



EMBERS

HEART OF THE INFERNO SERIES

NICOLE FANNING

Embers

Heart of the Inferno Series
Book 4

Nicole Fanning



Embers
Heart of the Inferno: Book 4
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First Edition

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Dedication

For the terrified, who don't realize they can be brave.

For the lonely, who don't realize they are enough.

For the broken, who don't realize they will heal.

For the anxious, who don't realize it will all be okay.

Whatever place you're in right now is exactly where you need to be.

So, carry on, you beautiful bitch.

Foreword

This book contains dark themes, and concepts.
The full list of content warnings is available [here](#).



Playlist

Dangerous Hand – Austin Giorgio
100 Ways – Austin Hull
What Am I Doing Wrong? – Clasio
Wrong (Feat Lil Uzi Vert) – MAX
Chills – Dark Version – Mickey Valen, Joey Myron
Millions – Always Never
Put It on Me – Matt Maeson
LOVE ME HARD – Elley Duhe
Tattoo – Loreen
Bad Liar – Imagine Dragons
Precious – Arcane
You're the one (Acoustic) – Luca Fogale
Flames – Donzell Taggart
Wolves – Jordyne
Had Some Drinks – Two Feet
About Us (Feat EMME) – Le Youth
Something, Everything – Sultan + Shepard
Heavy (Feat Kiira)
Better Days – Arman Cekin
Super Villain – Stileto
Lost Without You – Freya Ridings
Everything – SMNM
Lost – Le Youth
Fire for You – Cannons
You've Created a Monster – Bohnes

To my readers

Where do I even start?

The last three years have been a ride I never imagined I'd be on. Mostly because I never imagined Catalyst would ever see the light of day, only its spot on MY dusty bookshelf.

Six books, and a growing mafiaverse later, I'm still left scratching my head, in complete astonishment of what HOTI has become, and the fact that you all came into my life.

You took a chance on an unknown, slightly chaotic author, awkwardly peddling her book. You read it. And not only did you read it, you recommended it, to your friends, family, and the world.

You took my words, and my characters and you devoured them.

Everything that Heart of the Inferno has become, including sitting in the top 100 Bestseller List of multiple categories, and being brought to life through the audio by two phenomenal narrators, is because of YOU.

And there are no fucking words to say how grateful I am, because there's not a single descriptive term worthy of YOU, and your committed loyalty to a four-book series that has spanned three years of my life.

Because I know that it would be nothing without you.

Okay, now I'm crying.

The last three years have seen some of the hardest, most challenging experiences of my life, and at times my escapism into HOTI has been just as much for my benefit and enjoyment as it has been for yours.

Believe me, I'm not ready to say goodbye either.

So how about we don't?

Instead, how about we say that Heart of the Inferno is exactly that—a heart. A heart that beats inside of a much bigger world, filled with our favorite characters, and a safe nucleus to return to whenever life gets a bit too heavy.

Because that was I always wanted.

And that is what you all have meant to me.

Thank you for taking a chance on my scribbles.

Thank you for lifting me up with your kind words.

But above all, thank you for being the best fucking readers a small Indie

Author could ever have asked for.

As Jaxon Pace would say, “I could never hope to deserve you, but I will happily die trying.”

Sincerely,
Nicole Fanning

In Loving Memory of Ted

I know you weren't here for the end of the series, but somehow, I know you'll still see this. Miss you. Every. Day.



Prologue

RACHEL

“Hello, Sister.”

My brother’s voice sends chills down my spine as he materializes from the darkness.

“Michael,” I whisper, taking a step back into the stove.

“You look surprised to see me,” he says, taking a step toward me.

“I...I...” I start to say, but my words choke in my throat.

“I’m so glad to see that you’re alive. You know, considering you’ve been conveniently absent for the last several months. I had assumed the worst.”

“Well, I’ve only been gone because I’ve been Jaxon Pace’s prisoner.”

“Strange, you don’t seem like a prisoner,” he growls, taking another step toward me. “You seem to be getting around.”

I back up, taking another step toward the door.

“Jaxon had me locked in his bunker for a while,” I say quietly, trying desperately to hide the stammer in my voice. “But then I guess Natalie... well...she...grew uncomfortable with me being in the house so he decided to put me here.”

I point out the window, moving further along the wall.

“That’s why there’s armed guards outside, you know,” I laugh nervously. “Obviously.”

“How sad for you,” Michael sneers, narrowing his eyes at me. “And did Jaxon Pace make Agent Westwood a prisoner here too?”

Fuck. He knows Adam has been here. How does he know?

“W...who?” I breathe. “I don’t know any FBI Agents.”

Michael smiles.

“See that’s funny,” he whispers teasingly. “I never said he was *FBI*.”

Shit. I let that slip.

“Michael, I...I can explain,” I choke out. “I can explain everything that you think you know—”

But before I can even finish my sentence, he lunges at me.

I bolt from the kitchen, sprinting as fast as my legs will carry me toward

the study, knowing that if I can just get to the painting with the door behind it, I can lock the door from the inside, and he won't be able to get in.

However, the moment I step into the study I scream.

Because there, slumped on the floor, with dried blood dripping from the gunshot wound to his temple is Colton Reynolds.

...And what is left of his head.

Blood, bone, and brain matter are splattered up the wall, and all over the Van Gogh replica that hides the tunnel entrance.

But before I can process the horrific sight before me, Michael picks me up by the waist and slams me down hard into the lid of the grand piano.

Cracking my head hard, I crumple to the floor, the entire room beginning to spin.

Suddenly he grabs me by the hair, lifting my chin and pressing a pistol to my throat.

“The only thing I need you to know, Sister,” he hisses acidly. “Is that tonight you, your fuckboy, and Jaxon Pace are all going to die.”



Chapter One

NATALIE

Everyone around me is screaming.

“Levi! No!” Jaxon shouts, his voice pained as he doubles over on the cold concrete. “Fuck!”

“Sir, we need to get you out of here!” I hear Charlie say.

“Everyone stay alert!”

“Wesley, keep an eye on those apartment windows!” Josiah barks loudly.

“Mrs. Pace, please don’t get any closer! It’s not safe!” Travis says, gently tugging on my arm.

“What the hell is the meaning of this, Jaxon?!” Agent Westwood bellows.

“We need to get out of here now!” Charlie says, touching his ear.

“Transport to base! Transport to base! We have a situation here! We need backup! La Salle and East Division, North of the river!”

And then *I’m* screaming.

“What the actual fuck is going on?!” I cry, falling to my knees, feeling hot tears streaming down my face.

But staring up at the blazing car fire lighting up the Chicago night sky, I already know.

Levi had been driving that car when it exploded.

Now he is dead.

Along with my ex-fiancé, Colton, who had just been shot in the head by a psychopath while on a video call...with *me*.

“Jaxon, I demand to know the meaning of this!” snaps FBI Agent Westwood, who had previously been part of our convoy back to Pace Manor. “What the hell just happened?”

“What the fuck does it look like, you idiot?!” Jaxon snaps, storming over to me and pulling me into his arms. “Are you blind? That’s a fucking car bomb!”

“You’re telling me you had nothing to do with this?” The agent snaps back, glaring at Jaxon.

“Why the hell would I target my own fucking men?!” Jaxon roars.

Behind us, Travis and Josiah begin spraying down the fire with the extinguishers from the backs of the vehicles. Their efforts succeed in putting out the flames, but the smoke and steam now send a giant plume of smoke high into the sky, surrounding us all. Josiah and Wesley rush over to us, shielding us with their bodies, their weapons raised as they scan the tall apartment buildings around us.

“Well, the car was running just fine before you decided to stop *here*! Seems a bit convenient if you ask me.”

“We stopped here because—”

“Because I just saw Michael Valentine shoot my ex-fiancé in the head!” I interrupt, glaring at Agent Westwood.

“What?”

“Michael Valentine called me from his phone and shot him in the head, on a fucking video call!” I shout, stepping closer to the agent. “Now can you just trust me for a minute, or do you need me to go into detail about what his skull and brain matter looked like splattered all over a Van Gogh painting?!”

The agent recoils from me, his eyes widening as Charlie comes running over to us.

“Sir, we need to leave!” Charlie breathes quickly. “Alexei said there’s already chatter on the police band, someone’s already reported the car fire.”

“Shit!”

“What did you just say?” Agent Westwood says, ignoring him and pointing at me.

He takes a step toward me, but as he does the other five men surrounding us instantly draw their weapons and point them at him.

“Sir, step away from Mrs. Pace!” Wesley snaps, his voice unusually stern and terrifying. “Step away now!”

But the agent doesn’t move.

“What Van Gogh painting?” he asks. “Tell me what painting you saw?”

“What? Why?” I snort incredulously.

“Tell me!”

“It was the Vase with Twelve Sunflowers,” I say, crossing my arms. “Why are you asking?”

“Are you certain that was the painting you saw?”

“I know Vincent Van Gogh, Agent Westwood!” I snap irritably. “Though

I don't think it matters right now!"

"Fuck!" he snaps, suddenly doubling over.

"As fun as this conversation is," Jaxon hisses venomously, getting between me and the agent. "My men are right; we need to leave. We need to get back to the manor. You need to come with us."

"No," the agent says, suddenly aiming his gun directly at Jaxon, and causing all the men around us to aim theirs at him. "I need to take one of your cars."

"Excuse me?"

"Lower your weapon now!" Charlie demands.

"The painting of A Vase with Twelve Sunflowers is located in Munich, Mr. Pace," Agent Westwood growls through gritted teeth without taking his eyes off of me. "...And the Valentine estate."

Oh my God.

"What?" Jaxon gasps.

"You're going to give me one of your cars," Agent repeats.

"We need every car we—"

"Rachel..." I whisper, my blood running cold. "Michael is there, at the house, with Rachel."

Everything goes quiet.

"Rachel," Jaxon echoes. "He's with..."

His voice trails off as he stares at the agent, the realization dawning on him.

Then he springs into action.

"Charlie, contact our men at the house, tell them to do a welfare check on Rachel. Josiah and Travis, you will follow the agent and I in the second car. Get the heavy artillery loaded into your trunk, Agent Westwood here can help you."

"I don't take orders from *you*," the agent hisses. "And I don't need your help."

"Yes, you fucking do," Jaxon snaps back. "Believe me, agent, I know what he's capable of. And if you really want to save her, then we need to stop wasting time debating it."

Agent Westwood's jaw flexes but then he finally relents, holstering his gun. He stares at Jaxon for a moment before turning and rushing to help Josiah and Travis, leaving me standing here with Wesley.

“Wesley, you will take the other car and get Mrs. Pace back to the house,” Jaxon says in such a tone that even I can’t argue with him. “You stop for no one. That’s an alpha—”

“Jaxon, if you finish that sentence, I’m going to hit you in the freaking balls,” I interrupt with a growl.

My husband stares at me, his chest heaving.

“Wesley,” I say, swallowing hard. “Please grab my purse and my bags from our car, and give me a moment with my husband?”

“Um,” Wesley says, glancing at Jaxon, who thankfully nods once in resignation. “Yes, Mrs. Pace. Right away.”

He jogs away just as Jaxon pulls me against him.

“I know you want to come, Nat,” he says empathetically, turning to me. “I just need—”

But I silence him with a kiss.

I know his mind is clouded with the loss of Levi, who was one of his oldest and most trusted men.

“I know,” I say against his lips. “You need me safe so you can focus on what you have to do, I get it. But you can just *ask* me, Jaxon. You don’t need to give your men alpha commands to keep me safe.”

He nods again, kissing me once more.

“Go home, be safe, and I will see you later,” he whispers firmly. “Let me concentrate on getting to Rachel and...”

His voice trails off when I press my forehead to his.

“I know, Αγάπη μου,” I whisper. “Just as I know you’ll come back to me.”

“Always, Αγαπημένη,” Jaxon says quietly, closing his eyes. “Always.”

It’s then we hear the sirens in the distance, and realize our little tryst is coming to an end.

Taking my hand, Jaxon helps into the passenger seat of the second car. And after landing a final bruising kiss on my lips, he taps the hood twice, causing Wesley to pull away from the curb.

In the mirror I watch as he hops into the driver’s seat of the other car, with Agent Dickhead in the passenger seat. The tires of his car turn, followed by Charlie and Josiah disappearing down a side road just as flashing police lights begin appearing in the distance.

My chest tightens as I reach into my purse and pull out my phone.

...And my gun.

“Mrs. Pace, it’s alright,” Wesley says confidently, glancing over at me as we speed off down the street. “We’re not far from the Manor, we should be there short—”

“We’re not going to the manor, Wesley,” I say firmly, dialing a number and holding my phone to my ear. “Take me to the Valentine Estate.”

“Ma’am?” Wesley asks, his jaw dropping.

“You heard me just fine,” I say softly as the phone starts ringing. “And *that’s* an alpha command.”



Chapter Two

JAXON

I slam my foot down on the accelerator.

“Come on, Rach,” Adam whispers pleadingly into the phone held to his ear. “Answer the damn phone.”

No matter my murky history with my ex-girlfriend, and mother of my child, I can’t help but hope along with him.

I want Rachel to answer the phone.

I want her to tell me that Natalie was wrong, and that it *wasn't* that particular painting she saw Colton’s head explode all over.

But as ring after ring goes unanswered, the mounting fear and tension in the car rises with every second that passes, and my fears start to strangle me where I sit.

After all these years, and everything that’s happened in the last eight months, Rachel and I had finally reached a place of understanding.

“Fuck!” Adam snaps, throwing the phone down on the floor.

“Charlie, have we heard from any of the men stationed at Valentine Manor?” I ask into the car phone as we speed down the road.

“No, Sir,” he says gravely. “No one is answering their phones. I have extra men enroute, they will be at their door in ten minutes or less.”

“No!” Adam suddenly barks next to me. “Are you crazy? You can’t just have them drive up the driveway, it’s too obvious if he is there with her, he will see you coming.”

Silence echoes in the car for a moment before Charlie speaks again.

“Sir?” He asks, obviously to me. “What is *your* instruction?”

As much as I don’t want to admit it, I know Adam is right.

“Have the men on standby, but keep them a few streets away,” I say firmly. “We don’t know if he’s alone, or if he has lookouts and we need the element of surprise.”

“Roger that, Sir. What’s our plan when we arrive?”

I glance over at Adam who is furiously texting Rachel’s phone.

“I don’t know,” I sigh quietly. “I’m still working on it.”

Hanging up, the next phone call I make is to Ethan.

“Alexei just told me,” he says the moment the call connects. “Do you need me to join you?”

“No, I need you to stay with Jessica,” I say, turning a corner, barely taking my foot off the brake. “Take her to the bunk—

“Don’t you dare,” Adam growls and without looking up I can hear the distinct sound of a gun cocking beside me. “Do not try and take that child anywhere that—”

“I’m her father, and I will take her wherever I damn well please!” I snap back viciously. “Last I checked I’m the one in charge of her care and protection!”

“And you’re clearly doing an excellent job of that,” Adam hisses sarcastically. “One of your men is already dead, and a psychopath is holding the mother of your child hostage!”

“I’m fucking aware of that which is why I’m here trying to help you, you ignorant prick!” I roar at him. “I’m trying to help Rachel too!”

“*Help* her?!” Adam snaps angrily. “Like you helped her by trying to kill her? Or by keeping her prisoner locked in a house? Or by deliberately keeping her child away from her?”

“Those steps were necessary! Because in case you forgot, she was working *with* Michael just a few months ago, she spent months trying to kill me, and she actively killed my son!” I thunder. “So how about you sit back and shut the fuck up!”

“I’m not going to allow you to use that as an excuse to ferry that child away somewhere secret so that Rachel doesn’t get to see her!” Adam fires back

“That’s not what’s happening,” I growl. “I’m trying to protect her because that’s my fucking job. And get my daughter out of your fucking mouth!”

“Oh, so you’re allowed to bring up my children, but I can’t—

“In case you didn’t notice I’m here *with* you, trying to make sure her mother stays alive to see her at all!” I interrupt.

“Gentlemen!” Ethan’s voice rumbles condescendingly through the car. “I understand that neither of you two like each other very much and if you want to have this argument *after* we’ve rescued Rachel, then fine! But right now, there isn’t time for this!”

Is he fucking for real right now?!

My heart is pounding, and my blood is boiling within my veins.

“Jaxon,” Ethan says, his voice still short and pointed. “We can’t get in touch with any of the men on the ground at the Valentine Estate.”

“Wonder why that is, Ethan,” I growl sarcastically. “Because they are likely all dead. And even though drones would be the safest bet, we no longer have Levi, and we don’t have anyone that can accurately operate them without causing a scene.”

“That’s not true.”

“What?”

“Pasha came to me and told me that his brother Nikolai can,” Ethan continues. “Apparently you sent Roman a drone, and Levi spent a lot of time with Nikolai teaching him to operate it.”

“Then we should fucking call him!”

“If you’d let me finish,” Ethan continues, a tempered frustration in his voice. “You’d know I already have. He’s taking thermal scans of the house and the surrounding area as well. This time of night, anyone out and about will be suspicious.”

“Good man,” I say with a nod. “Now do you have any ideas how I can creep up on the house without anyone knowing we’re coming?”

“No,” Ethan says, clearing his throat. “But something tells me that *Adam* does.”

What the fuck?

“I’ll leave you two lovebirds to discuss,” Ethan continues. “And I’ll text you what we get on the scans.”

Silence falls over the car as the two of us speed down the road.

A part of me has to fight the frustration I immediately feel knowing that Ethan clearly knows Adam knows something but has elected not to tell me. And perhaps it’s my stubbornness and pride that makes me hesitate in asking the very man who could clarify.

...Or maybe it’s the gun in his hands.

But after a minute he puts it away, and I remind myself that even though I absolutely hate this prick, tonight we’re on the same side.

“What is he referring to?” I ask. “About you knowing another way into Valentine Manor?”

“I thought you two told each other everything,” Adam grumbles. “Since you and *daddy* are so close.”

I'm about to chop him in the throat with my hand when I notice him open his recent calls once more, and suddenly have an idea.

"Wait," I snap, grabbing his phone. "Let me do it."

"If she's not answering for me, there's no way in hell she'll answer for you."

Adam yanks the phone back, but I slap it away, sending it tumbling to the floor.

"What the fuck is—"

"Listen to me!" I shout. "If she's not answering for you, it's because *she* doesn't have her phone. Michael does. And I promise I'm the one he really wants to fucking talk to. And it might be the only thing to stop him from doing...*things* to her."

Adam snatches his device off the floor but remains silent, rubbing his chin.

Clearly anxious and irate, with nowhere to direct that energy, I can practically feel it radiating off his tense frame beside me in the passenger seat as he considers what I've just said.

"Fine."

"Here," I say, handing him my cell. "I don't have her number. Type it in."

Adam scoffs.

I shoot him a very pointed glance before turning my eyes back to the road.

"Type these words exactly," I say, turning down another side street. "*I need to see you. Tonight. Alone.*"

"I'm not fucking sending that," Adam snaps at me. "That'll get her killed."

"Or it will keep her alive!" I roar back at him. "I know him, Adam! Far better than you! If he truly thinks that Rachel has betrayed him, he'll kill her and he'll torture her before he does it. But if she's still alive, and he thinks that there's even the slightest chance he can lure me into a trap, he will take it and keep her in one piece long enough for us to run interference."

"That's a hell of a gamble to take on a life you don't give a fuck about!"

"I do give a fuck about her!" I seethe. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be trying to help you save her! Now quit pussyfooting around and send the goddamn message!"

Glancing at him briefly in the streetlights I watch his jaw flex before he curses under his breath and begins furiously typing.

The moment he presses send he throws the phone down in the cupholder.

“If she calls back,” I say, swallowing hard. “Just remember that doesn’t mean what she’s saying and she’s only trying to—”

“Just shut the fuck up,” he snaps angrily. “I don’t need you telling me what she means. I know her—”

The phone rings, interrupting his sentence and making my heart stop. And hearing Adam’s sharp intake of breath in the seat beside me, I know that it is in fact *her* number.

I cannot fuck this up.

After quickly shooting an apprehensive look at Adam, I accept the call.

“Hello.”

“I was wondering how long it would take before I got this phone call, Jaxon,” Rachel’s sultry voice sounds over the speakers.

She’s alive!

“...But old habits die hard I suppose.”

My hands grip the steering wheel tightly and I briefly close my eyes, finally releasing the breath held within my lungs.

“Yeah, I suppose they do.”

“Tell me, Mr. Pace, does your, uh, *wife* know you’re calling me?” She asks arrogantly.

“No, she uh...” I pause. “Well, I’m not sure I even *have* a wife anymore. Not after tonight.”

The leather pops under my hand, and my stomach lurches.

It’s a lie.

But knowing it’s a lie, does little to combat the gut reaction that simply uttering these words out loud does to me.

“I’m...so sorry to hear that,” she chuckles softly. “But I don’t know what that has to do with me—”

“Well, it’s *because* of you.”

“Of me?”

“Yeah, she’s been suspicious for weeks. Ever since you and I...”

“Jaxon, don’t tell me you forgot how to tell a lie?” Rachel teases. “That used to be your specialty.”

“We shouldn’t have done what we did, Rachel,” I continue, feeling like every word that comes out of my mouth is acid on my tongue.

“Funny, you seemed to enjoy it.” She snorts. “Besides, couldn’t have been

that bad, otherwise why the fuck are you calling me?”

“Because,” I growl. “Tonight your brother blew Natalie’s ex-fiancé’s head off, and she...well, she left me.”

