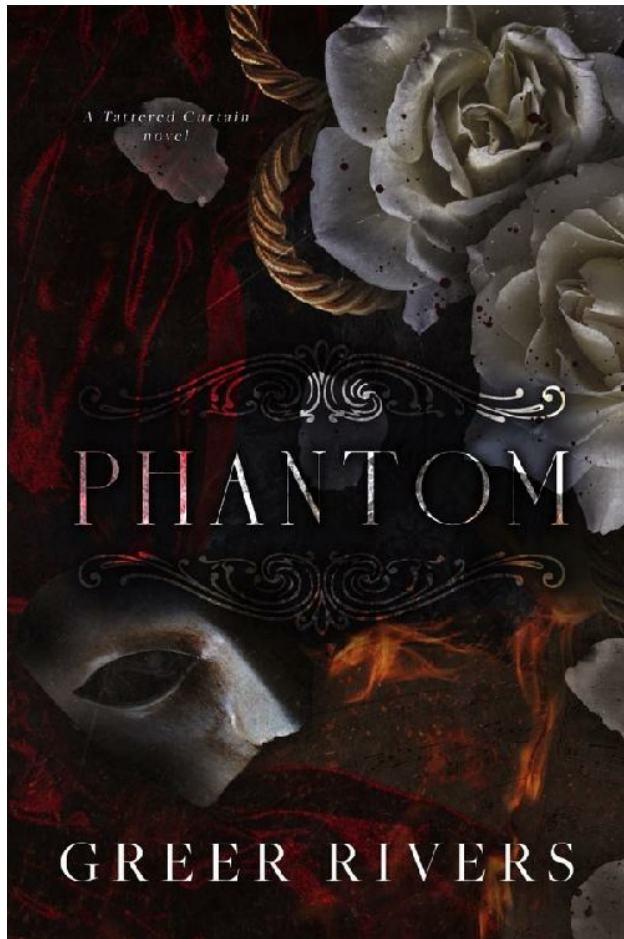
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Our families have a deep history of hatred, and Scarlett is caught in the middle. Meanwhile, her mind plays tricks on her. When a panic attack goes horribly wrong, I emerge from the shadows to save her.

Now that she's mine, I can't let her go.

I've mastered the darkness. She tempts me with her light.

But when my mask is gone, will she fear the monster underneath?

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I learned the hard way that actions have consequences. One misguided night has left me with both physical and emotional scars.

I'd hoped transferring colleges would help me heal, but I never expected *him* to be my remedy.

Hudson Wright looks at me like I'm another trophy to win. A challenge. A *game*. I should hate him and I definitely shouldn't trust him.

The truth is, I'm caught up in his storm.

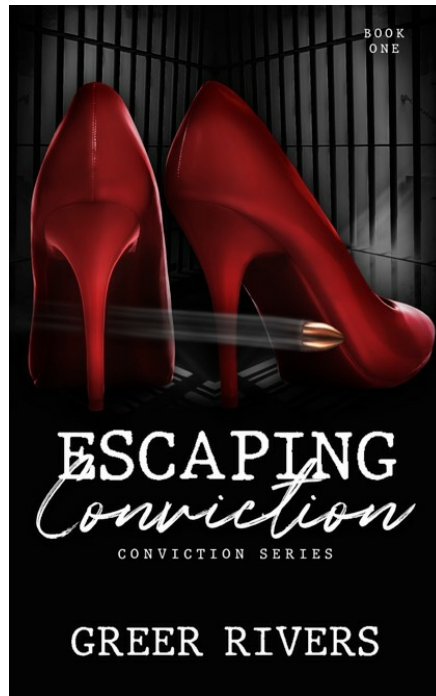
For the first time in almost a year, I feel alive. When he's near, sparks ignite under my skin. They're addictive and make me ignore all warning signs and doubts.

The star quarterback may be used to winning, but I can play games too.

He promised he'd chase me and I promised to run.

The only question is, what happens if I let him catch me?

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A Second Chance Romantic Suspense

Jason

I'm not letting her go after this.

I left the love of my life when she needed me most. I thought I was saving the world, but instead I lost everything.

Now I need *her*.

My sister is missing and I'm suspect #1. Without Jules as my defense attorney, I would be locked in a cell instead of trying to save my sister. Once I find Ellie, I'm never letting either of them out of my sight.

There's no way I'm making that mistake again.

Jules

He's just like every other client.

The man I thought was the love of my life, ghosted me when I needed him most. I'd like to say he was the one that got away. But no. He's the bullet I dodged.

Now he needs *me*.

His sister is missing and he's being charged with her kidnapping. He thinks we can mend what he broke. But I can't trust him.

There's no way I'm making that mistake again.