“What?” She gasps.

“I mean, it’s not like anyone will miss that fucker. He was a douche. But I guess somehow Michael tracked Colton all the way to Colorado.” I continue, clearing my throat. “And then he shot him...on a video call with Natalie.”

Rachel giggles.

“Yeah, well, Nat flipped the fuck out, said she’d had her limit, and demanded Ethan take her to the airport,” I say, swallowing hard. “She said she was done.”

“I’m sure she’ll come back,” Rachel scoffs. “She seems like the forgiving type.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure this time,” I sigh. “I think...I think this finally pushed her too far. And between that and the pictures she found of you on my phone...She’s livid.”

“I told you to delete them,” she laughs. “You really never fucking learn.”

Even from where I’m sitting, I can hear Agent Westwood’s fingers cracking as he balls his hand into a fist.

I shoot him a glance, finding him shooting daggers in my direction.

Does he think I actually want to have this conversation?!

As stomach-churning as this is, for multiple reasons, we need her brother to take the bait.

Michael has seen my long and messy history with Rachel.

He’s seen Rachel and I run back to each other time and time again, and so convincing him something has been going on between us on the side isn’t *that* hard.

Something Rachel has apparently recognized as well.

“So what, you’ve given up all hope of a reconciliation with the little church mouse and are now coming to your senses?” She asks teasingly.

“Maybe,” I snort softly. “Or maybe...”

“...Or maybe you just want someone to distract you for the evening.”

“Now you’re talking.”

There is a silent pause on the other end of the phone, and for a few seconds I hold my breath, fearing that Michael has somehow seen through my ruse.

“I mean, I’m truly sorry about your luck Jaxon,” Rachel chuckles playfully, returning to the call. “But right now, isn’t exactly the best time for me, if you know what I mean.”

“Come on. You can’t seriously be referring to that fucking Agent Dickhead, Rach,” I snort quietly. “Not after everything we’ve had.”

I clear my throat.

“...And especially not after last week.”

If looks could kill, I know that I’d have exploded into a million pieces based solely on the glare Adam is shooting me from the passenger seat.

“Jaxon,” Rachel whispers. “We agreed not to talk about that. It was a one time thing. It didn’t mean anything.”

Smart girl, Rachel. Play the game.

“What if it did though?” I ask. “Come on, you know you’ve been thinking about it too.”

Even though myself, Rachel, and Adam all know this is a lie, and simply a plot to try and keep Rachel alive, it doesn’t stop the bile and guilt from rising in my stomach at the thought of betraying Natalie.

“Look, to be real with you, I just don’t want to go home tonight. I don’t know where my head is at. I’m not far from your place,” I say carefully.

“Why don’t I come by and we just, you know, see what happens?”

Once again, I find myself holding my breath, the seconds in the silent pause passing like hours.

“How long until you’re here?” she finally says.



“Shut off your lights, and turn into this driveway,” Adam says as we reach the house just before The Valentine Estate.

In fact, these nine words are the only words he has uttered to me since I ended the call with Rachel.

Naturally the minute I hung up, I explained, in great detail, why I believed this approach would work with Michael.

I told the agent about Michael taunting Natalie the night he kidnapped her,

as well as the degrading comments he made about Rachel's weakness for me in the ice shack before the bomb exploded.

Yet he still says nothing besides these nine words.

However, after we stop the car and pour outside onto the street, I am instantly taken off guard when Adam suddenly punches me hard in the stomach.

The blow knocks the wind from my lungs, forcing me to my knees just as the headlights from Charlie's vehicle round the corner behind us.

Hearing the doors flying open, and the sound of guns cocking, I throw up my hand, stopping Charlie just before he shoots Adam in the head.

"Back the fuck up," he growls at the Agent, forcing him toward the sidewalk, his hands raised in the air. "Now!"

"Charlie, it's fine," I wheeze painfully.

"But, Sir," he protests. "He just *attacked* you."

"It's fine," I breathe, finally able to straighten my spine. "If anyone else sat through the conversation he just sat through, I'm sure they'd hit me too."

Natalie would probably want to hit me with a car.

"Sir," Travis says, running up to me with a tablet. "Our cameras have all been deactivated, but we've just gotten the thermal scans back from the drones. The power is on, as all the cable boxes are buzzing, but there's no lights on in the manor. Nothing running, not even a single bulb."

"You're saying no one is here?" Adam asks, his voice panicked.

"No," Travis continues, glaring at Adam. "I was just commenting on how odd it is that in a house that big there isn't a single light on. There *are* two heat signatures on the first floor, but only those two. The second and third floors have nothing either."

"Where?"

"East side of the house, facing the cliffs."

"Wait, you're saying Michael came *alone*?" Adam asks. "That's...odd? Surely, he'd bring security with him."

I shake my head.

"Not with Rachel," I whisper. "He doesn't view her as a threat; however, he would view her betrayal as a threat to his cause. He can't have witnesses, which means he needs to kill her in private so he can spin her death however he wants in order to garner sympathy...or *allies*."

Turning back to Travis, I ask the question that's been twisting in my

stomach.

“...And the rest of the grounds? Were there any heat signatures elsewhere on the property?”

Travis lowers his eyes, shaking his head, silently telling me the horrible truth: All of my men that we sent here to the grounds...are *dead*.

Adam blinks rapidly as Travis’s words register, before stepping away and cursing under this breath.

“I shouldn’t have left her...”

“Which brings up a good point,” I ask. “How *did* you leave?”

Adam turns back around to face us.

“My men were instructed to let Rachel come and go as she pleased, but I said nothing about you,” I say, taking a step toward him. “And they would’ve told me if they saw you. Which tells me they didn’t.”

He says nothing, instead glancing briefly up at the house.

“And Ethan already mentioned that you know another way into this place.”

“I might,” Adam says. “But before I tell you, I want to know what you plan to do?”

“How can I plan to do anything if I don’t have all the facts?” I gesture with my hands. “And considering the men I left here are dead, you’ll tell me now before I risk any more of them.”

He glares at me for a few seconds before sighing.

“There’s a tunnel entrance that leads from the study to the Valentine mausoleum,” he finally says. “It comes out behind one of the paintings. The same painting that was apparently behind...uh, what’s his name? Colby? Corvin?”

“*Colton*,” I correct him. “But continue.”

“Anyway, the tunnel is how she snuck out of here to come and see me. It’s how the two of us got back into the place a few weeks ago, and it’s how we’ve been coming and going without alerting your not-so-observant security staff.”

It takes everything in my power not to reach forward and hit him for that jab.

God knows I fucking want to.

“And how did Ethan know?” I ask. “Did he see you?”

Adam just shakes his head.

“I’m sure he would’ve stopped us. And I got the impression it was more speculation than confirmation,” Adam shrugs. “Like he knew it existed and wanted to make us...*aware* that he knew.”

Ethan and I will have to talk about that later. If I survive.

“So, there,” he says, slapping his leg. “That’s everything. Now tell me, what the fuck is *your* plan?”

“I’m going to go knock on the door.”

“What?!” Adam scoffs. “We can’t just go knock on the front door!”

“We can’t,” I growl. “But I fucking can. And that’s exactly what Michael is expecting. I just have to hope that you get inside through your little tunnel entrance before he kills us both.”

“And what about us, Sir?” Charlie asks.

“We’ve already lost too many men tonight,” I say, shaking my head.

“But, Sir!”

“No. The only reason Michael is keeping Rachel alive is because he thinks I’m coming alone,” I say firmly. “He’s kept the house dark because it’s a clear night, and it’s easier to see someone approaching. But if he sees anyone but *me* come up that driveway, alone, he will kill her without hesitation.”

The faces of my men are grim, all of them about as happy with this plan as Agent Westwood.

“I want the Alpha Squad on standby for extraction,” I say, opening the trunk of my car.

Pulling one of the supply cases over to me I pull a pair of night vision goggles, an extra gun, and two extra clips from it before motioning to Adam to do the same.

He stares at me for a second but eventually rolls his eyes and grabs another pistol, as well as a couple of hand grenades.

“Give the agent an earpiece,” I say, motioning to Adam.

There are a few seconds of hesitation, and the faces of my men tell me that they are not a fan of Agent Westwood listening in on their conversations.

But right now, I don’t give a shit.

Finally, the ever-obedient Josiah steps forward, slamming his down in Adam’s hand.

“I’ll try and stall him for as long as I can,” I say Adam throws it in his ear. “If he’s occupied with me, he’s not occupied with her, so get her out if you can.”

Adam stares at me, an unreadable expression evident upon his face, as if he still can't comprehend that I actually want to save Rachel this evening.

"I'd get moving if I were you," I say, nodding up the drive. "We're burning moonlight here."

Without another word, the Agent turns and starts sprinting up the long driveaway, using the trees on the right side for cover.

Once he's out of earshot I turn to my men.

"If shit goes south, and we're...eliminated," I growl under my breath. "You are to bring the entire house down. In whatever way you can. That psychopath cannot be let out into the world, especially if we are gone. Do you understand?"

My men say nothing, but Charlie's eyes find mine and I realize they don't need to respond.

Of course they understand.

In the event of my death, Jessica and Natalie would immediately become Michael's primary targets, and to accomplish his goal of syndicate dominance, he would hunt them both until the ends of the earth.

We cannot allow that to happen.

"We've not failed yet," I say, stepping closer to them, trying desperately to rally their spirits. "We won't fail tonight."

"Yes, Sir," Charlie says firmly. "*Until death.*"

I nod, swallowing back the emotions rising in my throat.

Turning on my heel, I head for the waiting vehicle, and step into the driver's seat. Within seconds I am pulling away from the curb and quickly approaching the gate of The Valentine Estate.

The *closed* gate.

And considering the men I had stationed here are dead, as well as all of my men on the property, I'm in a bit of a bind.

Shit. Now what do I do?

I'm pulling up my phone to dial Rachel once more, when I see the gate slowly begin to pull back.

The dark looming Valentine Estate appears behind it, and for the first time, the gravity of what we're about to attempt hits me like a semi-truck.

Rachel could be dead already.

Michael will be waiting for me.

I could very nearly be heading to my death right now.

What if I never see Natalie again? Or Jessica? Who will protect them if I'm gone?

My chest begins to tighten, and I consider calling Natalie to tell her I love her one last time...just in case.

But then I'm suddenly reminded of something that Ethan told me during the Trials.

"Fear isn't an option for anyone who has too much to lose."

It was also what he said to me when I was recovering from Rachel's gunshot, and afraid of losing Natalie.

It's then that I realize I cannot afford to think like this, because I cannot afford to lose.

Fear isn't an option tonight. And neither is failure.

I take a deep breath and open the door to the car. Stepping out, I conveniently use its bulletproof frame to shield my body long enough to listen for movement in the house behind me.

But the only thing I hear is the sound of the wind rustling through the trees.

The house is silent. And dark.

Despite putting on quite the act for Michael, no reasonable person would approach a house this dark and not be suspicious, let alone a Mafia Don.

I yank my gun from its holster and slam the car door behind me closed.

Quickly I climb the massive stone steps to the front door, finding it open. Again, I stop to listen, hoping to hear any sign of movement from the old house, but it's as silent as a tomb.

"Rachel?" I call stepping inside.

BANG!

The moment I cross the threshold into the Valentine Estate, something hits the back of my calf, causing an immediate, sharp searing pain.

"Fuck!" I shout, stumbling forward.

It's too dark inside the mansion to immediately see what hit me, but in the moonlight filtering in from the doorway I can faintly see something swinging from the door frame and I yank it from the wall.

It's a wire, and it appears to have been fashioned into some sort of sling-shot tripwire. And when I look down at my leg, I see the back of my pants are ripped, and I am bleeding profusely.

Shit. He got me good.

And I already know that he's certainly watching from somewhere in the shadows.

Remembering the study is to my left, and can provide the most cover, I instinctively lean in that direction, throwing my back to the just inside the door wall while quietly trying to evaluate the cut and my leg while also listening for any sound.

Yanking the night vision binoculars from my pocket, I quickly glance around the room.

Although, I instantly wish I hadn't.

Blood. So much fucking blood. And it's everywhere.

Colton's lifeless body sits slumped in the corner in a gigantic pool of the congealing black liquid that has been sprayed all over walls, furniture and the picture Natalie described.

The smell hits me next, the distinct scent of his violently evacuated bowels mixing with the metallic sourness of blood, bone, and brain matter sprayed across the room, makes me gag.

"Christ!" I whisper to myself, turning away.

The heavy top of the grand piano is cracked straight down the middle, and caved in on top of itself, as if something heavy was smashed down on top of it.

Guess that explains where Michael got the wire.

Get moving Jaxon. You have to get to Rachel.

Using the binoculars, I quickly peek around the corner into the foyer once more, trying to see any movement whatsoever.

"Rachel?!" I shout, hearing my voice echoing off the walls.

"Mmmpf!"

Faintly I hear a soft muffled cry echoing from somewhere down the hall.

"Rachel!"

Remembering that Travis said about seeing heat signatures near the east half of the house, I bolt in that direction.

However, I feel something wrap around my neck, and I'm suddenly yanked backwards, dropping my gun.

"How nice of you to join us, Jaxon," Michael purrs from above me on the balcony.

As I frantically claw at my neck, I see the rope dangling hanging from one of the banisters and I understand that in my haste to get to Rachel, I've

stepped into a *noose*.

Fuck.

Michael laughs deviously to himself before yanking on the rope, hoisting me up off my feet.

“Did you really think I bought your little act, Mr. Pace?” he says as he starts to make his way down the stairs.

As the air is choked from my throat, I struggle desperately to get my hands under the rope but it’s no use.

I have to do something! And quickly!

Instead, I pull on the rope above me, loosening the noose on my neck long enough to suck in a breath.

“You thought I’d actually fall for your little story about wanting my sister back.” He says, rounding the bottom of the stairs behind me.

I feel him step behind me just as I pull myself up for another breath.

“How fucking stupid do you think I am?!”

A sharp subtle pain shoots through my side as Michael jams a blade between my ribs.

If I wasn’t actively choking to death dangling on a noose a foot off the ground I would shout, but I can’t. I can barely breathe.

I flail my legs around, trying to identify where he is in the darkness in an effort to keep him away.

“You think I don’t know about this FBI fuckhead, huh?” He says, slashing at me again, connecting with my knee. “I caught him in bed with my sister, curled up like pathetic little love birds. I knew then that her feelings for you were over.”

His blade connects with my upper thigh, sending another horrific wave of pain radiating through my body.

The longer I stay here, dangling like a fish on a line, the longer I’m just going to keep getting attacked.

Luckily my blind kick just so happens to connect with his hand, knocking the knife from his grip and sending it scuttling across the tile floor.

The distraction is enough to use the limited strength I have left. I pull myself up the rope and finally give myself enough slack to pull it over my head.

I collapse on the tile, gasping for air just as Michael finds the knife and snatches it off the floor.

Finding my gun under the credenza I pick it up and aim it at him just as he turns back around to face me. A bullet connects with his shoulder, the blood splatter spraying up the wall as Michael ducks into the study.

Fuck! Where is Adam?! He should be here by now!

Something must have gone wrong with the tunnel. But with no way to contact my men, it occurs to me that I might be on my own tonight.

I turn and bolt off down the hallway.

“Rachel?! Rachel?!” I shout, calling out to her.

After briefly glancing in the ballroom, I continue sprinting down the long hallway, frantically checking each room while also looking over my shoulder for Michael.

Suddenly I hear the distinct sound of a woman’s muffled cries and the sound of water splashing.

The pool.

“Mmmpf! Mmf!” Rachel grunts as soon as I step through the doors of the indoor pool house.

But what I see makes my blood run cold.

A severely beaten and bloodied Rachel Valentine has been gagged, and bound to a metal chair in the middle of the pool. And in the moonlight filtering in through the giant floor-to-ceiling windows I can see blood pouring from the extensive cuts and gashes on her arms and torso staining the water around her.

The pool was emptied long ago, but tonight the inlet faucet has been turned on, dumping gallons of water every few seconds into the rapidly filling pool. Rachel, unable to move, is desperately trying to keep her head above the water already splashing against her chin.

Holy. Fuck.

Racing over to the massive faucet, I reach for the tap to turn it off...but find none. It’s been busted off, likely by the giant sledgehammer that sits discarded on the pool deck.

I’ve got to get her out of there.

I jump into the pool wading over to her and reaching for her gag.

“Rachel!” I say, cradling her face in my hands. “I’m here! I’m going to get you—”

“Jaxon, look out!”

I turn just in time to see that Michael is now standing on the pool deck,

holding an extension cord in his hand.

...An exposed cord.

He smiles wickedly before dropping the splayed wires into the water.

Instantly my body freezes, the electricity causing all the muscles in my body to spasm. My ears ring and my jaw clenches together painfully, the stinging sensation feeling like fire in my veins.

I fall backwards into the water, my entire body clenched, frozen in agony.

And then it stops.

But I am still unable to move, my body still reeling from the debilitating shock coursing through it.

“Oh, if only the syndicate could see you now,” Michael sneers. “The two love birds. Dying together. How poetic.”

Slowly I feel my faculties begin to recover and force my fingers to move.

“Kind of pathetic actually, that this is all it took to get you here. I should’ve thought of this a long time ago.”

Without alerting Michael to the fact that I can move, I watch as he walks slowly around the pool moving closer to us.

I know my Glock is still attached to my hip, and if he gets close enough, I might be able to get a shot off.

“But you’ve had your day in the sun, Jaxon,” Michael continues. “Your family has been suffocating this city’s potential for nearly a century. And it’s time for new management.”

The sound of his boots connecting with the cold tile continues slowly until he steps just in front of the big glass window. He steps into the moonlight, his frame casting a dark shadow on myself and Rachel, who I can hear choking on the water relentlessly pouring in.

“You’ve betrayed our mission as the Mafia. You both have. So, this is where you die,” Michael smiles viciously, extending his hand with the exposed cord over the pool. “As of tonight, this city is finally mi—”

But that’s when I hear it.

A low humming, slowly building, and getting louder.

...Or closer?

Is that an engine revving?

And before my brain can conjure up another thought, headlights appear behind Michael, and my Range Rover comes crashing through the giant glass window smashing into Michael and sending him flying into the pool.

By some miracle, he dropped the wire just out of reach of the water, now splashing at the edge.

Jesus that was close!

“Sir! You’re alright!” Wesley, albeit a bit disheveled, stumbles out of the driver’s seat.

“Wes?!” I gasp.

What the fuck is he doing here, crashing cars into windows?

But even as Adam Westwood stumbles out of the back seat of the car, I don’t have time to care.

“Rachel!” I shout, turning back to her.

But she doesn’t respond, as her head is now completely submerged in the water.

“Fuck!” I shout. “I need help! Now!”

Adam is already in the water, rushing over to me, and together are able to yank the chair out of the water.

“Rach! Baby, stay with me!” He pleads, his stoic facade slipping ever so slightly. “Rachel!”

With Wesley’s help the three of us are able to lift the chair with Rachel’s soaked and bleeding body out of the water.

I shoot a glance at Michael, still laying face down in the pool, before my attention is drawn back to my men, now pouring in through the hole in the wall.

Everything is happening at once.

“Keep your eyes on him!” Charlie shouts, entering with his rifle drawn directly pointing at Michael’s unconscious body.

“Rachel?!” I hear Adam plead, gently tapping her face as Wesley slices through her restraints, freeing her broken body from the chair. “Baby, wake up! Shit! She’s not breathing! And she’s still bleeding!”

“Her pulse is weak,” Wesley says, placing his fingers on Rachel’s neck. “Start chest compressions!”

Adam crosses his arms, positioning himself over Rachel and beginning CPR.

“Don’t you fucking die on me, Rach, you hear me?” Adam says desperately, bending down to listen for her breathing. “You’re not allowed to die on me! Not like this!”

“We’re going to need medical evac!” Josiah says into this earpiece. “Both

Mr. Pace and Miss Valentine are injured!”

“I’m fine,” I say, waving them off as I catch my breath. “Focus on her!”

“Jaxon?! Jaxon are you alright?”

And to my utter surprise, my wife, whom I specifically instructed to go back to Pace Manor, suddenly appears in the gigantic hole in the wall.

“Nat?! What the fuck are you doing here!” I snap, once again shooting a glance over at the limp body of Michael Valentine. “Stop! Don’t come in here, it’s too dangerous!”

“But, Jaxon, you’re hurt!” Natalie pleads, taking another step toward me.

“No! I’m fine! Just stay back!” I shout firmly, throwing up my hand. “There’s weapons, and live wires and—”

But I’m cut off when Rachel finally coughs, spitting up blood and pool water all over her tattered shirt.

“Oh thank God!” Adam exclaims, relief flooding his voice as he kisses her forehead.

I make my way through the pool toward her, but between the deep stab wound to my rib and left leg, and the fact that my right leg still feels numb from the electrocution, I’m having a bit of a struggle.

Adam scoops a drowsy but conscious Rachel into his arms.

“Arrrgh!” She yelps, draping her arm across her stomach. “That...that hurts!”

“Get her outside!” Natalie commands. “Dr. Franklin is waiting in the ambulance!”

The ambulance? What fucking ambulance.

Finally, I make it to the edge of the pool.

“Wesley,” I snap, waving him forward. “Get over here, I need your help to get out.”

“Yes, Sir!”

“And perhaps you can explain to me what in the fuck you are doing here?”

“Of course, Sir!” Wesley says, rushing to me. “I can explain everything I —”

“Wait! No! Wesley watch your step there’s a—”

But as he scrambles over to assist me, his boot accidentally collides with the still very live wire back into the water.

Suddenly the same excruciating pain shoots through my body, causing me

to spasm. Unable to control my own limbs I fall back into the water, sinking below the surface.

Chlorine stings my eyes as my rigid body convulses.

For a moment I can hear shouting on the pool deck, but the ringing in my ears quickly overpowers all sounds all together.

My vision blurs, and in agonizing pain I sink to the bottom of the pool, as the chaotic scene around me fades into blackness.

I am drowning.

And I am dying.



Chapter Three

NATALIE

Mafia Dons must have nine lives.

Or at least two.

However, this is the second time I have been forced to perform CPR on my husband after his heart stopped beating.

And when my relentless chest compressions on the cold lawn of the Valentine Estate finally result in him coming to and gasping for air, I realize that Jaxon Pace is most certainly on his *third* life.

“Holy shit!” I choke, tears welling in my eyes. “Jaxon!”

“Hello, Αγαπημένη,” he whispers, coughing up water. “I missed you.”

I throw myself across him, sobbing into his neck.

“You have to stop doing this to me!” I sob, feeling his hand on my back.

“Funny,” he chuckles softly. “I was going to say the same thing to you.”

I pull back to look at him.

“To me?”

“Yes,” he groans, rolling onto his side. “Considering you never seem to follow the directives I give you.”

“I follow your directives,” I say defensively. “I just ignore the stupid ones.”

He laughs softly, coughing once more and wincing.

“How’s Rachel?”

“She’s alive,” I say gently. “She’s been beat to absolute hell, but Dr. Franklin is tending to her in the ambulance.”

“Ambulance?” he asks.

“Well, after you sent Wesley and I back to The Manor, I realized that there was no way any of you weren’t going to need medical attention. So I overruled you, with an Alpha Command.”

“But, I gave him an Alpha—”

“No,” I smile sweetly, batting my lashes at him. “You didn’t, because I stopped you, remember?”

“Embracing the technicality, eh?” Jaxon scoffs to himself.

“If it saves your life,” I say, crossing my arms. “Then yes, I certainly am.”
Jaxon collapses back against the cold earth, still too weak to stand.

“So anyway,” I say, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Since you didn’t *technically* give Wesley an Alpha Command, I decided I would. And then I called Dr. Franklin, and had the base send our evac team in the black utility ambulance. Thought that would be more discreet than calling EMS.”

My husband blinks up at me, his jaw hanging open in utter surprise.

“And it seems like it’s a good thing I did, considering the state of both of you.”

“Yeah, well, you know me,” Jaxon says, sitting up and touching his ribs. “Always the life of the party.”

Now that my husband’s lungs, heart, and brain are all functioning properly, I quickly allow myself to evaluate the rest of him and take stock of his condition.

Deep gashes line his legs and arms, and there is a massive blood stain on his abdomen.

“Can I see it?” I ask.

But just as I reach for Jaxon, he cups my face and kisses me passionately.

“God, I fucking love you, Natalie,” he breathes.

“As I love you, *Αγάπη μου*,” I whisper, kissing him again. “But if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to not have to bring you back from the dead anymore?”

Jaxon smiles, rubbing his thumb on my cheek.

“Sweetheart,” he says gently. “You bring me back from the dead just by existing.”

Oh my...

Even now, laying broken and bleeding on the lawn of this Valentine battlefield, my beautiful husband still has a way of making desire pool inside my chest.

Leaning forward I cup his beautiful face and kiss him deeply.

“Thank you, Jaxon,” I whisper against his lips. “For coming back to me.”

“Always,” he replies, kissing me again. “I’ve still got a lot of living left to do with you, remember?”

I fucking love this man.

However, the steamy extracurriculars will have to wait until after I’ve patched him up.

“Jesus, Jax,” I whisper, staring at the deep gashes all over his legs. “These cuts on your legs are really deep.”

“Sir,” Charlie says, walking over to us. “Are you alright?”

“I’m alive,” he grumbles, glancing around. “No thanks to that clumsy kid.”

“Jaxon,” I admonish. “You know damn well that Wesley didn’t mean to electrocute you.”

“Well, he still did,” Jaxon snorts. “So, for the time being, I’m still pissed about it.”

“With Adam’s help, we were able to shut off both the water line to the pool, as well as the electrical box,” Charlie says, helping my husband to his feet. “There should be no more surprises.”

“Good. And Miss Valentine?”

Charlie’s face softens ever so slightly, and he glances up at me as if unsure if he should go into detail.

I nod, letting him know it’s alright.

“She’s stable, Sir. However, Dr. Franklin believes she has a fractured ulna on her left side, a dislocated shoulder, a broken collarbone, and extensive bruises and gashes,” Charlie says with a sigh, hanging his head. “...And although he said he needs an Xray to confirm, the Doctor thinks her tibia is completely shattered.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper under my breath.

“Yeah, apparently the asshole was worried she would run away so he took a sledgehammer and...” Charlie’s voice trails off and he shoots me an uncomfortable look. “Well, anyway, I think you get the idea.”

My heart twists inside me, disgusted by the horrific torture this poor woman has just endured.

“And where is *he*?”

The tone of Jaxon’s question is low and lethal, and so steeped in rage that it shivers down my spine.

“He’s in the pool house, Sir,” Charlie replies. “He’s breathing but unresponsive. I’ve got Alexei and a couple Betas watching him.”

Jaxon chuckles darkly to himself.

“Oh, I’m about to make his ass *very* responsive,” he growls. He sighs, staring up at the darkened house. “Very. Fucking. Responsive. And I’m going to be the one to put a bullet in his fucking head when I’m done with him.”

Holy shit.

“Wesley! Travis!” Jaxon suddenly barks, making me jump. “Get over here.”

Travis, alongside a very pale, and visibly anxious Wesley, jog over to the three of us.

“Sir,” Travis says with a nod.

“Call in Beta Detail One and have them meet us over here.” Jaxon says, inhaling sharply and placing his hand on his ribs. “When they arrive, I want you to join them in taking Miss Valentine, Agent Westwood, and Dr. Franklin to the Jefferson. Tell Sally I want them set up in the guest penthouse indefinitely.”

He nods to Travis, who quickly runs off, pulling out his phone to start making calls.

But then he turns to Wesley.

“Sir!” Wesley says, straightening his shoulders. “I’m very sorry that I electrocuted you. It truly was an accident and I hope you can forgive me.”

Jaxon glares at him briefly before rolling his eyes.

He then places his hand on Wesley’s shoulder, squeezing it tightly.

“Now, I’m going to forgive you, Wes,” Jaxon says quietly. “And I’m going to give you a very important task, if you’re up for it that is.”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Good, good,” Jaxon says, rubbing his chin. “Well, in that case I want you to listen very carefully, got it.”

“Listening, Sir!”

Jaxon steps so close to Wesley that his nose is practically touching Wesley’s cheek.

“I want you to take my wife, back to the fucking manor, Wesley,” Jaxon growls venomously. “You are to stop for no one, or nothing, do you understand? I don’t care if Christ himself appears in the seat next to you and starts spouting parables. You get her fucking ass home, or so help me God, Wesley, I hunt you down and strangle you myself.”

Jaxon looks at me, his face softer than a moment ago, but his tone no less terrifying.

“And yes, that’s a fucking Alpha Command, Commander, Am I clear?”

“Crystal clear, Sir!” Wesley nods.

“Good,” Jaxon says with a forced smile. “Now go get the car and—”

“Clear the yard! Clear the yard! Back up!”

A panicked voice shouts from the darkened house, and all of us turn to see Alexei, and two of the Betas sprinting from the house as fast as they can.

“He’s got a bomb!” Alexei shouts. “He just armed a fucking bom—”

BOOM!

A massive explosion rips through the air, the compression knocking all of us to the ground.

The once beautiful mansion is now completely engulfed in a giant fireball, its fiery tendrils billowing high into the sky and causing dust, ash, and glass shards to litter the front lawn.

Holy. Shit.

Rather than face the impending doom of Jaxon Pace, Michael Valentine has just blown himself up, and taken the entire Valentine heritage with him.



“There’s something I need to show you,” Jaxon says the moment we finally step through the doors of Pace Manor.

He takes my hand, and as my mind is still heavy and whirling from the hellish evening, we’ve all endured, I don’t even have the energy to put up a fight.

“We’ll be right back,” he says to the men, before pulling me down the hallway to the library.

Given the age and function of the sprawling mansion, I shouldn’t be surprised to learn that Pace Manor possesses more than a few secrets.

However, when he walks directly to the bookcase closest to my favorite bay window, pulls down a book on the middle shelf, I stare at him in confusion.

...Especially when it swings backwards revealing a thin hallway I never knew existed.

“Oh my God,” I gasp, staring into the musty darkness. “Is that a—”

“Secret passage?” Jaxon finishes, flicking it on the light switch nestled on the wall. “Yes, it is.”

He waves away a cobweb as a series of lights flicker on one by one as we step into the long narrow stone hallway.

“My great-grandfather built it as a safety contingency when he built the house,” he says quietly. “But to my knowledge it’s never actually been used for a full-scale evacuation or anything.”

“Clearly,” I say, brushing yet another cobweb from his shoulder. “And why, pray tell, do I have a feeling you’re going to insist that we step *into* the spooky hallway?”

“Because I need to show you where this leads, in case you ever need to use it.”

“Oh...”

Considering the evening we just had, and the fact that my adrenaline is still on overdrive, I decide to just squeeze his hand a little tighter and oblige him.

“We’ve done all we can to secure the main tunnels that lead to the bunker and down to the cove beneath the bluffs,” Jaxon says quietly. “But this is another way.”

He points to a metal lever on the back of the door.

“This mechanism is solid steel,” he continues. “If you engage it, it will disable the pulley system that opens the door. So if you need a getaway, it will stop anyone from following after you.”

I feel my heart start pounding.

Not from the information he’s sharing, but from the grave, serious way he’s delivering it. It’s almost as if he’s worried that something like this could actually happen here at the fortress known as Pace Manor.

“But, ideally, if we ever have to use this tunnel to escape,” I say, trying to hide the tremble in my voice. “You’d be *with* me...right, Jaxon?”

He stares at me, his brow furrowing painfully before he takes my hands.

“Yes,” he whispers. “But I need you to know what to do in the event that I’m...not.”

“Jaxon,” I breathe, hearing it catch in my throat.

“Natalie,” he says before kissing my hand. “Believe me, I don’t want to think about that either, but after tonight I...”

His voice trails off and he closes his eyes with a sigh.

“I just need to know that you know it exists.”

Tears fight behind my eyes, but I will myself to nod, knowing that at the

end of the day, my husband's number one priority is my safety. And Jessica's.

"Okay," I whisper.

Turning, we start to make our way down the tunnel, the only sound being that of our shoes echoing off the concrete walls. Eventually, we come to a set of stairs with a long metal railing.

But as we start to descend, I hear Jaxon grunting quietly to himself with every step he takes.

"Are you alright?" I ask gently.

"I'll be fine," he replies resolutely. "This is more important than a little pain."

"You were stabbed in the leg tonight, Jaxon, I'd say that's more than just a *little* pain."

Thankfully, we reach the bottom of the stairs and a metal door with a lockbox hanging from the handle.

"I added a few things," he says. "Including this. The code is 0-9-1-3. It's ___"

"Jessica's birthday," I finish for him.

He smiles softly, raising my hand to his lips and kissing it softly before punching in the code and retrieving the key from inside.

However, nothing prepares me for what I see next.

Jaxon opens the door, and we step from the concrete hallway, on to the solid rock floor of a massive underground cave.

Hundreds of feet above us, stalactites protrude from the ceiling.

Directly in front of us sits a sleek black speedboat, smaller than the Ismena, yet still hefty in its own right. It's anchored in a natural pool of water that gently trickles in and out through what appears to be a slit in the stone.

"It's a garage door," Jaxon says, grabbing a keypad off its hook on the wall and pressing the button.

The sound of metal scraping metal echoes through the chamber as the door begins to raise, retracting into the ceiling and revealing the exit into the bay.

"It's immaculately camouflaged to blend in with the bluffs."

He presses the button again and the door returns to its closed position.

"Jaxon..." I gasp, unable to stop my jaw from dropping once more. "Holy shit."

“This cave was part of why my relatives picked this particular piece of property,” he explains. “They saw its potential as a natural contingency plan.”

Taking my hand once more, he leads me to the back of the cave’s alcove, where a raised platform sits among some industrial chests.

“These have weapons and ammunition,” he says, pointing to various chests. “These have survival rations and bottled water. And this one has medical supplies.”

“I suppose you mean more than just butterfly bandages and antiseptic ointment?” I say, shooting him a slightly playful wink.

“Indeed,” he chuckles softly with a nod. “Further back there are cots and blankets, and there’s a lavatory as well.”

“Is this like a billionaire’s bunker back-up plan?” I ask. “Or like an apocalypse doomsday plan?”

“Both,” Jaxon replies flatly. “It’s whatever it needs to be.”

I can’t tell if it’s worry, or pain, or just plain exhaustion but the concerned look on my husband’s face makes my heart ache. Because I know that Jaxon wouldn’t be showing me this if he wasn’t afraid that I might have use of a getaway plan like this.

Seeing the raging storm in his deep blue eyes, I look down at my hands, biting my lip to keep it from trembling.

But sensing my apprehension as always, he walks over to me and pulls me against him, kissing the top of my head.

“I know you hate talking about this,” he whispers against my ear. “But there’s things in place, and people set up to help you if you ever need it.”

“Jaxon,” I whisper, unable to fight the tears any longer.

“I will do everything in my power to protect you and fight to stop that from happening. But I still need to know that if I’m not around, for whatever reason, that you are taken care of,” he continues. “All of the Alpha Squad know the plan, as do your security detail. They will make sure you are taken care of.”

He pulls back from me, before gently lifting my chin to look up at him, causing the tears to roll down my cheeks.

Using his thumb, he gently wipes them clean before kissing me deeply.

“That being said,” he says as his eyes scan mine. “I truly hope that you go your entire life without ever having to use this place. And as I’ve already told

you, Mrs. Pace, I intend on having a long and happy one, by your side.”
My resolve breaks and I collapse back against his chest.
“You better,” I weep.



Chapter Four

JAXON

There were very few places I knew could actually protect Rachel while she recovered, the Jefferson was one of them.

Even after I explained that I was giving them the second penthouse, Adam still wasn't thrilled about this prospect. But in the end, he relented, especially with all of us now knowing the full extent of Michael's pull and influence.

But it was Rachel who actually accepted my offer.

I assigned her a full protection detail, and Dr. Franklin visited nearly every day to aid in her recovery. Natalie also made regular trips to the penthouse to check on her, and it seemed their relationship was softening.

However, *I* kept my distance.

I told myself that it was because I wanted her to focus on her healing, and not on the complexity of our situation.

But that wasn't the reason.

Truth is, there was one unresolved issue. One that even after our conversation in the car on the way home from the Valentine Dolar Domas, I still haven't been able to address.

...Even with myself.

"Husband."

Natalie's voice interrupts my thoughts as she steps on to the master bedroom balcony back at Pace Manor.

Not wanting to add to her suffering, or the long list of burdens that have already begun to pile on our shoulders, I set my features and smile up at her.

"Wife," I say softly, taking the last sip of my scotch.

She pulls her long thick sweater around her shoulders and tilts her head, appraising me.

"You've been out here for a minute," she says gently, stepping toward me. "Are you alright?"

I start to nod, but my eyes fall from hers to the blazing fire pit that crackles in the cool fall air.

She asked me not to lie to her.

“Because it’s okay if you’re not, you know,” she says quietly.

Also drawn to the warmth of the fire she takes a seat on the patio couch, pulling her knees up underneath her.

“...And it’s okay if you’re upset with me.”

“What?” I snort, scrunching up my face. “Nat, why the hell would I be upset with *you*?”

She bites her lower lip.

“Because I disobeyed your instructions,” she says, glancing up at me briefly. “And I made Wesley disobey your instructions.”

This makes me chuckle.

Silently I make my way across the balcony, and take a seat beside her, pulling her into my arms.

“That’s my fault,” I say, kissing her forehead. “I should know better than to give *you* orders. You’re not really the obedient type.”

“I mean, I can be!” She whines playfully.

“Uh huh,” I tease. “I think I can count on one hand the number of times you’ve actually listened to my commands when I’ve given them.”

“Yeah, but I—”

But I grip her chin and silence her with a kiss.

“And I love that about you,” I whisper against her lips. “I didn’t marry you in hopes that you would obey me. I married you because you *complete* me.”

She blinks up at me, her emerald-green eyes scanning mine.

“You, my love, have this uncanny ability to see past what blinds me. It’s like you know exactly what I need, even before I do.”

With my fingers on her neck, I can feel Natalie’s pulse racing as the embers cast a gentle glow across her face.

She’s so fucking beautiful.

“I can’t be upset with you, as I wouldn’t be standing here had you not listened to your instincts and came anyway. Neither would Rachel. Or Adam. Or any of us.”

Her eyes fall from mine, but I gently lift her gaze back up to mine.

“But you should know that I will never stop wanting to protect you,” I say softly. “That’s my job. And I will always endeavor to keep my dark life, and the danger it brings, as far from you as I possibly can.”

“Jax,” she whispers, swallowing hard. “You don’t get it. I don’t want you to keep it from me.”

Her eyes flit between mine before she takes a deep breath.

“I realize that I’m not from your world,” she says, licking her bottom lip. “But when I married you, I committed to this life *with* you, and everything that comes with it. I’m not afraid of your darkness, and I accept the risks we may face together.”

My chest tightens, her words hitting deep within my soul as they connect to everything I’m feeling tonight. I close my eyes, sighing heavily.

“Talk to me, Αγάπη μου,” she pries gently. “Because I can feel the weight of everything you’re not saying.”

I don’t want to.

Not because I don’t want to tell her, or desire to keep this from her for some miscellaneous reason, but more so because I still can’t process it myself.

However, her green eyes implore me, and I am helpless in their wake.

“I guess it’s just,” I say slowly. “I hate how much you’ve already suffered because of me. And how much you’ve lost.”

“Jaxon, I’ve already told you,” Natalie sighs, tucking her hair behind her ear. “I haven’t lost anything because of you.”

“Yes, you have, Nat,” I counter. “Your car. Your home. Your job. And Walter, and Colton, and...our *baby*.”

It takes everything in my power to stop my voice from cracking.

“And when I stack all of those things together, I can’t help but feel like all I seem to bring you is pa—”

But she presses her lips to mine, kissing me hard.

When she pulls away, I see the tears welling in her eyes and hear her shaky breath.

“Now, you listen to me, husband,” she growls. “Don’t you dare even finish that sentence.”

She cups my face in her smooth cool hands.

“You are my soulmate, my partner, and my best friend. No, our life might not always be a walk in the park, but as you yourself told me, no life ever is. None of us are guaranteed a pain-free life, and we’re not promised a set amount of time here on this earth. But that just means that what we choose to spend our time doing, or who we choose to spend it with, are all the more

important. That choice is what gives our life meaning.”

She presses her forehead to mine.

“And I choose you.”

Her words hit me like a car crash, and my entire body tenses. I swallow hard, setting my jaw to stop it from trembling.

“Make no mistake, Jaxon, my love for you is about more than just the happiness you bring me. It’s also about how you choose to stand beside me, and help me through the painful and difficult trials we face too,” she says, stroking my cheek with her thumb. “You never promised me that this marriage, or this path would be easy, you simply promised me that I would never walk it alone. And you’ve *kept* that promise.”

She leans in, kissing me once more.

“Not a day has passed where I’ve regretted marrying you, Jaxon Pace. Nor will there ever be,” she whispers against my lips. “I choose you. And I will keep choosing you for as long as there is breath in my body.”

I wish I had something profound to say in response, but I have nothing. Instead, I do the only thing I can do, and press my forehead to hers.

“I love you, Αγαπημένη,” I whisper. “I don’t know how the fuck you came into my life, but I will forever be grateful you stumbled into my hotel.”

She smiles.

“And I’ll be grateful that you didn’t listen to me when I told you to leave me alone.”

This makes me laugh.

I pull her close, pressing my lips to her neck and inhaling the sweet scent of her gentle perfume.

“Never,” I growl. “You were, and will always be, *mine*.”

She pulls away from me slightly and giggles, the sound soothing the still broken parts of my soul.

God, she’s incredible.

I don’t know how she does it, but a few minutes with her seems to lighten my worries.

“I am yours,” she says, biting her lip “However, there is something I need you to do for me.”

Gently I reach forward and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

“As you well know,” I say huskily, rubbing her cheek with my thumb. “I could never deny you anything.”

“I know,” she inhales deeply. “I’m kind of counting on it.”

“Oh?” I ask, raising my brow. “And what is your request, my dear?”

“I want you,” Natalie says slowly. “To make your peace with Rachel.”



When the elevator opens, I hesitate to step outside the doors, my brain weighed down by a thousand heavy thoughts.

I still can't believe I got coerced into this.

“Hello?”

Adam’s voice calls from the living room of the penthouse and clear my throat.

“It’s just me,” I say, finally stepping off the elevator.

I’m immediately greeted by Adam, standing rigidly in the adjacent living room with his gun drawn.

“Christ,” Adam rolls his eyes and lowers his gun. “I know you own the place, but a little heads-up would’ve been nice.”

“Yeah,” I say, running my hand through my hair. “I, uh, meant to text but I...got distracted.”

“Probably not the best idea considering it was *your* protocol that has us only allowing approved visitors,” he grumbles irritably. “I nearly blew your head off.”

“Well,” I smile acidly. “That’s a bit presumptuous. I recommend setting more realistic goals.”

I’m well aware that the amnesty achieved through our successful combined rescue efforts was only temporary.

He stands before me in his gray cargo pants and a tight-fitting black t-shirt with the word FBI written above his left pec muscle.

“I’d also recommend that if you’re trying to lie low in a mafia-owned penthouse, perhaps you should go with a different shirt. If you need something a bit more discreet, I’m more than happy to provide.”

He chuckles to himself, licking his bottom lip and throwing his hands on his hips.

“I don’t need you to give me anything,” he sneers. “Least of which being fashion advice.”

Despite Natalie sending me here to be nice, his abrasiveness grates on my patience, and I just can’t stop myself from looking him up and down.

“That’s debatable,” I smirk, clicking my tongue.

“Why are you here?” He snaps, crossing his arms.

My entire body tenses as I take a step toward the bedrooms.

“I need to talk to Rach—.”

“She’s resting.” Adam interrupts, stepping in my path.

“That’s fine. I can wait,” I reply, with a shrug. “I have all day.”

“You sent her here to heal,” Adam whispers venomously, pointing at the floor. “But that doesn’t mean you can just show up whenever you want and —”

“No, that’s exactly what it means,” I snap. “I’ve left you both alone for nearly a week. I’ve provided protection, supplies, and even a full medical staff.”

“And that makes you think she owes you something?” Adam says, narrowing his eyes at me.

“It’s not my fault her brother is a psychopath,” I growl. “And let’s be clear, she’d be dead if it wasn’t for me.”

“She’s only in this position *because* of you!” Adam roars.

I open my mouth to reply, but I’m interrupted before I can say anything.

“Adam,” Rachel calls down the hall. “Send him in.”

“No, you need to rest,” he calls back to her without taking his eyes off of me. “You need to sleep.”

“Well, I can’t fucking sleep with you two assholes carrying on like this,” she says sarcastically. “If you want him to leave, it’s easier just to give him what he wants.”

Adam glares at me, and for a second, my resolve falters.

On some level, I understand. It’s not like I can blame him for hating me. Whatever Adam’s faults, it’s clear he cares for Rachel, and even compared to Michael, I’m probably the biggest antagonist in Rachel’s life.

Hell, I’d hate me too.

However, I promised my wife I would come here to make peace with Rachel, and I assured her I would do it without causing her any further harm.

Although that promise said nothing about causing *him* harm.

Thankfully, just as I'm thoroughly contemplating throwing Adam over the balcony, he finally relents and steps aside.

Walking past him I head toward the bedroom, hearing his footsteps behind me.

I find Rachel sitting up in the bed, taking a drink of water.

"Morning," I say politely.

Adam brushes past me, grabbing a chair and pulling it over to Rachel's side.

"How are you feeling?"

"Alive," she says quietly as Adam takes her hand.

She glances up at him for a second before turning her gaze back to me.

"I suppose I owe you my gratitude," she says. "You know, for not letting my brother kill me."

I shake my head.

"None of us wanted that, Rachel," I say quietly. "We wouldn't have ever allowed him to do that to you."

"Yeah, well," she says, smoothing the front of her blankets down. "Thank you."

"I was wondering if we could," I say, clearing my throat. "Speak privately for a second?"

Adam opens his mouth to say something but is stopped when Rachel squeezes his hand.

"It's fine," she whispers softly. "I promise I can handle him."

The two of them share a long, pointed stare before he finally sighs and stands to his feet.

He kisses her hand, and without another word turns and walks past me out of the room. Once the sound of his footsteps has faded off down the hall, I take a step toward her and sit down in the chair.

"Are you...comfortable?" I ask tentatively. "Do you need water or more pillows or—"

"I'm all set," she whispers quietly. "I'm in good hands."

I nod.

"He, uh, doesn't seem to like me much," I shrug. "Though, to be fair, if I was in his shoes, I wouldn't like me much either."

She says nothing, shooting me an awkward smile that confirms what I just said.

Rachel crosses her arms across her body, as I sit back in my chair and rub my chin as silence falls upon the room.

I had things to say, but somehow, I don't know how to start *actually* saying any of them.

"Whatever weighs on your heart, is what you need to say."

Natalie said that to me last night.

I'd told Natalie everything that I remembered from the night we rescued Rachel. Even the part about having to fake infidelity in our gamble to convince Michael to keep her alive.

Natalie had understood, telling me that I'd done what was necessary. But when she asked me what was still bothering me about Rachel, I hadn't been able to tell her.

Perhaps it's because I haven't spoken about it, or even allowed myself to acknowledge it personally, as the thought was just too painful.

You have to do this.

"Rachel, I wanted to come by today," I say, my heart pounding in my chest. "Because you deserve an apology."

"Jaxon..." she says, closing her eyes and shaking her head.

"Just...let me say this," I say gently. "Since our last conversation I've had nothing but time to think. About everything."

"Everything is a lot," she sighs. "Especially when it comes to us."

"It is. There's a lot of history here," I swallow. "But when I look at what it's cost us. And what we've become...I just can't help but wonder if it was worth the sacrifices we've made along the way."

"We weren't always this way," Rachel whispers.

"No," I whisper. "No, we weren't."

Leaning forward, I stare down at my hands.

"You trusted me," I choke out, the words strangling me in my throat. "And I failed you in so many ways."

Rachel says nothing, biting her bottom lip.

"And the fact that I will never be able to make that up to you, will probably haunt me until the end of time," I say, forcing myself to look up at her. "But of all my regrets I have over you, I will never regret Jessica. I know that I wouldn't have her, without you."

A single tear steaks down her cheek as she stares up at the ceiling, her bottom lip trembling.

“Apologies were never really my forte. But I guess what I’m trying to say,” I finish. “But I want you to know that I’m sorry for it. For *all* of it.”

“I’m sorry too,” Rachel says, wiping her eyes. “Not for loving you, or for Jessica. But for shooting Natalie. And killing your son.”

I close my eyes, the memory of losing my son raging within my chest.

“Rachel…”

“You talk about things that haunt you?” Rachel scoffs quietly, her voice cracking. “You don’t think I think about what I’ve done in all of this? I shot you. I put my brother in power, and worst of all, I shot Natalie, and killed your unborn son.”

“You didn’t,” I whisper, my jaw clenching.

“Yes, I did!” She snaps at me. “I pulled the trigger!”

“It wasn’t *just* you!” I fire back, my heart pounding. “That entire situation was my doing. And it wasn’t just you. My hand was on the gun the same as yours. So, if anything, I’m just as responsible for what happened to Natalie. And to Evander.”

Fuck. There. I said it.

I finally ripped off the Band-Aid.

“It’s unfair for me to put all of the blame for what happened with Natalie on you, but I have,” I cringe, sighing heavily. “Because I can’t blame myself. I’m not brave enough to face that conversation.”

Unable to look at her, I lean my head against her bed fighting the burn behind my eyes.

Rachel says nothing, the room silent except for the soft sound of the ceiling fan humming above us.

And then I feel her hand on my head.

“So let me take it.”

Slowly I sit up, looking at her.

“What?”

“Let me take the blame for that,” she says, her dark brown eyes holding mine.

“Rachel, I can’t—”

“You can,” she interrupts, shaking her head. “So let me take it.”

Time slows, the seconds passing between us like hours.

“Look, Jaxon, I blame you for things that aren’t entirely your fault too. Is that right? Probably not. But I do.”

All I can do is stare at her.

“One way or another, we’ve both hurt each other. And no matter how we assign the guilt, what happened, happened,” she says sympathetically. “So let me take the guilt for this.”

“But it’s not entirely your fault,” I say, shaking my head. “That’s what I’m trying to say and—”

“I know what the hell you’re trying to say, but I’m trying to tell you who the fuck cares, Jaxon?” Rachel suddenly shouts, throwing her hands in the air. “What does it matter who carries which particular guilt?!”

All I can do is stare at her in confusion.

“We’re both *fucked* in the head!” She scoffs with a sarcastic laugh. “And we can waste time, breaking down our sins into more palatable pieces, and dividing up the guilt, but at the end of the day we have to swallow the fact that we can’t go back and fix any of it. We’re still going to be stuck here, sitting in the fucking mess we made.”

I open my mouth to say something in response, but nothing comes out. At the same time, I watch as Rachel’s angry face softens.

“Look,” she sighs heavily. “I’ve spent so much of my life hating you, for one reason or another. And to be honest it’s just...exhausting. I don’t want to do it anymore. I just want to move past this and have some goddamn *peace*.”

Holy shit.

“I want that too,” I say softly. “And I want to believe we can find a way to navigate something...”

“New.”

Rachel finishes my sentence with a nod, her brown eyes burrowing into mine before she stares back down at her lap.

“I know I have a lot of shit to work through,” she says quietly. “But can we please, put the past behind us and move past this? Because while I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, Jaxon, the only thing I really want from you is a world in which I can see my daughter.”

I stare at her for a moment, fighting the tightness that instinctively grows in my chest.

I’ve always been so protective of Jessica. But given the way Rachel left our life, and then abruptly reappeared into it, I know that I’ve built invisible walls around us to protect us both...from her.

And even though I know that Rachel deserves to have a relationship with

Jessica, I still struggle letting down the battlements I've erected.

However, I also know it's the only way forward.

"Alright," I whisper with a nod. "We can try."

She smiles, her brown eyes sparkling brightly.

"But, in the spirit of transparency," I sigh. "You should also know that Natalie has *adopted* Jessica."

As the words leave my lips, I brace for impact, expecting this revelation to infuriate Rachel.

But it doesn't.

She stares at me a moment before lowering her eyes to her hands in her lap, biting her bottom lip.

"I don't need to be her mother," she says, her voice barely above a whisper as a tear rolls down her cheek. "I don't want to confuse her. I just want to see her. I want to have some part of her in my life, and spend time getting to know her."

Stunned by her reaction, all I can do is nod.

"We can do that. I think she would love that," I say with a smile. "But I'm curious, how do you think Mr. FBI is going to feel about all this? As it will mean a quasi-immersion into our life, and you spending time at the Manor... and *me*."

She chuckles softly.

"Do you...*trust* him?"

"Well, I don't think he'll ever be a fan of *you*," she says with a shrug. "But, yes, I trust him."

I inhale deeply, shifting in my chair.

"But he's FBI," I say tentatively. "Isn't that going to present a bit of a conflict of interest?"

"I know him, Jaxon," she says, looking down at her hands. "Adam wants me to be happy, and he knows that having Jessica in my life will make me happy. His life might be the Bureau, but his heart is mine."

It's then that I notice the ring on her left hand.

...The black diamond ring.

"You're engaged," I blurt out, unable to stop myself.

Her eyes find mine and slowly she smiles.

"We're not engaged," Adam's voice startles me, and I turn to see him standing in the doorway. "We're *married*."

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Of all the things I expected to learn today, Rachel Valentine marrying FBI Agent Adam Westwood was not one of them.

Adam's reaction to my phone call with Michael makes much more sense now.

I hadn't been lying to Michael about fucking his girlfriend.

I'd been lying to Michael about fucking his *wife*.

But despite my obvious concerns about how on earth we're all going to navigate this bizarrely complicated co-parenting situation, I can't deny that for the first time in a very long time, Rachel looks legitimately happy.

And so does he.

Not that I particularly care for Adam, or his happiness, but maybe the reason that Rachel and I can even have this much overdue conversation, and put the past behind us, is because of the "light" that's come into our lives through Natalie and Adam.

For the first time in months, I feel a weight lifted from my shoulders.

Rachel and I were never meant to be together.

But maybe, just maybe, we could be a force for good in Jessica's life.

And maybe that's enough.



When I step back into my hotel lobby, I find Ethan standing at the front desk, casually chatting with Sally.

Seeing her now, one would never know that a week ago a crazy disgruntled employee, Anna Thompson, broke into my office and threatened to slice open the neck of my trusted front desk manager if she didn't give her the security footage from my office.

She refused and was prepared to die to protect me.

But then my wife stumbled upon them and ended up putting two bullets in Anna.

Sally still ended up with a decent gash on her throat that needed several stitches, but thankfully Anna's blade missed any vital arteries. But even

though she's worn a high collared shirt today to cover it, seeing the edge of the bandage on her throat makes me wince, realizing just how close I came to losing one of my most loyal employees.

And one of my *favorites*.

"Miss Halston," I say, keeping my voice low as I walk over to her. "It's very good to see you. But I do seem to remember telling you, repeatedly in fact, that you were allowed to take as much paid time off as you required. You know, to *recover*."

"You did. And believe me, Mr. Pace, I was resolved to take full advantage of some time off at your expense," she says, with a nod. "However, I happen to live by LaSalle and East Division, so I was one of the first to hear about the, uh, *explosive* events of the other night."

She raises a brow at me.

"...As well as what happened at the old Valentine Estate."

Holy shit.

"And considering the front desk girls say that this cocksure new vice Mayor has been bombarding your office with phone calls, and driving them crazy," Sally says, confidently batting her lashes. "I figured that you probably needed *me* here, manning the ship, more than I needed another week of sitting at home watching infomercials and reruns."

I snort.

"Glad to have you back with us." I grin.

"Pleasure to be back, Sir," she smiles warmly. "Though I suppose I have your wife to thank for that."

Ethan chuckles softly beside me.

"You chose well with that one," Sally continues, gathering up the papers in front of her. "She's a firecracker."

"Trust me, I'm well aware," I scoff quietly. "She definitely keeps me on my toes."

"That's good. You need that," Sally says, before turning and quietly excusing herself.

"I guess my next question," I say, turning now to Ethan. "...Is what are *you* doing here?"

Ethan shrugs with a grin.

"I'm technically allowed to be wherever I want these days," he says, leaning against the counter.

However, I happen to catch his eyes following Sally as she walks back to her desk.

No. It couldn't be...right?

“You didn't come all the way down here this morning to see *her*,” I ask, raising my brow. “Did you?”

“You know,” Ethan says, rubbing his chin. “I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure that's none of your business. As again, I'm ret—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I chuckle, waving him off and rolling my eyes. “You're retired. I know.”

“Good.” Ethan grins. “At least we understand each other.”

It's then that I notice the folder in his hands, and I realize that he didn't *just* come here for Sally.

“You know,” I say, clearing my throat. “Even if you're retired, if you wanted to sit in on the Alpha briefing this morning, you're more than—”

“I assume we're meeting in your office?” Ethan asks without missing a beat, already stepping toward the hallway.

Uh huh. Retired alright.



Chapter Five

NATALIE

“Please! Don’t do this! Just let him go. He’s no use to you!”

“You know,” Michael nods, pressing the gun against Colton’s temple.

“You’re absolutely right.”

BANG!

“No...no...no!”

“Mrs. Pace? Are you alright?”

A man’s voice startles me, and my body flinches.

However, as my eyes flutter open, and I see Deylan’s concerned expression looking down at me, I realize that I’m *not* watching this horrific scene play out on a video call in the front seat of Jaxon’s Range Rover.

No.

I just had a nightmare on the couch in the library at Pace Manor.

Wiping the droplets of sweat from my forehead, I slowly will my fingers to release their death grip on the cushion.

“Are you...alright, ma’am?”

Deylan’s tone is gentle and sincere, his deep green eyes scanning mine apprehensively. My brain struggles to reconcile the dream I just had, with the fact that I was apparently just screaming in my sleep, attempting to catch up to the present.

“Yes,” I whisper, my heart pounding. “I’m...I’m...”

However, I cannot catch my breath. I inhale deeply, attempting to force oxygen down into my lungs but they feel as though they are on fire.

Oh no...

“Ma’am?”

Deylan’s eyes find mine and it’s then that I realize I am *not* alright. Not by a long shot.

Colton, my ex-fiancé, and a man who despite his faults was a huge part of my life, is dead.

...And I watched him die.

Images of his head exploding on the video call begin playing behind my

eyes and I can do nothing to fight the tears streaking down my cheeks.

He's dead. Colton is really dead. And it's all my fault.

"Mrs. Pace?" Deylan says, taking a knee in front of me. "What can I do for you? How can I help?"

Shit. I'm really struggling here.

"I'm sorry," I barely manage to choke out. "Please find Steph...I need Steph."

"Yes, Ma'am!" Deylan nods, hesitating slightly. "But...are you going to be okay if I leave you here to—"

"Yes," I whisper, feeling my thumping heart hammering away inside my chest.

As he bolts from the library, my peripheral vision blurs and my ears begin to ring. For a moment, I wonder if I shouldn't have sent Deylan to find my cousin.

Breathe, Natalie. You have to at least try to breathe.

Grabbing the armrest of the couch, I channel all of my energy into repositioning myself into a sitting position.

Take another breath.

Air fills my lungs as I pull it through my nose and push it back out through my mouth.

What is happening right now?

But I know the answer. I know exactly what this is.

This is a panic attack.

I never used to get them, but sadly I've had a handful of them over the course of the last few months, the majority of them coming in the form of graphic nightmares like this.

The difference is that when I wake from whatever horrific scene is playing in my mind, Jaxon's been by my side and able to talk me down.

Unfortunately, that is not the case today, as my husband has already left for the hotel early this morning.

This means that I have to do it myself, until Steph gets here.

Thankfully, Deylan returns shortly on the tail of my cousin who comes sprinting into the room.

"Nat?!" She says, racing over and dropping to her knees in front of me. "I'm here, ok? I'm right here. Just breathe."

She places her hand on top of mine and squeezes gently, grounding me.

“Let’s take a deep breath together, alright?” She says inhaling with me. “Don’t worry, you’ve got this.”

With Steph’s reassurance I’m finally able to regain control of my faculties.

Deylan excuses himself, only to return minutes later with a cup of tea.

“Thank you,” I whisper as he hands it to me. “I’m...I’m sorry you had to see that.”

My face flushes with heat, embarrassment flooding my veins. I feel bad, knowing that on some level my role as the Regina Vestra means that people are counting on me.

“I promise I’m not usually so...fragile,” I say, biting my lower lip. “It’s just been a very chaotic few months, and a few days ago I saw someone murdered and—”

“Mrs. Pace,” Deylan’s says gently. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me. I promise.”

He shifts, his eyes falling from mine.

“I...I get them too. The nightmares that is.”

“What?” I ask quietly.

But as I stare up at him, I feel as if I can actually feel the deep sadness that slowly blankets his features.

“I, uh...well, I didn’t have the best childhood,” he says, clearing his throat. “Let’s just say I’ve seen some things, and as a result I have nightmares too. Vivid ones. And they can mess me up pretty bad sometimes. Doctor told me it was called PTSD I think.”

Oh wow...

His words shatter my heart a little, especially since I know that the quiet and reserved Deylan is an actual sweetheart.

Ever since Jaxon offered him an official place on the team, he’s been part of our Beta Squad household security team. Personally, I think he’s a perfect bodyguard, being both direct and observant, without managing to be overbearing. And it’s those qualities that have earned him the respect of the rest of the staff, as well as Jaxon’s Alpha Squad.

“With respect, Mrs. Pace,” he begins softly. “If I might offer a bit of advice?”

I nod gently.

“You can’t control when they might happen, but you can take control

when they do. Just remember that the memory is the scar of the trauma,” he says with a polite smile. “But the nightmare is the proof you *survived* it.”

Holy shit...

Steph smiles, looking over at me and squeezing my hand once again.

“I like him,” she says gently.

“Thank you, Deylan,” I reply, smiling up at him.

“Anytime,” he nods, glancing over at Steph. “I will step outside and give you two a minute. But I’ll just be outside the door, if you need anything, just holler.”

Silently he exits the library, leaving me alone with Steph.

“I’m not going to ask if you’re okay,” she says after a long pause.

“Because I know you aren’t.”

Unable to find the words to reply I simply just shake my head, feeling the tears welling in my eyes.

The emotional dam within my breaks, and I cover my face with my hands, choking out a sob.

“Oh Nat,” Steph says, immediately moving to sit next to me on the couch and pulling me into her arms. “I’m so sorry.”

She holds me tightly as I fall apart, sobbing uncontrollably against her shoulder as she gently rubs my arm.

I’m not sure how long we sit here like this.

But right there in the middle of the Pace library I release all of the emotions I’ve been carrying.

“I know he was an asshole,” I finally say, wiping my eyes. “But he was still a huge part of my life, for so many years. And he didn’t deserve to die like that.”

“I know,” Steph says with a nod.

“And I can’t help but feel like it’s my fault.”

“No,” Steph says firmly, pulling back to look at me and grabbing my shoulder. “Colton’s death was not your fault, Natalie.”

“I know,” I whimper, biting my trembling lip. “But he was just doing so good. He was moving to Colorado, and he was sober and trying to do better and—”

“All of those things are great,” Steph says, her expression softening as she tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. “But you still weren’t responsible for this.”

“But he came back to Chicago to see me,” I choke out, closing my eyes. “Maybe if he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have crossed Michael’s path.”

“Maybe,” Steph nods. “But even if he was making good on all the areas of his life that needed improvement, it still doesn’t negate the fact that sometimes the consequences of our actions catch up with us. And in this case, Colton’s did.”

I stare at her, sniffing softly.

“You didn’t put Colton in Michael’s path. Colton did that all on his own by trying to buy drugs from Black. That was his choice, Natalie. And that is what put him in Michael’s path, and you certainly had nothing to do with whatever sick vendetta Michael is seeking. So, no, this was not your fault.”

Her words cut through me like a knife.

I know she’s right, but somehow it still feels so hard to swallow.

Standing to my feet, I cross my arms across my body and walk slowly towards the large bay window in the library.

The strong winds on the bluffs howl outside, and the trees sway violently.

However, as my eyes catch sight of a small drone just off the cliffside, my heart sinks again, knowing that launching the drone security patrol was an accomplishment of Levi’s.

Levi. We lost him too that night.

I close my eyes, shaking my head.

Jaxon has always been honest about the risks that come with this life, but aside from the loss of our son, and Walter, we’ve been fortunate enough to avoid any major losses.

...Until that night.

“Does Jaxon have a plan to tell Colton’s family?” Steph asks, sitting back against the couch and pulling her feet up underneath her.

“I...don’t know,” I shrug. “He’s usually on top of everything so I’m sure it’s crossed his mind. All I know is I’m sure it won’t be easy.”



Chapter Six

JAXON

“The situation with the city council is escalating,” Travis says with a sigh. “I mean, we successfully put them off our scent, but only barely.”

“They still think we’re responsible for the hit on the Police Chief?” Wesley asks.

“Of course they do,” I grumble. “Michael has been strategically causing all kinds of noise around the city. And God knows what Celeste Donahue was whispering in the ears of her little socialite pawns.”

“Well, this new interim Mayor, James Fry,” Travis says, looking up from the papers in his hands. “Is insisting on a meeting with you.”

“He can insist all he wants,” I growl, flexing my wrist. “We’re far too busy to deviate from our schedule right now. Especially for that prick.”

“But, Sir,” he cautions. “Don’t you think it would be less suspicious to meet with him? You know, just to dispel the rumors?”

“No,” Ethan says, shaking his head. “We need to bring him on side, but we need to make sure we do it at exactly the right time. He’s likely already made up his mind as to our guilt. And if Jaxon were just to rearrange his schedule to accommodate Mr. Fry, it would be confirmation. For now, it’s better to act as though we’re unfazed by the accusations, and far too busy to respond.”

“What do we know about him?” I ask.

“Not much,” Travis sighs. “I was able to get his resume, and a few minor connections in the political circle, but he’s done a decent job of keeping a low profile.”

“Let’s keep digging then,” I say, rubbing my chin. “When we have something to leverage, I’ll agree to meet with him.”

“Yes, Sir,” Travis nods.

“Where are we with Celeste Donahue?” Ethan asks Charlie.

“Rachel says that the night we rescued her, Celeste was at the house because Rachel had...acquired her,” I say, clearing my throat and knowing full well that acquired means kidnapped. “Apparently that night, Michael sent

her away before he started beating Rachel. But my question is, has anyone seen her since?"

"No," he sighs solemnly. "I've had men tailing her ex-husband, as well as several of her closest friends, but there's been no sight of her."

I sigh, sitting back against my chair.

"And, uh, where are we at regarding Colton Reynolds?" I say, clearing my throat.

"I don't think we need to *be* anywhere," Charlie shrugs, pursing his lips together.

"Well..." Josiah says softly.

I hang my head, gently tapping my fingers on the top of my desk.

"Sir," Charlie says quietly. "So you have any thoughts about what we should tell the family?"

But that's the problem. The *whole* problem actually.

Explaining what happened to Colton to his next of kin, without launching a massive inquiry with potentially far-reaching consequences isn't going to be easy.

"Nothing for now," I sigh, rubbing my chin. "I need to think on how to address that. What about Michael? Have *his* remains been recovered?"

He shakes his head.

The room falls silent.

"They are still clearing the rubble, Sir," Travis finally says. "Maybe they just haven't located him yet?"

"If Michael was dead, we'd know," I say, shaking my head. "And given the Valentine's track record of faking deaths, until I physically see his body, I won't fully believe it. Hell, maybe not even then."

"Then...how do we proceed, Sir?" Charlie asks.

Staring at my men around the room, the concern on their faces makes my chest tighten.

Each one of them is unique, with different backgrounds and stories, but all of them are loyal to the marrow, and willing to die for me at a moment's notice.

But I can't have that.

It's my job to protect them, at all costs.

"We hold the line," I say, clearing my throat. "We do what we've always done, gentlemen. We stay alert, on guard, and we question everything."

The men shift, nodding their acknowledgement.

“Rest assured if Michael is still alive, he isn’t retreating. He is regrouping. This psychopath will stop at nothing to try and hurt me and my family,” I growl, my hand balling into a tight fist. “His vendetta is personal and has become the singular goal of his existence. But the next time I lay eyes on the fucker, I am going to do what I should have done seven years ago and end him...For good.”

Once again, silence fills my office. I’m just getting ready to dismiss the men, when Ethan steps forward.

“Until we get a read on Michael,” he says slowly, “there is another problem we need to deal with.”

I nod, motioning for him to continue.

He steps forward, handing me the folder that had been in his hands when he was chatting at the front desk with Sally. However, the grave look that blankets his face tells me that whatever he’s about to tell me...can’t be good.

“Michael hasn’t been negotiating with the Sicilian Mafia,” Ethan says darkly. “He’s been dealing with *La Fratellanza*.”

The blood in my veins turns to ice, and I inhale sharply.

“The Brotherhood,” Charlie whispers, his eyes widening.

“Holy shit...” Travis mutters, leaning back against my credenza and rubbing his chin.

“You’re certain?” I ask, but I already know the answer.

He nods, his blue eyes burrowing into mine.

“Shit.” I breathe.

“Um,” Wesley says quietly, raising his finger into the air. “Am I the only one who doesn’t know what *La Fratellata*...or whatever you just said, is?”

“*La Fratellanza*,” Josiah says, folding his arms across his chest. “And they are the mafia’s mafia. One of the worst.”

“So...they are an older mafia clan?”

“No,” Josiah shakes his head. “They are new. Very new.”

“Over the last few decades, *La Fratellanza* has been slowly gaining power, not just in Sicily, but in the whole of Italy,” Ethan continues. “They started by scooping up the remnants of the old mafia clans. With the population crisis that Italy has seen in the last twenty years, a lot of these clans didn’t have heirs, or at least heirs willing to take over the family ‘businesses, so they’ve been systematically absorbing the various clans. Their main goal is to

eventually consolidate all of the Italian mafia families under their banner.”

“*Eventually?*” I ask, locking eyes with him. “Meaning they haven’t actually accomplished it yet?”

“No, not quite yet,” Ethan says, shaking his head. “From what I understand, there are a few holdouts. A number of the old mafia families that haven’t taken the money or succumbed to their threats, have formed a makeshift coalition of their own to try and resist the increasing pressure that The Brotherhood is putting on them.”

“But...that doesn’t make sense,” Wesley says, his brow furrowing as all eyes turn to him.

He takes a deep breath before continuing.

“Look, I’m no brainiac or anything, but it’s no secret that the Sicilian mafia isn’t what it used to be. Everyone knows they don’t have anywhere near the kind of power they used to have, and the people don’t fear them anymore,” he says with a shrug. “But now you’re saying there’s a new mafia clan rising up in Sicily, with power and influence...why wouldn’t the other clans want to reclaim some of their former glory and get on board with that?”

“Because,” Ethan says, nodding to the folder. “...Of *that*.”

Staring down at the innocent looking manilla folder, it feels as if it is vibrating in my hands. Something tells me that I don’t want to see what lies inside this seemingly innocuous folder.

But I have no choice.

I have to know the threat that faces us in all its grim, gruesome, and often gory details.

As I open the folder, I’m immediately met with a picture of a naked woman. Her dark, lifeless brown eyes stare back at me, as she stands with her arms folded behind her head and her legs spread wide.

I look up at Ethan, who nods once, telling me to continue.

The next image is of the same girl, except this time she lays unconscious on a surgical table with black dotted lines drawn down her jaw, cheek bones, and breasts.

“So it’s true,” I whisper, my stomach twisting. “What they say about them.”

Pulling the two photos from the file I pass them to Charlie.

“I’m afraid so,” Ethan says, adjusting his jacket. “The Brotherhood has a subsection that has gained some notoriety filling a very specific niche in the

European black market.”

“Doing what?” Wesley asks, taking the photos from Charlie.

“They call themselves the *Maestri*, or The Masters. They’re known in certain circles of the sex market for being a very discreet seller,” Ethan explains. “But they don’t sell to small-time criminals or brothels. They procure women from all over the world to sell exclusively to the most affluent and powerful buyers.”

“The aristocracy,” Travis says quietly, glancing down at the photos.

“Or celebrities, or politicians,” Ethan nods. “Anyone with money, power, and a reason to keep their activities secret, seeks them out and solicits their... services.”

“They are buying these women as sex slaves?” Wesley says, crossing his arms.

“Sometimes,” Ethan says quietly. “Or trophy wives who will always obey.”

“Quite a risk,” I say, waving my hand. “Especially since it can be assumed that these people are well known and well connected. How have they been getting away with it?”

“The same way Eamon got away with it,” Ethan says quietly. “You of all people should know by now that if there’s enough power behind a name, it can suffocate any potential fire from erupting.”

Fuck. He’s right.

He stares at me, swallowing hard,

“And,” he says, clearing his throat. “Because they deliver exactly what the customer asks for.”

I sigh, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath.

“Which is?” I ask, my eyes finding Ethan’s.

He stares at me in silence for a few seconds.

“A customizable *product*,” he says finally, his voice low.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to understand what he means by “product.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

I have to stop the bile from rising in my throat, knowing I have to ask a question I have absolutely no desire to ask.

“How?”

Ethan hesitates, his own disgust clearly written on his face.

“They call their process the *Perfezionare*. It means “to make perfect,” he continues. “And what you’re holding there, are pictures taken from a brochure that they’ve sent out to selected buyers.”

“You’re not serious,” I snort incredulously. “You mean they are actually advertising this shit?”

“I’m afraid so,” Ethan sighs. “I’m not sure how they select their customers, but one can reasonably assume they choose the ones who adhere to certain...proclivities.”

I flip the page once more, seeing the same girl lying in a medical bed. Her face and body are swollen, disfigured, and bandaged.

“The girls are collected from all over the world, from wherever La Fratellanza can find vetted sellers. From there, they are evaluated, and put through their rigorous training.”

“What do you mean by training?”

“Everything you’re thinking,” Ethan says darkly. “And everything you wish you weren’t.”

Holy. Shit.

“The ones that survive the torturous initiation process are then subjected to horrific psychological reprogramming. Their identities are completely stripped from their person, to make them forget who they were entirely,” he says, his jaw flexing. “Once the Maestri are convinced, that they have a blank canvas to work with, the girls are force-fed every manner of sexual education and trained for service before they are taken to the buyers auction.”

“Auction?” I growl.

“Once a year in Messini, the Maestri hold an elaborate gala and auction,” Ethan says, swallowing hard. “Where the girls are sold.”

I cover my mouth with my hand, feeling my stomach lurch.

“But even that isn’t the end of their misery,” Ethan says, shaking his head.

“Holy shit,” Wesley whispers. “How much worse can it get?”

“Much,” Ethan says, nodding to the folder, reminding me of its existence in my hands. “Because as I said, they offer a customizable product. Which means that those ‘blank canvases’ are carved up and shaped to fit whatever specifications their new *owner* desires.”

I feel like I’m going to be sick.

“And, uh,” I whisper, clearing my throat. “I’m going to assume you aren’t just referring to something simple like turning a brunette into a blonde.”

Ethan says nothing, but then again, he doesn't have to.

The file in my hands, and more specifically the picture of the once pale, thin, terrified brunette laying unconscious under a plethora of tubes and bandages, says everything.

Assuming that the stack of pictures is just further documentation of her ghastly recovery process, I skip to the very end. And just as I feared, the girl who stares back at me looks completely unrecognizable.

She wears bright pink lace lingerie, and her once pale skin is tan. Her brown hair is now platinum blonde, and her lips, cheeks, bust, and hips have all been unnaturally expanded with what can only be assumed is copious amounts of filler and implants.

"It's already hard to find these girls once they go missing and enter the sex trade," Ethan sighs, also staring at the picture in my hands. "And even if the victims could remember who they used to be, and the lives they once had, who would even recognize them after this?"

"That's how they get away with it," I whisper softly. "They give them masks they can't take off."

Unable to look down at the photo any longer, I close the folder, handing it to Charlie.

My mind is spinning.

"This is a problem, Ethan," I say, shaking my head. "A big fucking problem."

"Unfortunately, I think it's even bigger than you think," Ethan says, his eyes finding mine. "Because Michael promised them a shipment. And they are expecting it on Friday."

"Ethan, we cannot allow that," I growl.

"No, we cannot," Ethan nods.

"We need to be careful in how we proceed though," Charlie says. "The Sicilians take their business deals seriously, but La Fratellanza is next level shit. If they are promised something, they will collect it, no matter who or what stands in their way."

He's not wrong.

Luca might talk a big game, but he's weak and fickle, and half the time he's usually strung out on cocaine. Obviously, I was concerned when the email we intercepted implicated that he was dealing with the Sicilians, but this?

This is a powder keg that could blow at any minute.

“However we play this, we need to be cautious,” Ethan says softly. “And unfortunately, we need to be prepared for things to get messy.”

His words linger in the room, quietly echoing off the gray walls of my office.

If I allow the shipment to proceed, I not only will break one of the fundamental laws set down by my forefathers, but also consign countless girls to an utterly unspeakable fate.

However, if I stop it, I risk the wrath of a highly connected and highly volatile mafia clan, known for their brutality.

It’s clear that no matter which path I decide to take, I risk imploding the entire syndicate.

But the worst part of all, is that deep down, in the depths of my soul I know that this was Michael’s intention all along.

“We need to talk to Luca,” I growl. “And we need to do it tonight.”



Chapter Seven

NATALIE

After an incredibly tumultuous few days I find myself grateful to be back at St. Stephens checking in on my patients come Monday morning.

Today I'm accompanied by Isabel, one of the nuns assigned to watch over the women's ward.

The quiet Isabel doesn't say very much. However, according to Father Tomas, before she took her vows as a nun, she worked as a nurse on the east coast. She was one of the first who had volunteered to help in the medical wing as soon as it was operational.

"Susana," I ask as the two of us walk down the hallway of the medical wing. "Has she returned?"

"No, Mrs. Pace," she replies gently. "I don't believe we've seen her since she came in last week."

A heavy sigh escapes my lips as two of us come to a stop at the foot of the bed assigned to the young woman.

"That's a shame. I've been worried about her and thinking about her all weekend."

"Oh?"

Quickly I flip through the paperwork on my clipboard, until I reach her intake form.

"She had a head injury, and several marks on her wrists and ankles that looked distinctly like ligature marks," I say, pointing to my notes.

Isabel reads them silently before looking up at me nervously.

"You believe it was abuse?"

"I think there was certainly a possibility," I whisper quietly. "But what concerned me the most was the fact that some of her injuries...well, they didn't look *new*. Which made me think that it might've been...ongoing."

She nods gently.

Closing my eyes, I force myself to swallow back the uneasy feeling I have, wondering what has become of the young lady.

Pull yourself together. You have more patients to see.

Silently, I shift my paperwork for Susana to the back of my stack and turn to face the bed opposite us.

“Well, that means that Zoey is next,” I say with a smile, reaching for the curtain. “How are we feeling today, Miss Pruett?”

However, as I yank it back, I’m met with a sight that instantly makes my blood run cold.

It’s *empty*.

The sheets have been changed and folded neatly around the mattress, the pillow sits perfectly fluffed at the top of the bed, and the small vase of purple flowers I’d placed by her bedside table are now missing.

“Where is she?” I ask, turning to Isabel.

“We...we don’t know,” Isabel sighs. “She left without telling anyone.”

“But...her detox?” I ask, confused. “She only had a few days left in her treatment?”

My chest tightens, and I struggle to fight the panic and sadness that rises in my throat.

In the week that Zoey Pruett had been with us, I’d inexplicably formed a bond with her.

The beautiful nineteen-year-old girl, with jet black hair and bright green eyes had unfortunately fallen on hard times after the passing of her grandmother and guardian. For the last year she’d been on the street, battling both homelessness and a debilitating drug addiction.

With the help of Dr. Franklin, we’d started her on a subtle but steady medical detox.

She had done well, responding to treatment, and her daily therapy sessions, and told me repeatedly how she just wanted the opportunity to start over with a clean and sober life.

I’d made it a point to visit her nearly every day, bringing her some of my favorite books, as well as a few new outfits, and even her favorite flowers.

I hadn’t yet found the courage to actually discuss it with Jaxon, but it had been my intention to help Zoey find more permanent housing and work once her detox was complete.

But now she’s just...gone.

“It was a shock to all of us too, Mrs. Pace,” Isabel says quietly. “She was here for the nightly bed check, but when the nurse arrived in the morning...”

Her voice trails off as I stare down at her empty bed.

I can't believe that every trace of the beautiful, smart, and funny young girl who had been there just days before, excited about her future, has disappeared as if she wasn't ever here.

"It's sad," she interrupts, shaking her head. "To see such pain and suffering, while also being limited in how you can help. Especially when the victim doesn't want to help themselves."

"But Zoey *did* want to help herself," I say before I can stop myself. "I know she did."

Isabel places her hand on my arm.

"These things sometimes take time," she whispers. "Sometimes people need to reach that place of healing for themselves. The Lord works in ways that are often mysterious to us."

Even though I know that what Isabel says is true, I have to bite my tongue, because something about this doesn't make sense to me.

"Were there other patients you wanted to see?" She asks.

My body tenses, and the hair on the back of my neck suddenly stands on end.

"Ahh, Mrs. Pace! There you are!"

Father Tomas suddenly appears at the end of the hallway of the women's ward, with a beaming smile.

"I've been sent to inform you, by your polite and well-armed escort downstairs, that your husband is just down the street," he says a bit anxiously, glancing at Isabel. "He should be here shortly."

Isabel inhales sharply, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"Well, I will, uh, just be on my way then," she squeaks, reaching for my clipboard. "I can go and get your notes entered into the computer if you'd like, Mrs. Pace?"

"Sure, that would be fine," I say gently. "But—"

Yet before I can assure her that Jaxon really *isn't* as terrifying as his reputation as of late suggests, she's practically bolting down the hallway.

"You'll have to forgive Sister Blume," the Father says delicately. "She's not entirely comfortable around men."

"Oh..." I say, watching as she disappears around a corner. "I apologize, I wasn't aware of that."

"She came to us from a convent out West," he continues, motioning me to

follow him in the opposite direction. “I’m not entirely sure of all the details but from what I understand she had a bit of an altercation with a partner several years back that did not end...pleasantly.”

“I see,” I nod, momentarily feeling guilty for brazenly sharing my suspicions regarding what happened to Susana.

“But, it was this experience that led her to the church, and ultimately to us,” he smiles. “So, we must always remember to give thanks.”

“Give thanks for her misery?” I ask, but instantly regret it when Father Tomas stops in his tracks.

Shit. I shouldn’t have said that.

“Forgive me, Father,” I say politely. “That came out far ruder than I intended it to. I’ve just gotten some sad news and I’ve still not processed it yet. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

The handsome priest stares at me a moment longer before nodding with an understanding smile.

“There is no offense, my child,” he says kindly as we head toward the staircase. “Would you like to talk about what is troubling you?”

However, before I can answer him, a loud and commanding voice shatters the quiet silence.

“Where the fuck is my wife, Wes?”

“Sir, she’s visiting the patients on the women’s ward,” Wesley responds quickly, his voice hushed.

“So?!”

“Men aren’t allowed up there, Sir,” Wesley says politely as Father Tomas, and I quickly descend the stairs. “It’s the rules.”

“Fuck the rules!” Jaxon barks.

Good lord. Did he really just say the f-word in a church?!

“Tell me commander,” I hear Jaxon snarl. “How exactly are you supposed to be protecting my wife if you’re down here holding your di—”

“Jaxon!” I snap, watching Jaxon’s head spin around to look at me. “How nice of you to join us.”

I walk toward him, holding his incendiary stare while also shooting him a look that silently reminds him to watch his mouth inside the church.

“Sweetheart,” he says, pulling me against him.

“Mr. Pace,” Father Tomas says with a smile.

“Father,” Jaxon nods once. “I trust you’ve had your fill of my wife

today?”

I snort, gently pressing my hand to his chest and shaking my head.

“On the contrary,” the priest laughs. “We’re always grateful for every minute Mrs. Pace can lend us. She’s a breath of fresh air, and we’re quite needy around here I’m afraid.”

Although I know Father Tomas is simply trying to make conversation, the icy look Jaxon shoots in his direction tells me that he’s not feeling very chatty.

“Thank you, Father,” I say politely. “I’ll let you know when I’ll have time to stop by again later this week.”

“Looking forward to it, Mrs. Pace,” Father Tomas smiles, before nodding toward my husband. “Mr. Pace.”

He then turns and walks down the hallway to my left toward the rectory as I turn to Jaxon.

“You really are quite the charmer; do you know that?” I say, rolling my eyes. “It’s no wonder everyone likes you.”

“I don’t need them to like me,” Jaxon says, glaring at Wesley. “I need them to obey my commands.”

Wesley shifts, lowering his eyes to the floor.

“Hey,” I say, gently touching Jaxon’s chin and forcing his gaze back down to me. “I told him to stay here. He can’t accompany me upstairs in the women’s ward.”

“Then we need to find you someone who can,” Jaxon says with a sigh. “Perhaps I’ll start sending Steph with you. Christ knows she’s been yapping my ear off for an assignment.”

At this I can’t help but giggle.

“You wanna send Steph? Into a church? God help us all.”

For the first time since he arrived, I see Jaxon’s face finally soften, and a smile tugs at the corners of his lips. He leans down and presses his lips to mine, kissing me passionately.

“I’ve finished my rounds,” I say as he pulls away, trying to mask the way my breath trembles as I stare up into his bright blue eyes. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Good” he says, rubbing his hand gently on the small of my back. “Jessica is back at the manor, but we need to make a small pit stop on the way home.”

“Alright,” I nod. “I just need to collect my purse and bag from my off—”

But just as I attempt to step away from him, Jaxon holds me fast, and plants a bruising kiss on my lips, knocking the wind from my lungs.

“I’ll go with you,” he grins, leaning in to whisper in my ear as he simultaneously presses his hard erection into my leg. “I’m feeling a bit needy *myself*.”



“Jaxon, where the heck are you taking me?”

My question echoes in the third-floor hallway of the Hidden Hills apartment complex as we step out of the stairwell.

“A week ago, Michael attacked Rachel, who barely survived, Colton had his head blown off, and Levi actually *was* blown up!”

“Your point?” He asks flatly.

“My point?” I scoff at him, my voice hushed as I glance around anxiously. “My point is that we have so many threats coming at us from so many different directions, so why the hell are we coming all the way across town to this place?”

“This place is exactly where we need to be, Nat,” he says calmly as we stop in front of apartment number 303. “Trust me.”

“Why do I *hate* it when you say that?” I grumble, crossing my arms.

He smirks at me before raising his hand and knocking on the rusty red door twice.

But nothing happens.

He knocks again, pounding louder on the door this time, before pressing his ear to the door.

Even from where I’m standing, I can almost hear sounds coming from the other side, but it’s impossible to know if it’s people talking, or just the sounds of a television.

“Fuck it,” he mutters.

He pulls a key from his pocket and slips it into the lock. Twisting it, the clunky lock releases and he pushes the door open.

I realize that I haven’t faced the same things that Jaxon has faced. But in

my years as a nurse, I've confidently seen quite a few shocking sights when assisting patients. And as the girlfriend, fiancé, and now wife of Chicago's most feared mafia don, I've definitely survived my fair share of terrifying and earth-shattering experiences.

However, what I see the moment Jaxon and I step into the apartment makes my jaw instantly hit the floor.

"What the fuck?!" A woman says loudly, from the living room. "He has a key?!"

She comes barreling around the corner and despite her black leather corset, fishnets, four-inch heels, and intimidating riding crop, both Jaxon and I immediately recognize her.

Everything happens at once.

"Montresa?" Jaxon asks.

"Levi?!" I gasp, dropping my purse.

"Holy shit! Mrs. Pace!"

The eyes of a very surprised, very alive, and very *naked* Levi, who is presently strapped to a St. Andrews cross stare back at me, as wide as saucers.

"You're alive?!"

"Oh, he's definitely alive," Montresa chuckles.

It's then that my eyes impulsively drift down to Levi's exposed and swollen erection.

"Oh my God!" I cringe, screwing my eyes shut and throwing my hand up to block my line of sight to his genitals.

"Mrs. Pace! I'm so sorry! I—" He apologizes frantically.

"Quiet you," Montresa hisses at him, whipping him soundly across the thighs with the riding crop in her hand.

"Arrrgh!" He yelps.

"What the hell is going on here?" Jaxon thunders.

"A hell of a lot more before you just showed up," Montresa fires back sarcastically. "Uninvited I might add."

"Jesus Christ!" Jaxon snaps at Levi. "Put some fucking clothes on!"

"Yes, Sir! Sorry, Sir!" He gulps.

"Ahem?" Montresa says, clearing her throat. "What was that, pet?"

"Mon...I mean, *Mistress*," Levi looks at her pleadingly, before using his head to motion toward me and Jaxon.

“I don’t care if they’re here,” Montresa says, raising her brows and crossing her arms across her chest. “You’ll ask for permission properly or you’ll stay exactly where you’re at!”

“Please...*Mistress*,” a mortified Levi begs. “May I please come down and put my clothes on.”

“Oh my God,” I snort, turning away.

“Levi! Now!” Jaxon roars.

“Uhhh, are you blind? He’s a little tied up at the moment, Jaxon,” Montresa snorts.

“Then untie him!” Jaxon snaps irritably. “Now!”

“Okay, okay, calm down,” she walks over to Levi. “Just give me a second.”

As Montresa begins untying Levi from the cross, I take the opportunity to turn to my husband...and elbow him hard in the stomach, knocking the wind from his lungs.

“Ow! Nat!” He gasps, coughing loudly. “What the actual fuck is that for?!”

“What’s it for? What’s it for?!” I snap at him angrily. “You knew Levi was alive this whole time and you didn’t tell me?!”

“We were trying to keep it under wraps, Nat!” Jaxon says, trying to avoid me hitting him on the shoulder.

“I’m not *The Star Magazine*, Jaxon!” I growl at him. “I’m your wife! A wife who watched you fall to your knees and cry over a burning car!”

“Sir,” Levi says. “Did you really cry?”

“No!”

“Yes, you did!” I shout at him, poking him in the chest again. “You put on this whole theatrical performance!”

“For Agent Westwood!” Jaxon says defensively. “It was all to get him off Levi’s trail.”

“But you could’ve told me!” I thunder.

“I was going to tell you as soon as we got in the car, but then we got the phone call with Colton and everything just happened so fast,” Jaxon says, throwing up his hands.

Crossing my arms across my chest I glare up at him.

“Jaxon, we held a funeral for Levi. A funeral! And I cried. And now I just waltz in here with you and find out it never happened!”

“Look, Nat,” my husband says, this time apologetically. “You’re right, I should’ve told you. And I promise you, I had every intention of doing so. But then that entire night went off the rails, and we’ve been going a million miles per hour ever since. And I know it’s no excuse, but also, we weren’t sure whose side Agent Westwood was really on. And the last thing I needed was that asshole tapping our phones or texts and seeing some sort of conversation he shouldn’t have seen. So, yes I instructed the men to keep it ultra confidential to prevent risk of Levi being exposed, and the whole thing being a bust. That’s all.”

Well, shit...

Even though I’m still momentarily furious, I can’t deny that Jaxon has a point.

Our lives have been going a million miles per hour lately.

“Fine,” I snap, still partially annoyed but mildly less murderous. “But don’t you ever hold out on me like that again, Jaxon Pace. Or we’re gonna rumble. Got it?”

“Sir?” Levi asks quietly. “Did you like...actually cry for me?”

Jaxon glares at him, before walking over to the fridge and grabbing a beer.

“Um, Jaxon, I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to ask first?”

“I didn’t ask to have my eyeballs see the shit I just saw,” Jaxon says, popping the lid off the bottle on the edge of the counter. “And something tells me even alcohol won’t unsee what I’ve just seen tonight, Mr. Abdallah.”

Seconds later, a naked Levi collapses to the floor, immediately covering his junk with his hands.

“Here,” Montresa snaps, tossing him a blanket.

“What the fuck is going on in here?” Jaxon demands.

Montresa rubs her arm with her other arm, tilting her head to the side and raising her eyebrows.

“Do you really need me to answer that question?” She asks with a smile. “I thought that was obvious.”

“He’s supposed to be working!” Jaxon snaps. “Not...fucking around.”

“He’s on a break,” Montresa shrugs, undaunted by Jaxon’s attitude.

“He doesn’t get breaks,” Jaxon grumbles. “Levi, what the—”

But this time I interrupt him, dashing over to Levi and wrapping my arms around his blanket covered shoulders, bursting into tears.

“You’re alive!” I sob.

“Yes, Mrs. Pace,” he says quietly, gently hugging me back.

“I’m so happy you’re—”

“Ahem!”

Jaxon clears his throat loudly, and it’s then that I realize that underneath the blanket Levi is still naked.

“Um, perhaps I should go put my actual clothes on,” he says sheepishly, glancing up at a glaring Jaxon.

“I think that would be a good start,” Jaxon growls.



“How did you escape the fire?” I ask.

A part of me is still stunned by the fact that a week ago I was attending Levi’s funeral, and now I’m sitting here with him at a creaky kitchen table.

Levi grins.

“It was a decoy,” Jaxon says gruffly, still glaring at Levi with his arms crossed.

“But...you were driving the car?” I scoff. “You were there with us in the road when we pulled over.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Levi nods. “But I wasn’t in Anna’s car. I was in the back of Charlie’s, and her car was rigged with autopilot.”

“But...there was a body in the flames?” I ask, looking between Jaxon and Levi. “I saw it myself, and even the police confirmed.”

“There *was* a body in the flames, ma’am,” Levi nods, shooting an awkward glance over at Jaxon. “But, uh, it obviously wasn’t me.”

“Then...who?” I ask, looking at Jaxon.

However, I catch him glancing over at Montresa, who sits casually sipping a cup of coffee, her eyes wide.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” she shrugs with a grin. “I already worked out what you do, Mr. Pace. A while ago, actually.”

Jaxon raises an eyebrow.

“What? I know you’re in the mafia.”

“Who told you such salacious gossip,” he asks, glaring darkly over at

Levi.

“No, no, it wasn’t him,” Montresa says, waving her hand. “It was Natalie.”

“What?” I ask, my jaw dropping as Jaxon looks up at me. “No, I did not tell you that.”

“Oh, come on!” She laughs, rolling her eyes. “Billionaire businessman who risks his life to rescue her from a kidnapper? That screams mafia actually.”

“Rescuing my girlfriend doesn’t mean I’m in the mafia,” he says, narrowing his eyes. “Maybe I’m just a good boyfriend. And well, ya know, a billionaire.”

“Honey, that’s way too much effort to expect of a billionaire,” Montresa says with a smirk. “Name one other billionaire that would personally risk their *neck*, when they could just as easily hire an army to go extract her? I’ll wait. Oh, and then add in that over-the-top ceremony when you proposed? Come on. I’m a nurse, Mr. Pace, not an idiot.”

Jaxon stares at her a moment longer before snorting softly to himself.

Well, at least he finds her observation amusing. Not a threat.

At least more amusing than learning Levi ran his mouth and Jaxon deciding that he’s going to *actually* have to kill him.

“The body was one of the men from the hit and run that happened at St. Stephens,” he says to me. “Technically, Levi was never in that car, only controlling it remotely from the trunk of Charlie’s car.”

I nod slowly.

“That’s why you had Charlie and Levi at the rear.”

“...And the agent with Wesley and Josiah directly behind us,” He continues. “Had we not pulled over when we did because of...”

But his voice trails off and I realize that he’s obviously referring to the horrific video call we got from Colton.

I bite my bottom lip to keep it from trembling before taking a deep breath.

“You’re saying the car was *always* going to blow up enroute to the Manor,” I say. “But why?”

“To protect Levi,” Jaxon says with a shrug. “Agent Dickhead had worked out exactly who Levi was and was getting far too close. This puts him off the scent for a bit.”

“And you’ve had him here, staying out of view ever since.”

He nods, looking up at Levi.

“However,” he says, crossing his arms and tilting his head. “I never gave you permission to bring company.”

“Surely he doesn’t need your permission in his personal time,” Montresa fires back.

Shit. Jaxon won’t like that.

My entire body tenses as I watch Jaxon’s jaw flexing.

Gently I place my hand on his leg, drawing his eyes to mine and silently pleading with him to remember that Montresa is my friend.

“Oh, I assure you, Miss Edwards, he does need my permission,” Jaxon replies, his gaze lingering on mine. “And he doesn’t get personal time. Not really the way our world works.”

“Well, then may I ask how he was supposed to feed himself, Mr. Mafia Don?” Montresa says, crossing hers. “Or get supplies? Hmm?”

“Groceries can be delivered. Anything can be delivered.”

“Not anything,” she says under her breath, playing with a strand of her hair.

“I am sorry, Sir,” Levi says, clearing his throat. “I never intended for either of you to see me like...*that*. I accept full responsibility and accept whatever punishment you deem fit.”

But just when I’m starting to worry about the chilly way Jaxon’s icy blue eyes are still glaring at Levi, I catch the faint traces of a smile.

It’s almost immediately camouflaged when he rubs his fingers over his chin.

“Seems to me you’ve had a decent amount of *punishment* already, Mr. Abdallah,” Jaxon says, standing to his feet and extending his hand to me. “But you know, tonight I kind of feel like outsourcing for a torturer. As long as she can guarantee he’ll return to his duties tomorrow as expected.”

Slowly a wicked smile spreads across Montresa’s face, and she nods, understanding Jaxon’s inference.

Levi, on the other hand, does not.

“Uh...Sir?” He asks. “What do you mean? Outsourcing a torturer?”

“He means say goodbye to our guests and get your ass back up on the cross,” she says, also standing to her feet.

I watch Levi’s jaw drop, as he glances between Jaxon and Montresa, who extends her hand out to Jaxon.

“This is normally the part where I’d have to threaten you with bodily harm should you tell anyone about what it is we do,” Jaxon smirks, lowering his voice. “But I’m sure that concept is lost on a dominatrix.”

“Indeed,” she says, shooting him an arrogant little smirk. “Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Pace. I’ll make sure he’s online tomorrow at what time exactly?”

“Seven.”

“Yeesh,” she cringes. “And here I thought y’all would have a more relaxed work policy.”

Jaxon raises a brow.

She rolls her eyes, throwing up her hands.

“Fine, seven it is.”

What the fuck just happened?

Did Jaxon really just give Levi a pass for the evening?

Is he really just okay with Montresa knowing about our life?

“I’ll, uh, call you,” I say, pulling her in for a hug. “How long are you in town for?”

“Til Saturday,” she smiles. “We should get coffee in the next few days, there’s a nice little cafe a few blocks—”

Jaxon clears his throat.

“Er, we’re kind of in a bit of a high-alert situation,” I say, rolling my eyes as my cheeks flush. “Why don’t you come by the Manor tomorrow? We can have it on the patio. In privacy.”

She nods, playfully rolling her eyes at Jaxon.

“Levi can arrange for one of the cars to bring you over,” Jaxon says, opening the door.

“He’s not coming too?” I ask.

“He can’t,” Jaxon replies.

“But...how long will he have to be in hiding?”

Jaxon pauses, rubbing his chin.

“Maybe not as long as we previously thought,” he says, looking over at Levi. “There’s been some...developments. Some of which might change our liability. But, for now, we need to play it safe until we know that Agent Westwood is on our side.”

Looking over at Levi my heart breaks.

He’s a good man and doesn’t deserve to be locked up in this shitty

apartment forever.

Sensing my reservation, Jaxon's face softens a bit.

"This arrangement won't be forever," he says quietly. "I promise."

I know my husband. And I know that *he* knows I'd feel better with Levi safely back at the manor with us, and I also know that Jaxon will endeavor to do everything he can to restore him to a life of normalcy. As soon as the threat passes.

I nod, and after hugging Montresa and Levi goodbye the two of us shut the door.

"What did you mean by *developments*?" I ask as we make our way down the hall. "What have I missed?"

"A lot," Jaxon snorts. "I'll tell you in the car."

However, as he opens the stairwell door my thoughts are admittedly pulled somewhere else entirely.

"Is there a reason you're biting your lip?" He asks curiously.

Blushing, I instinctively shake my head.

"No reason," I say quietly as we start down the steps.

But as we reach the first landing, he gently grabs my arm and pulls me into his. He gingerly cups my chin and tilts my head back to look into my eyes.

"That's not how we do things, Mrs. Pace," he whispers, running his thumb along my jaw. "Tell me."

Shit.

"It's just a bit embarrassing," I say, feeling my cheeks heating even more.

He grins darkly and leans in to kiss me softly, twisting my thoughts and making my brain go fuzzy.

"Even better," he growls against my neck, making my insides clench.

I'm momentarily grateful when he grabs my hand and continues down the stairs, thinking he's going to let it go.

But I should've known my husband better than that.

"Is it about what you saw today?" He says, his words are more of a statement than a question. "With Levi and Montresa."

Oh God...He caught me. How does he do that?!

"Yes," I whisper sheepishly, unable to look at him as we reach the bottom floor and step out into the dark shadowy parking structure.

Given my track record with parking structures in this city, this place

should give me the creeps. But considering I'm with the scariest man in all of Chicago, I'm more focused on the accelerating conversation happening between us.

"You have questions, I assume," he says, his voice echoing off the concrete walls as we make our way to the car.

"I've just never seen anything like...*that*."

Silently he opens the passenger side door and helps me inside before walking around and climbing in himself.

"Are you referring to the equipment," his jaw clenches and he clears his throat. "Or seeing it...in use?"

"Technically, both," I shake my head. "Though I'd prefer to forget that I saw Levi like that at all."

"As would I," Jaxon grumbles.

The Range Rover's engine roars to life and Jaxon backs it out of the spot. And as we pull out onto the dark street, I try to muster up the courage to ask what's actually on my mind.

Natalie, he told you never to hesitate to ask him anything.

"Have...you...ever done something like that?"

However, as soon as the words leave my lips, I instantly wish I could call them back.

"I've used a Saint Andrew's cross before, yes," he says, his voice low and husky. "But I've never been on one before."

The image that is immediately conjured behind my eyes makes me hot between my thighs.

"And, I, um, imagine it's very similar to Steph's gift?"

"Yes and no," he says softly. "Yes, because they both involve restraint, but the positioning is different. However, that level of surrender and vulnerability definitely has its...benefits."

"I...I can imagine," I choke out, desire pooling in my stomach.

As the light ahead turns red the car comes to a stop, along with my pounding heart as Jaxon turns to face me, catching him staring at him.

A dark, wicked smirk spreads across his face as he looks down at me. Without a word he leans across the armrest and gently grabs my throat, landing a bruising kiss on my lips, taking my breath away.

"If you'd like me to remind you how intoxicating surrender can be," he growls against my lips, while tightening his grip around my throat ever so

slightly. "All you have to do is say the word, Mrs. Pace."

Oh my God...

Somehow a brazen audacity comes over me, and I answer him without so much as a hesitation.

"Yes."



Chapter Eight

JAXON

9:37pm: Unknown Number

I've arranged to have the back door clear at 9:45pm. The Grand Eden Room code is 6969.

The show starts exactly at 10pm. Don't be late.

I chuckle quietly to myself.

My wife appraises me with caution.

"What is it?" She asks quietly, glancing around the darkened alley where I've parked the car. "Jaxon, why have we come...*here*?"

"Education," I grin.

Her deep green eyes widen a bit before she takes another look out the window, trying to determine where we are.

But it's no use.

Even though there are dozens of doors leading out here to the alley, none of them have any signs. And although I've brought Natalie here before, I specifically took a different route to get here this time.

This is going to be a surprise. And fun.

I look down at my watch.

9:43pm.

Time to go.

Opening my door, I swiftly walk around the car and open Natalie's, helping her out onto the sidewalk.

"Really, Jax," she breathes. "What are we—"

But I silence her with a kiss, cradling her face in my hand and pushing my tongue into her mouth. She melts into me, kissing me back, with the softest of moans escaping her lips.

"Do you trust me, Nat?" I ask as I pull away.

"Of course," she answers.

"Then come with me."

And without another word I take her hand, pulling her toward a darkened

door with a single bulb overhead.

As the text said, I find it open, and after peaking my head inside I confirm that the hallway is empty.

Which is necessary, as I really don't want anyone to see us here tonight.

Quickly I pull Natalie inside and down the hall to the left, stopping in front of a door with the word "Eden" engraved on a black wooden plaque above it.

After typing in the passcode on the door handle, it buzzes open, and we slip inside without anyone noticing us.

"Holy shit..." Natalie's voice trails off as the soft track lighting around the crown molding gently illuminates the room.

That's when her jaw drops.

There is a small table in front of us that has a single red rose, two glasses next to a bucket with champagne on ice, condoms, a few brand-new sex toys still in the boxes, and a card explaining that all the other toys and equipment in the room have been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

Things have been upgraded since the last time I was at the Apparatus Room.

Which was a less than pleasant experience.

The walls have been painted a dark gray, and are lined with hooks and shelves showcasing a variety of whips, chains, crops and cuffs.

Additionally, scattered around the room there's a variety of custom sex furniture, some of which I know came from Pat's Shop. A bench with built in cuffs, a black vinyl Tantra Chair, and a metal bed frame with the accompanying straps already attached.

Aside from the table the only *normal* piece of furniture is a small black L-shaped leather couch that sits in front of a large glass window looking down onto the Apparatus Room main dance floor.

However, Natalie's eyes are immediately drawn to the item in the center of the room: a large black Saint Andrew's Cross.

Her eyes widen as she looks up at me.

"Is this for us?"

"Perhaps," I smile. "If you want it to be."

I reach forward, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"No one can see in," I say quietly as Natalie cautiously peeks out into the room. "Unless we want them to, that is."

“What?” She whispers softly. “What do you mean unless we want them to?”

Taking her hand, I bring her to the window and point across the club to another suite. Behind the thick glass, illuminated by a soft light, are the black shadows of two individuals engaged in what appears to be a very visceral fucking.

“These rooms are called Silhouette Rooms,” I explain, pointing to the switch on the wall. “They are meant for people who want to experience a little...voyeurism.”

I can hear Natalie gulp even from a few feet away.

“But, as I said, no one can see in, unless we flip this switch in which case, they would only see our shadows,” I pull her against me, running my thumb along her chin. “But, technically, that’s not why I brought you here.”

“Then...why?” she asks, breathlessly.

With my hand still lingering on her neck I can feel her pulse racing beneath my fingers.

“For the *show*.”

I nod toward the window just as one of Glow’s employees wheels yet another cross out onto the middle of the dance floor.

“Tonight, by my request, there will be an exhibition,” I explain, taking her hand and leading her over to the black leather couch. “There will be a public performance of a punish-fuck demonstration.”

As I take a seat, pulling Natalie down beside me, I have to give Glow credit.

She somehow managed to organize the event in under a half hour and inform her patrons of the night’s changing activities.

And thankfully, from the bustling crowd scurrying to find a seat around the room it hasn’t deterred her traffic.

It has increased it.

Leaving Natalie on the couch I stand to retrieve the bucket of champagne and the two glasses. And as I return, I see the lights around the room dim, and the light in the center of the dance floor brightens.

The show is about to begin.

Just as I pop the cork on the champagne, a loud crack echoes through the club, and the casual chattering of the over-eager onlookers stops.

Glow, clad in a scandalous leather outfit and thigh-high vinyl boots, steps

slowly into the center of the room, carrying in her hand a long black whip.

“Good evening my lovelies,” her sultry voice booms in the room as her shoes click against the floor. “I do apologize for the minor change in our schedule, but tonight’s event comes by special request.”

She shoots a look toward our suite, and although I know that she can’t see through the glass panel, the pointed gleam in her eye instantly causes my heart to beat a little faster.

“...And we here at the Apparatus Room are always willing to oblige in a little *debauchery*.”

I feel Natalie shiver beside me and wrap my arm tightly around her waist.

“So, I guess my question is,” she says, batting her long lashes and glancing around the room. “Who among you has been naughty?”

A low murmur erupts from the crowd.

“Who here knows how they deserve to be punished?”

She cracks her whip loudly on the floor, making everyone, including Natalie, jump.

“...And who here among you is *brave* enough?”

The crowd goes silent.

That is until a woman steps forward.

“I am, Mistress.”

Glow smiles.

“Well, hello there, beautiful,” she says warmly. “How long have you been part of our lifestyle?”

“I have been a submissive for seven years, Mistress.”

“Do you currently have a Dominant?”

“Yes, Mistress,” the woman nods, pointing to a beautiful raven-haired woman smirking to the right of the circle. “That is my Goddess.”

“Stunning,” Glow says, licking her bottom lip as she appraises the pretty dark-haired woman. “And does your Goddess consent to your participation?”

“Yes, Mistress,” the red-haired girl nods. “She recommended me to do so, as I was going to be punished this evening anyway.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I disobeyed her instructions,” the woman says, swallowing hard. “...And wore panties this evening.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Glow murmurs, clicking her tongue. “And what name would you prefer me to call you, little mouse?”

“I...I prefer, *slut, slave,*” the woman says quietly. “Or pet.”

“*Pet*, eh?” Glow nods, walking around her slowly. “I haven’t used that with a woman in quite some time. Very well, Pet will be your name for the evening. Assume the position.”

The woman drops to the floor, before opening her thighs and sitting back on her heels, extending her palms upwards toward the ceiling.

“Do you know what position this is, Pet?”

“Yes, Mistress,” she replies. “This is Nadu.”

Glow walks over to “Pet” and gently lifts her chin up to her.

“And I assume that in seven years with your beautiful Domme, she has explained to you what Nadu symbolizes, correct?”

“Yes, Mistress,” Pet nods.

“Tell us.”

“Nadu symbolizes submission and vulnerability,” Pet explains. “It is to tell my Mistress or Domme that I am ready to accept her domination and submit to her will for my body.”

Glow eyes canvas the petite red-haired woman intimately.

“Do you understand that your punishment here tonight will be public?” Glow asks, motioning to the silent crowd. “...As will your pleasure, should I decide to deliver it?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“What is your safeword, Pet?”

“I use the traffic light system, Mistress,” the woman replies.

“Explain to me what that means,” Glow demands, turning to the crowd.

“Green is good,” Pet says quietly. “Yellow is—”

“Louder,” Glow barks, cracking the whip again. “So everyone can hear you.”

“Yellow means caution, Mistress!”

“And what is caution?”

“Something that is nearing my limits, Mistress!” the woman says, her voice echoing in the club.

“And what is red?”

“Red means stop!”

“Do you trust me to stop if you use this word?” Glow asks.

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Do you trust that should I, for any reason, fail to heed your safeword, that

your Domme will step in on your behalf?” Glow continues. “As she is responsible for your safety...and *use*?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Audience!” Glow thunders, now turning to the room around her. “As willing spectators to this glorious act of penance, I also ask you to hold me accountable! Do you accept your role and commit to ensure I honor this brave submissive’s safewords should she feel the need to use them?!”

“Yes!” The crowd responds.

“Do you consent, Pet?” Glow asks, cupping the woman’s chin. “And do you understand that at any time you can revoke your consent?”

“Yes, Mistress!”

“Then rise and disrobe for us,” Glow says warmly before snapping her fingers.

From the corner of the room, two of Glow’s employees emerge pushing a cart, atop of which sits a variety of punishment devices and toys.

She then extends her hand toward the brunette Domme.

“Before we begin, I’m going to ask that your Domme step forward, so that the three of us can discuss your hard limits for this encounter.”

From the crowd, Pet’s Mistress emerges, slowly rising to her feet and walking to join them on the dance floor.

The two employees help the woman remove every piece of her clothing, folding it neatly and setting it on the tray.

“Holy crap,” Natalie whispers, her jaw hanging open. “This...this is really going to happen. Right here.”

“Yes, it is,” I say, swallowing hard and studying Natalie’s face. “But if you don’t want to watch this, we don’t have to.”

She is silent for a moment, and I hold my breath.

Oh no...have I assumed too much?

“I mean, I’ve never seen anything like this. But she *has* consented. And it seems like she’s...interested,” Natalie says quietly, taking a sip of her champagne. “I...I think I’d like to stay and see what happens.”

Finally, I exhale.

“What the lady wants,” I say, a gentle smirk tugging at the corners of my mouth as I take a sip of my champagne.

As the three women discuss the submissive’s limits in private, I catch Natalie glancing around the room. She stands and begins slowly walking

around the various pieces of furniture, trailing her finger along the smooth leather.

Admittedly, the idea of using any of these pieces with her has my cock already throbbing and me loosening my collar around my neck.

Of course I want to fuck her. Always. And doing it here would be hot as hell.

But I also know that while all of this is somewhat commonplace to me, it isn't to Natalie. It's a new experience for her, and I imagine that she never imagined she'd be here, about to witness a show like this.

So despite my raging desire to strap her to the bench and fuck the living shit out of her, I know I need to remain calm.

She needs to take all of this in at her own pace.

Unbuttoning her jacket she hangs it on a hook beside the door, smoothing the front.

"Are those, um...toys...ours?" she asks, motioning to the three boxes on the front table.

I nod.

"They just *give* you those?" She snorts, turning back to me.

"Well, most people prefer to use their own," I shrug.

"Wow," she breathes. "That's quite a party favor."

"Trust me," I wink at her. "For what it costs to rent out this room for the night, I promise the Apparatus Room can afford to provide a few silicone toys."

"So what's happening now?" Natalie asks.

"They are discussing limits," I explain. "Glow is showing what toys or tools she enjoys using for her punishments, and the submissive and her Domme are either consenting to them, or declining."

"Why is the Domme being consulted?" She asks snuggling in beside me. "Does she participate too?"

"Sometimes," I shrug. "Sometimes not. Every dynamic is different, it's all about choice and preference. However, as this submissive has a longstanding relationship with this Domme, Glow is consulting her out of respect."

"Why?"

"Because this submissive is collared," I say, pointing to the woman being strapped to the cross. "She's committed on a deeper level to this Domme, one that signifies not just submission and trust, but also a level of

ownership.”

“Ownership?” Natalie gasps. “You mean, she wants to be...*owned*?”

She immediately turns her attention back to the scene developing before us. I smile, realizing that for her these concepts must be very confusing.

“Yes, she might,” I say, pulling her toward me and pressing my lips to her neck, kissing her softly. “Sexual ownership can have its perks.”

She shudders as I gently continue sucking on her perfumed skin.

“And as I recall, Mrs. Pace, you thoroughly enjoy being *mine*,” I growl wickedly in her ear, slipping my hand between her thighs. “At least that’s what I remember you saying over and over when I had you naked, spread, and dripping all over the penthouse floor.”

“Oh shiiiiit,” she groans as I stroke her slit between her tights.

“If you want,” I whisper darkly. “I’m more than happy to refresh your memory.”

However, before Natalie can answer, Glow’s whip crack slices loudly through the air, pulling our attention back to the center of the room.

“Fiona, Pet’s Mistress,” Glow starts to explain, motioning to the Domme who now retakes her seat. “Has stated her desire for the evening. She has requested that Pet be punished for disobeying her commands.”

With a nod, her assistants remove several unapproved items from the cart.

“Additionally, while Pet here has consented to the remaining items, as well as this public form of rehabilitation,” she continues, now turning to the crowd. “The honor of exacting this punishment has been granted to me and me alone. The rest of you are only allowed to spectate. This is not a group event.”

A low murmur rumbles amongst the crowd.

“That being said, you are all to remain outside the perimeter of this set,” Glow says, twirling her finger in the air. “Should any of you forget your place, and cross this line, my men will toss you out onto the street. And should any of you attempt to lay a finger on Pet, you will face my wrath... which will be much more severe.”

The darkness that coats Glow’s voice nearly makes me shudder myself.

“These are the rules by which we govern ourselves tonight. If anyone would like to leave, I will not stop you, but if you remain you are acknowledging the rules as I have stated.”

Over the next half hour Natalie and I observe Glow tormenting the naked,

whimpering redhead.

But even though the people inside the club have front row seats to every crack of Glow's whip, or yank of her clamps, or the slow rhythmic strokes of her hand on "Pet's" most sensitive areas, I have the best fucking seat in the house.

I get to watch my wife's first voyeur experience.

I get to feel Natalie squirm and jump in the seat beside me, hear her gasp, and watch the flicker in her eyes become a raging inferno.

God I bet she's fucking wet right now.

As the minutes tick by attempting to reign in my own lust becomes more and more of a problem.

"Jaxon," she says, startling me from my thoughts. "How come you've never...you know...punished me."

I chuckle softly to myself. "Because you've never deserved a punishment," I shrug. "And also, because this is different from what we have."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, this is a dynamic," I say, nodding toward the window. "You and I don't have a dynamic."

"But you've had them before," she says, her tone more of a question than a statement.

I shift, clearing my throat.

"Yes, I have."

"And...do you...want a dynamic?" Natalie asks tentatively as she bites her lip, looking back instead to the punishment happening before us. "Like, do you want to do all of those things to me?"

I can't deny my heart instantly starts racing. But before it takes control, and gives me away as the filthy pervert who has been undeniably thinking about her in all of those delicious ways, I pull her onto my lap.

Cupping her face I kiss her deeply, passionately, like a man on fire.

"No," I whisper. "As I've already stated, I don't want a dynamic with you."

Natalie pulls back to look at me, and for a split second she almost looks disappointed.

And it's then that I understand.

Again, I lean in and kiss her hard.

“I don’t want that with you because I don’t need it,” I growl against her lips, kissing down her neck while tracing my hands up her back. “...because if I want to strap you down and do bad things to you, I’ll just do them.”

I thread my fingers in her hair and pull her head back, exposing her neck.

“...And what if I want you to do bad things to me?”

I hear Natalie speak the words, but they register slowly in my head.

She really just said...

“Natalie,” I say slowly, feeling my cock throb in my pants. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, Jaxon,” she whispers.

“Then it’s like I always say,” I breathe huskily sucking on her collarbone. “What the lady wants.”

Glancing over to the wall, a particular set of cuffs catches my eye and an idea forms in my head.

I point.

“Do you see those handcuffs on the wall over there, on the second peg?”

Natalie nods.

“Go get them.”

She gulps and bites her bottom lip but obediently stands to her feet and walks slowly over to the wall. Pulling the cuffs from their peg, she takes them into her hands, appraising them before looking up at me.

Smiling wickedly, I say nothing, instead motioning her over to me with my finger.

“Good girl,” I say softly, taking them from her.

Turning her around to face the window I reach up to the top of her dress, and pull the zipper down very, very slowly, watching as the soft fabric trickles into a pile on the floor around her. Next, I unlatch her bra, hearing her breath hitch as she instinctively moves to catch it in her hands.

“Let go,” I say gently, tugging on the clasp.

“But...Jax...” she gasps as I pull the bra from her, leaving her now standing here in just her panties and tights.

“They can’t see you,” I remind her, running my hand up the inside of her now trembling legs. “Only I can see you.”

Without warning I grip the crotch of her tights and tear it open.

“Jax!” she groans.

“Just giving myself access, Sweetheart,” I chuckle darkly.

On the other side of the glass, the red-haired woman moans loudly as Glow presses a wand to her bare pussy.

“Now bend over.”

“Wh...what?” Natalie whispers.

“You heard me just fine,” I say, cupping her ass with my hand. “Bend over. And know that if you have trouble obeying instruction, I’m more than happy to strap you to that breeding bench over there.”

“Fuck,” Natalie groans slowly bending forward on the ottoman in front of us.

Gently I pull each of her legs up, spreading them and pressing her back down.

“Mmm, now we both get a show,” I growl, running my hand over her ass and then between her legs, watching her jump.

On the dance floor, Glow is now alternating between whipping and wanding the whimpering submissive.

“Move all the way to the far side, closest to the window. After all, I wouldn’t want you to miss the show.”

“Oh my...” She whimpers softly.

“Go on,” I growl again, running my hand up her shaking thigh. “I won’t be asking a third time.”

Carefully Natalie does as I ask, climbing on top of the ottoman.

Moving to the edge of my seat I slip my hand back between her legs, pulling them apart even wider before running my fingers along Natalie’s sex. Her long legs begin to shake as I start massaging her slit.

“My, my,” I whisper, pressing my lips against her side as I continue to slide my fingers back and forth. “I can feel how wet you are already, Naughty Girl. I wonder, do you like watching someone getting played with?”

“Jax...” Natalie cringes, blushing deeply.

“There’s nothing wrong with it.” I say, slipping my finger inside her. “She’s enjoying it...and you’re just enjoying watching her enjoy it.”

“Oh my god!” Natalie moans loudly.

Vigorously I swirl my fingers around inside of her.

“So, Mrs. Pace, I’ll ask again,” I say, keeping my relentless rhythm. “Are you enjoying the show?”

“Ye...yes...” she stammers.

“Excellent.”

Grabbing one of the special cuffs she pulled from the wall I take the larger strap and wrap it around her thigh.

“Now give me your hand.”

She turns to look at me, her breathing deepening before slowly extending her hand.

“These are very special cuffs,” I grin, gripping her wrist.

Without breaking eye contact with her, I fasten the strap around her wrist, before connecting it to the hook on the thigh strap.

“Oh fuck...” she moans, now realizing her predicament.

But even though I feel her body begin to shake, she still willingly gives me her other wrist allowing me to fasten it to her other thigh as well.

After moving her so she’s positioned with her head hanging over the side, I run my hand along the inside of her trembling thighs.

On the dance floor, the moans of the submissive echo through the club as Glow fingers her aggressively.

However, the view here in my private room is far more sexy.

“Well, well, would you look at that,” I growl. “I have to say, Submission looks very good on you, Naughty Girl.”

Suddenly I grip her wet, dripping pussy in my fingers, making her cry out.

“Jaxon!”

“How does it feel to know there is nothing you can do to stop me from doing whatever I want to you like this?” I whisper darkly, slipping a finger inside her.

“Argh!” She whimpers.

Impulsively I reach for my throbbing cock stroking it slowly before kicking off my shoes, undoing my belt buckle and stepping out of my pants.

I stand, taking my time to slowly walk around in front of her, running my hand up the length of her perfect body.

The sound of Glow’s riding cropping sounds behind me, but I couldn’t give a shit. There is only one woman in the world who has my attention right now, and she is squirming nervously on her hands and knees.

With one hand stroking my cock, I gently cup her chin with the other, drawing her eyes to mine.

“Now are you sure you want to do this?” I ask with a smirk.

Natalie looks up at me, a fierce determination in her eyes that then deliberately drifts south.

“Yes...daddy,” she grins, leaning forward and circling her tongue around the tip of my cock.

“Show me.”

I step forward, the tip of my erection rubbing against her swollen soft lips. Without hesitation she wraps her lips around it and swallows me deep down her throat.

Holy. Fuck.

Using only her mouth and tongue, she works the full length of me, and within seconds I can feel my only legs trembling.

Despite having fucked some of the best whores in Chicago, my wife is hands down the best head I’ve ever received.

“You know, you’re really good at that, Mrs. Pace,” I whisper, threading my fingers in her hair and slowly thrusting myself deeper down her throat.

When I finally pull out she coughs loudly, gasping for air, her spit dribbling down her lips.

“I think that’s enough for now,” I whisper huskily, walking around her and kneeling down on the back of the ottoman. “Now it’s my turn.”

Desperate to taste her I bury my face in her exposed pussy, swirling my tongue on her clit.

“Jax!”

Her body jolts forward, but my hands grip her thighs, holding her firmly in place as I continue devouring her.

“How does it feel, to know there’s a room full of people on the other side of that window who have no idea how exposed and vulnerable you are right now,” I say, slipping two fingers deep inside of her. “How close the line is between ecstasy and embarrassment.”

“Oh my fucking God!” She groans.

“None of them know that you’re in here on your hands and knees,” I growl. “Making a fucking mess all over the furniture.”

Moving my fingers in a beckoning motion against her G-Spot I feel her start dripping down my hand.

“Ja...Jaxon!” She moans loudly. “I’m...I’m going to cum!”

“Perfect,” I grin, pressing my tongue once more to her clit and increasing the pulsing of my fingers inside of her. “Give it all to me, Natalie.”

Within seconds my wife climaxes hard for me, her entire body convulsing.

“Good girl,” I whisper, kissing her perky ass and teasing her a bit longer.

“Such a good girl.”

“Holy fuck, Jaxon,” Natalie breathes. “That was...that was...amazing.”

“Nah, Baby Girl,” I say, positioning my cock at her entrance. “That was just the beginning.”

And with that I shove myself inside of her, feeling her still pussy still convulsing with the aftershocks of her pleasure.

“Fuckkkk!” She shouts as I pull out and thrust in again.

“Jesus,” I grunt, gripping her hips hard and pulling her down on me. “I fucking love this pussy.”

Pressing my chest to her back, I slam in and out of her, over and over, until I can feel her cum dripping down my leg.

It isn't long until I feel my own climax building within me. But instead of allowing myself to cum inside of her like this, I pull out.

“Jaxon, what are you doing?” Natalie gasps.

I take the opportunity to taste her delicious little slit once more, feeling her writhing beneath me.

After edging her to the brink I stop, and unsnap the cuffs, sending her collapsing against the leather ottoman.

“Have you had enough, Naughty Girl?” I ask, standing above her.

She chuckles breathlessly.

“Never, Mr. Pace.”

My sassy girl.

“Come here then,” I say, extending my hand to her and pulling her up on her feet.

I have to catch her though, as she nearly topples to the ground.

“Whoa there,” I say, gripping her tightly around the waist. “Are you good?”

“I think so,” she scoffs. “I just don't think I can walk.”

“That's not a problem.”

Reaching behind her thighs I grip her tightly and lift her into the air... before slowly lowering her down on to my glistening cock.

“Holy fuckkkk!” Natalie groans, burying her face in my neck.

Carefully I walk her towards the floor to ceiling glass window, pressing her against it and thrusting up and into her.

She moans, tossing her head back against the glass, and screwing her eyes shut as I pump harder and faster into my beautiful wife.

“If...we’re going...to...do that...” she breathes with each of my thrusts. “Then we might...as...well...do *this*.”

And before I can even comprehend what she’s referring to, my wife reaches over...and flips the switch on the wall.

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

The soft silhouette lights kick on, illuminating our shadows for the near-feral crowd down below, already electrified from Glow and Pet’s performance.

The room erupts.

And with a few final thrusts, so do I, emptying myself into my wife just as she climaxes with me.

The deafening cheers and applause continue even after I switch the light back off.

I step backwards, the two of us collapsing on the ottoman, both of us trying to catch our breath.

“I have to say,” I pant, chuckling softly. “You never cease to amaze me, my darling wife.”

“Well, I keep telling you, *husband*,” Natalie rolls over and places her head on my chest, staring up at me with her bright green eyes. “That you have no idea what I’m capable of.”

And as I stare down at her, her long blonde hair falling messily around her beautiful face, I know the truth:

I could never deserve this woman.

But I would happily die trying.



“Wait...you’re leaving?” Natalie asks as I walk her up the steps of Pace Manor. “At this hour?”

“I’m sorry,” I say softly, pulling her close to me and stroking a strand of her hair behind her ear. “I unfortunately have some business I have to attend to.”

“Business,” she sighs.

Her words are more of a statement than a question, telling me that she knows exactly what I'm referring to.

"And I assume it is the kind of business that cannot wait until the morning?"

Slowly I shake my head.

"I see," she breathes, her eyes falling from mine.

I run my index finger along her jaw and lift her chin, forcing her to look up at me.

"I won't be long," I say gently, staring into her mossy green eyes. "I promise."

She stares at me for a moment before nodding.

"Nat, I—" I start to say but before I'm able to finish she presses her lips to mine, kissing me deeply.

Instinctively I wrap mine around her waist and press her body against mine, shoving my tongue into her mouth.

The world around us fades away and for a moment, the two of us are lost in each other, standing in the moonlight on the front steps of Pace Manor.

Natalie pulls away, pressing her forehead to mine.

"It's alright, my love," she whispers against my lips. "You go handle your business. But always remember that I'll be here waiting when you get home."

Home.

This word resonates with me on so many levels.

I'm reminded of what Ethan said to me the first time we ever discussed Natalie, after meeting her at my hotel.

"The only parallel to the darkness we deal in, is a light bright enough to guide you home."

She has *become* my home, and her unconditional and steadfast love is the guiding light preventing me from being swallowed up from my own darkness.

"I love you," she breathes. "Even if I hate you leaving."

"As I love you," I whisper. "And don't worry. I'll be back, and then I assure you I will happily beg for your forgiveness."

Casually I slip my hand down her voluptuous backside.

"...All night long."

She giggles, biting her bottom lip before kissing me once more, sighing softly into my mouth.

“Looking forward to your *penance*, Mr. Pace.”

She winks at me and for a moment I’m tempted to disregard my plans for the evening, carry her upstairs, and bury my face in her delicious pussy until I collapse from sheer exhaustion.

But I know I cannot.

Tonight is imperative and has been too meticulously planned.

And I know that if Natalie knew what me and my team were actually setting out to do this evening, there’s no way she would allow me to selfishly distract myself from the cause.

I kiss her hand once more before tearing myself away and heading off back into the night.



It’s quarter to eleven when the rumble of a car gently breaks the silence at Tom’s Long Term Storage Yard. As it rounds the corner, its LED headlights cast shadows in between the rows of rusty shipping containers, stacked high along the dirt road. A bright white Ferrari, with a custom hood ornament painted the colors of the Italian flag comes screeching to a halt amid a cloud of dust and gravel.

Right on time.

Antonio Luca hops from the driver’s seat, rubbing his nose, glancing around angrily at his men who promptly exit the gray Hummer that has also followed him here.

The passenger door of the Ferrari opens next, and Antonio’s teenage son exits next, preoccupied on his phone.

“Where the hell is Angel?” Luca barks at one of his men as he storms into the dockside storage yard. “I told him I needed him to be here early! These bitches need to be cleaned up and ready! They’ve been living in a storage container for weeks, and they smell like shit! But I haven’t heard from the cunt all day.”

The men around him murmur but no one replies.

“Well?!” He roars. “Answer me dammit!”

“Erm...Boss, w...we, uh, don’t know.”

“What the fuck do you mean you don’t know?” Luca snaps. “He didn’t sprout wings out his ass and suddenly fly away!”

“A few of the men had beers with him last night over at Nyx, cause you know, he likes that waitress,” one man says, looking around nervously.

“Uh...I think her name is Jess? Or Jez?”

“Jezebel!” Another one chimes in. “And yeah, she’s fine as f—”

He’s interrupted by Luca slapping him in the face.

“I don’t give a fuck about those whores, you idiot!” He shouts, spit flying from his mouth as he continues to mercilessly beat the man while the rest look on helplessly. “I give a fuck about *these* whores! The ones due to ship out tonight!”

“Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss,” the young man yelps, falling to his knees and shielding his face. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Eventually Luca stops, his chest heaving and his eyes wide with rage.

His anxiety over this transaction is glaringly apparent.

And I’m sure the cocaine isn’t helping his condition.

He takes a few more exaggerated breaths before he runs his hand through his hair, cursing in Italian.

“Fuck it,” he snarls. “I’ll handle that shithead later. But right now, I need to get this deal done. Get these bitches washed and dressed before Pace finds out we’re here, or we’re all dead men.”

“Yes, Boss.”

His men head back to the Hummer, pulling crates of clothes and towels, along with a few buckets of water from the trunk.

“Father, why *can’t* Mr. Pace know we are here?” His son asks, casually glancing down at his phone.

“Because kid, Mr. Pace owns this lot,” Luca quips, wiping his nose with his handkerchief.

“But...then why would we pick this place?” His son asks, his head snapping up to look at his father. “Isn’t that really dangerous?”

Luca smiles darkly, watching his men make their way toward his shipping container.

“It is dangerous,” he says, placing his hand on his son’s shoulder and bending down to his level. “But it’s also the last place he’d suspect—right under his nose.”

“What the fuck?!”

The man opening the giant heavy metal door on the container suddenly drops the bucket of water he was carrying on the cold ground.

“Holy shit!” Another shouts. “Boss, come quick! The girls...they...they are gone!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?!” Luca demands, turning on his heel and racing over toward the container.

“And that’s our cue, boys,” I whisper into my earpiece before cocking my gun. “Let’s go to work.”

“What the hell?! What the fuck is going on here?!”

Luca’s shrill and panicked voice echoes against the tall, towering stacks of containers as me and my Alpha Squad silently make our way out of our discreet hiding places around the yard, slowly closing in on Luca and his men whose attention is transfixed on Luca’s shipping container.

...And the bloodied body of a man lying slumped inside.

“Evening,” I say with a grin.

His startled men quickly turn and move to grab their weapons, but freeze when they see that they are surrounded by none other than my notorious Alpha Squad in full tactical gear, and pointing their weapons directly at them.

“Drop your weapons!” Charlie snaps. “Now!”

Although they hesitate at first, one by one Luca’s men obey.

“P...Pace?” Luca gasps, his eyes wide. “What are you...I mean...why are —”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” I say darkly, wagging my finger back and forth. “Let’s not do that, Antonio. I mean surely, we’ve known each other long enough to know when to drop the charade.”

“Jaxon, I—” he starts to say, but stops when I hold up my hand.

“I don’t want to hear your well-rehearsed bullshit,” I say coldly, pulling the cigar I picked up at Nyx from my pocket and lighting it. “How about we pretend that I know exactly what you’ve been doing in the shadows, old friend.”

I nod toward the shipping container.

“And Angel over there was relatively cooperative in filling in the gaps and telling us everything we needed to know about where and when you planned to orchestrate this illegal sale behind my back.”

Luca turns instinctively to look once more at the mangled corpse behind

him.

“If he was cooperative,” he says breathlessly, slowly turning back around to face me. “Then why kill him?”

I smile at him.

“Well,” I shrug. “I said *relatively* cooperative.”

His eyes go wide, and his breathing increases rapidly.

“So,” I say, puffing the cigar. “I suppose a better question would be, why on earth did you think aligning yourself with Michael Valentine would be a good idea? Especially considering it puts you in direct violation of our laws.”

Luca says nothing, his eyes darting rapidly around, staring at my men now surrounding him.

“I didn’t want to,” Luca replies, his voice low. “Michael...he forced my hand. He reached out directly to Giovi from—”

“La Fratellanza,” I finish for him.

He nods once.

“He used me to get in contact with them,” he continues. “They’ve already threatened my family.”

“Still,” I say, tilting my head to the side. “That’s a bold step for The Brotherhood isn’t it? As they are aware that our laws forbid the sale of human cargo.”

Luca stares back at me, glancing down at his terrified son who steps closer to his father.

“They would’ve known that getting involved in our affairs would involve overstepping, and risk causing a war,” I say with a shrug. “Why would they do that if they didn’t have assurance from someone connected in the syndicate.”

Even from where I’m standing, I can see Luca’s breaths become more ragged.

“War is what Michael wants,” Antonio says.

“*Wanted*,” I snap through gritted teeth. “He’s dead now.”

Luca nods nervously.

“He brokered a deal with La Fratellanza where he would supply them with shipments, if they supported him in...”

He shifts uncomfortably.

“...Overthrowing you,” he says quietly.

I snort softly, before crossing the cigar into the snow.

Silently I walk through the group of men toward him, until I am standing right in front of him.

“Is that what you want too, Luca?” I whisper. “Me dispatched, and a psychopath for a Don Supreme?”

“N...no, of course not,” he scoffs defensively.

“Then why didn’t you come to me in the first place?” I hiss venomously. “What did you stand to gain from this?”

His eyes widen.

“Me?” He asks. “I...I...”

But before he can finish putting together some bullshit reply I step behind his son, who stands shaking in the cold.

Gently I touch the boys shoulder, glaring at Antonio and reminding him of the power I have.

“What. Did. He. Offer. You?” I whisper lethally. “And know that I won’t be asking you a third time.”

Luca looks down at his trembling son before his eyes find mine once more.

“He said that it could bring in a new source of income,” he whispers.

“And?”

“And that if we played our cards right, we could expand the syndicate to encompass all of the Midwest and East Coast.”

“And?!” I say darkly.

“And that if we were successful, he’d give me whatever territory I wanted,” Luca sighs, closing his eyes. “Including this one.”

“I see,” I nod.

I pull my gun from my pocket without releasing my hold on Luca’s only son and heir.

“You have to understand,” Luca pleads. “The power that they have in Italy, with my family. They could destroy us. And Michael reached out to them directly knowing that once he brokered this deal and there was nothing I could do.”

“But you don’t answer to the Brotherhood.”

He opens his mouth but says nothing.

“I said you do not answer to the fucking Brotherhood,” I thunder loudly, making him jump. “Do you, Luca?”

“N...no,” he stammers. “I answer to you.”

“Good,” I growl. “Then you’ll have no problem calling them and informing them that your little transaction tonight is off, will you?”

“What?” Luca gasps, his eyes wide. “I...I can’t do that.”

“Oh, you most certainly can, and will,” I smile back at him. “Right now.”

“Mr. Pace, I don’t think you understand—”

“Oh, I understand perfectly,” I seethe, and before he can react, I cock my gun, grab his shirt, and shove the barrel up against his chin. “I understand that you worked with my enemies to unseat me. And that I am fully within my rights as Don Supreme to blow your fucking head off right here.”

Luca’s eyes dart about wildly, and he raises his arms in the air defensively. Given that I’m still holding his shirt I can smell the lingering smell of cigarettes and vodka leaking from his open mouth.

“However, being the *merciful* don that I am, I don’t want to do that in front of your son,” I growl. “Which is why I’m offering you a choice. It’s either a phone call, or the grave.”

“O...okay,” he stammers nervously. “I’ll make the call.”

“Smart man.”

“The number is in my phone,” Luca continues. “If you’ll allow me, I’ll grab it and—”

“That won’t be necessary,” I interrupt. “Charlie.”

From the crowd, Charlie steps forward with a cell phone.

“We already have the number,” I smile. “We got it from Angel’s cellphone. So, all I need is for you to tell them the deal is off, and that there won’t be any further shipments coming from Chicago.”

Panic instantly flits across Luca’s face, and his eyes seem to widen even further.

“Mr. Pace,” he gasps. “I can’t tell them the deal is completely off. I have to tell them that it’s just delayed, and find another way to satisfy their—”

“The deal is off,” I snap, shoving the barrel deeper into his chin. “For good. They are to leave us to our own devices and not meddle any further in our business. Understood?”

Charlie presses the call button from Angel’s phone, and it starts ringing.

“Moment of truth, Antonio,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him. “What is it going to be?”



Chapter Nine

NATALIE

“Brrr!” I shiver as I take Jaxon’s hand, stepping out of the back of the Range Rover at The Jefferson. “These Chicago winters are no joke!”

He chuckles softly, before slipping his hand inside my coat and immediately pulling my body flush against his. Leaning in, he lands a soft, sensual kiss on my neck, before slowly trailing his nose up my neck.

“You know, I have a few ideas of how to combat the chill, Mrs. Pace,” he growls, kissing my earlobe. “If you’d like to take a trip upstairs to the penthouse.”

“I think I know all about your ideas, Mr. Pace,” I giggle, pressing against his chest and fluttering my lashes up at him. “But I already had some this morning, remember?”

“Oh, I remember, I just want more.”

“You never get enough, do you?”

“Of you, Αγαπημένη?” He whispers against my lips. “No, no I do not.”

He kisses me deeply and I feel him slip his hand down the inside of my coat and grip my ass firmly.

Oh my...

“Are you two smooching again?”

Jessica’s voice sounds from behind us, and I turn to see her cherubic face looking up at us with her sassy brows raised.

Jaxon clears his throat and reluctantly releases me, before stepping over to the car and scooping her up into his arms.

“Maybe,” he says, kissing her cheek. “But I think Mama likes it.”

Ethan steps forward and instantly Jessica extends her arms to him.

“Come on kiddo,” he says, taking her from Jaxon.

“Wait a minute,” my husband scoffs playfully. “Did I get demoted or something?”

“No,” Ethan shrugs with a grin. “I just promised Jess some hot chocolate when we got to the hotel.”

“With marshmallows!” Jessica giggles, squeezing her little arms around

Ethan's neck.

As he carries her toward the doors, Jax chuckles under his breath, but there's no denying the smile that skates across his face.

Well, would you look at us, acting like a real family.

However, I'm immediately pulled from our blissful little moment when I catch sight of the serious look on Charlie's face.

"Eyes up everyone," he says into his earpiece. "We're moving."

He visually scans the perimeter around us with hawk-like precision as he and the other alphas surround us.

It's then that I'm reminded of the ever more present threat.

Since Jaxon's meeting with Luca two nights ago, the entire Alpha Squad has been on high alert. Even Wesley, who is normally relaxed and laid back, taking his place by my side and eyeing some departing guests warily.

"Um, Jax," I whisper as Jaxon takes my hand. "Why does everyone seem so...tense."

"Just standard security protocol, my love," he says, pulling me toward the hotel doors.

"Uh huh," I say looking over at Deylan and Alexei bringing up the rear behind us. "Is that the reason we have extra security today?"

"They—

"Mr. Pace! Mr. Pace!"

A man's voice suddenly rings out through the atrium, interrupting Jaxon.

I jump, and the men close in around us, with Wesley stepping in front of me, his hand on his gun.

"Hold it right there!" Charlie snaps aggressively stepping in front of Jaxon. "Don't come any closer, pal."

A tall, thin, balding man with a large camera comes to a halt just to our right.

A small crowd of paparazzi, which had been inconspicuously stationed under the awning of the hotel's heated bus stop, now flood toward us. The flashes from cameras pop and Jaxon puts his hand up to shield us both from view.

"Mr. Pace, do you have any statement about the rumors regarding recent explosions in the city?!" The first man asks between relentlessly snapping pictures with his camera.

"Of course he has no comment," Charlie growls. "Now get out of here!"

“Mrs. Pace!” A younger and shorter man shouts loudly beside him. “Is it true that your husband was sleeping with his staff?!”

Suddenly our entire entourage comes screeching to a halt.

Oh shit.

In a fraction of a second, I feel Jaxon turning to face them. Instinctively I grab his hand, knowing that if I don’t keep him close to me, he’s likely to shoot this man...in front of all of the press.

But before Jaxon even has a chance to respond, the shorter man is instantly rushed and slammed off his feet.

...By Deylan.

The impact from Deylan’s muscular frame is so fierce that the paparazzi is thrown backwards into the hedge that lines the driveway leading to valet.

“You don’t get to speak to Mrs. Pace like that,” he thunders down at him. “In fact, you don’t get to speak to her at all. So, get her fucking name out of your mouth!”

“Hey asshole! You can’t do that!” The first man says rushing toward him.

“I think I just fucking did!” He fires back. “Problem?”

He swings at Deylan, and I gasp, covering my mouth with my other hand.

But my concern evaporates the minute Deylan ducks and punches the man hard in the stomach, knocking him on his ass.

A third paparazzi comes barreling out of the crowd, but again Deylan flawlessly avoids his haphazard jabs, and instead lands three punches of his own, before kicking him in the chest and sending him smashing into a trash can.

“Anyone else?!” Deylan snorts mockingly, beckoning the crowd of paparazzi.

But no one steps forward this time, all of them instantly lowering their cameras.

“Get the fuck out of here!” Travis bellows, sending the now terrified scavengers scuttling down the sidewalk.

Josiah, Alexei, and a couple of the guys from valet collect the cameras from the three winded and beaten men, removing their SD cards.

“You can’t do that!” The first man stammers nervously as he is aggressively pulled from the bushes by Alexei and handed his empty camera. “That’s...that’s private property!”

Deylan storms over to him, knocks the camera from his hands and stomps

it to pieces on the pavement.

“Now it’s trashed property,” he growls. “Are you going to fuck off now or do you want another taste, old man?”

The paparazzi’s eyes go wide, and he quickly shakes his head.

He backs away slowly before turning and following his two companions now bolting down the street.

Deylan stands staring after them, his chest heaving.

After a few seconds he turns, straightening his suit.

“Apologies, Mr. Pace,” he sighs, hanging his head. “I...probably got a little carried away.”

My husband’s chiseled jaw is flexing as he stares back at Deylan.

“Take a minute and compose yourself,” he says firmly. “Then meet me in my office.”

The look of disappointment on Deylan’s face nearly breaks my heart.

“Jax...” I start to say quietly as he pulls us inside the lobby but before I can he silences me with a kiss.

“Sweetheart, I will catch up with you later,” he says, gently cupping my face.

My chest tightens. I don’t want to see Deylan lose his job, especially for defending me.

“But Jax—” I start to say, but he kisses me once more.

“Leave this with me.”

And before I can say anything else, Jaxon tears himself away, walking back toward reception.

“Morning, Sally,” he says politely.

“Damn it,” I mutter under my breath. “I hate when he does that.”

Only Jaxon can render my brain incapable of cognitive sentences.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Pace,” Wesley says quietly, stepping up beside me. “Around here, that’s the kind of behavior that gets you promoted, not fired.”

My eyes find his, and it’s then that I recall the look in my husband’s eyes, and the faint smile on his lips.

“Leave it with me.”

Jaxon won’t fire Deylan for what just happened.

My husband, the big ol’ softie.



A little while later the elevator dings, opening to the guest penthouse.

“Hello?” I hear Rachel say.

She steps around the corner,

“Natalie?” she asks. “What are you doing here—”

But her question is immediately interrupted when Jessica steps out from behind me. In her tiny arms she carries a vase of flowers almost as big as she is.

“Hi Miss Rachel. Oof!” She grunts adorably, setting the flowers down just a few feet from the elevator and wiping off her hands. “These...are for you.”

Rachel’s face immediately brightens as she briefly looks up at me.

“She insisted on carrying them herself,” I say with a smile.

“Told you I could do it!” she says proudly.

“You did indeed,” I chuckle, nodding to Wesley who silently picks them up from the floor.

“And my goodness,” Rachel says, walking forward and smelling them.

“They are so beautiful. Did you pick them out?”

“Yep!” Jessica beams.

“Well, you did a very good job!”

“Thank you!” She smiles.

“I didn’t know you were coming by today,” Rachel says, looking up at me almost nervously. “I don’t know if there’s anything here for a...”

Her voice trails off, but I can already sense her concern, given that the penthouse she and Adam are staying in is technically built for adult *royalty*, not seven-year-old girls.

Fortunately, we came prepared today.

“Jess, why don’t you take Miss Rachel into the kitchen and show her what you brought with you in your backpack.”

Her cherubic little face lights up, and without missing a beat she walks straight over to Rachel and takes her hand.

“Come on!” She says enthusiastically, pulling on her hand.

Rachel smiles down at her, and allows Jessica to all but pull her into the

kitchen.

She walks over to the kitchen table and pulls her backpack from her shoulders. After pulling out a couple of her favorite toys, like her “talking” teddy bear, and a few plastic containers of Play-Doh, she pulls out a red and white box.

“We brought brownies!” she exclaims excitedly.

“Oooh! It’s been a while since I’ve had one of those.”

Jessica looks down at the box in her hands.

“Do you...like brownies?”

“Of course I do,” Rachel smiles.

“Would you like to bake them with us?”

Rachel’s face is indescribable, as if the little girl just invited her into heaven itself.

She smiles down at Jessica, softly running her fingers through her hair.

“I...would love that,” she says, trying desperately to hide the way her voice cracks.

It’s at this moment that I find myself tearing up too.

When I’d considered a small way to bridge the distance between Rachel and her daughter, I’d hoped an activity, like baking a simple box of brownie mix, might do the trick. But I had no idea that something so small could mean so much.

Over the next hour, I sit at the table, while the two of them set about cracking eggs and making a mess of the penthouse kitchen.

And when a giggling Jessica, with brownie mix on her nose, spreads the mixture into their glass baking tray I realize this might be the happiest I’ve ever seen Rachel.

Despite her injuries, her face is alight with happiness.

This right here is everything I’d wanted for her. And Jessica.

It might not be entirely normal, with Wesley gingerly lingering in the hallway, and with Jessica unaware of who or what Rachel truly is to her, but it doesn’t matter.

It’s a start towards a new normal. For all of us.

My heart feels full for the first time in a long time.

When the brownies go into the oven Jessica hands Rachel one of the dolls she brought with her, insisting that she play with her.

I take the opportunity to step into the living room, and set about trying to

bridge yet another chasm Jaxon and I have in our lives: Adam Westwood.

He sits on the couch reading a book, casually glancing up toward the kitchen every few minutes.

Perhaps it's just his nature, or maybe he also understands that today is about Rachel and Jessica getting some quality time together, but he says nothing, simply watching from afar.

Wesley looks up at me, a flash of concern on his face as his ever-watchful eyes dart between Jessica and Rachel, and me and the pain-in-the-ass FBI