[Read Escaping Conviction \(Conviction Series Book One\) on Amazon or FREE on Kindle Unlimited!](#)

Be a Bear and Stalk Greer Here

[Stalk me like you mean it...](#)

Acknowledgments

Hi! Welcome to the praise kink part of writing a novel, aka the acknowledgments! The tl;dr version is: if I know you, I am thankful for you, more than you'll ever know.

First, and almost foremost (sorry, the hubs is always my #1), thank you READERS! The dream makers, the spicybooktokers, and all my Babes. I know your time is precious, so to have you spend it on something I wrote is a true honor. Let me just tell you that you make an author's world. Words of affirmation is my love language, so just know that your pretty praise makes my whole day. I wouldn't be able to pursue this dream without y'all so thank you for making my dreams come true.

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Many thanks to Ellie McLove, my editor at My Brother's Editor: You are seriously one of the most patient people on the planet and I'm so grateful you put up with me and that I get to call you my Frand.

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rooftops to anyone who will listen! I loved meeting you at SmutLovers and you are truly such an amazing and important light in this community!

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To Dreadful's alpha and beta readers: A.V., Ashley, Blanca, Bre, Carlie, Carrie, Kristen, Rosa, Sierra, and Whitney

Thank you so much for telling me all the pretty things and letting me know when I accidentally say things like "jeansslacks." I love you all and I couldn't do this without you. Thank you forgiving my crazy, sporadic chapter edging sessions and please don't ever ever leave me!!!

Thank you Bre and Carlie again! You guys are SAINTS. Seriously. Thank you for sticking it out with me even though I'm a chaotic hermit. You both are so amazing and I'm so glad to have you!

To Lee: without you I'm really not sure this book would have been finished at all. Our sprint sessions were a NEED and thank you so much for being there at 7:30am when I needed you.

To KK: We need FaceTime ramble sessions twice a month. MINIMUM. Thank you for being my best friend through my deadline gremlin days and beyond. I'm so excited to see you at LoveNVegas (!!!) and I can't wait for what's in store for us!

To the Dinner Divas: Katie, Sydni, Liz, and Lauren: I love having y'all in my life. Since the last book, we celebrated a wedding and a baby dinner diva's 1st bday, sang at the top of our lungs at a drunken T-Swiftie bachelorette party, had our childhood ruined by country music, and learned that Sydni and I are the worst dirty fighters ever, lol. Although I think we're just right and I'll die on that hill.

To my wonderful family, my momma, sisters, BIL, and 2 precious baby angel face nieces, Baby J and Sweet P: Your support means everything. Once again, I **never** expect y'all to read my books, but if you do, I hope you at least enjoy them!!

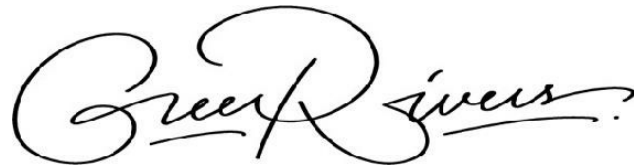
To Maria: I firmly believe that when everyone is born we should be assigned a therapist and I'm so grateful I lost my mind at the perfect time that I got to have you as mine.

Athena, you crazy bitch. You were a wild one this time but I blame the psych. Thanks for sorta keeping in check!

And finally, to the hubs: If this book has taught me anything, it's that you are my best friend. You're also my "Mighty Alpha," first reader, last reader,

all the readers in between, co-writer, business partner, co-owner, manager, TikTok approver, cliff jump pusher/catcher, favorite encourager, IRL book boyfriend, and the love of my life. You're my I'm so thankful to have you at my side. Thank you for telling me every time you like something and thank you for telling me when you don't. Thank you for picking up ALL my slack while I basically disappeared. I'm super excited for what's to come and I'm so thankful to have you at my side. Here's to mountain drives, exploring the world, creating new ones, and going to 26 breweries by the end of 2023 so our beer passes don't run out. You've saved my life and you've changed it for the better. I wouldn't want to spend a moment of it without you. Thank you for making every day an HEA.

Love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Green Rivers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent "R" and a small "Green" to its left. The word "Rivers" is written in a similar cursive style, with a small flourish at the end.

All About Greer



Greer Rivers is a former crime fighter in a suit, but now happily leaves that to her characters! A born and raised Carolinian, Greer says “y’all,” the occasional “bless your heart” (when necessary), and feels comfortable using legal jargon in everyday life.

She lives in the mountains with her husband/critique partner/irl book boyfriend and their three fur babies. She’s a sucker for reality TV, *New Girl*, and scary movies in the daytime. Greer admits she’s a messy eater, ruiner of shirts, and does NOT share food or wine.

Greer adores strong, sassy heroines and steamy second chances. She hopes to give readers an escape from the craziness of life and a safe place to feel too much. She’d LOVE to hear from you anytime! Except the morning. She hates mornings.

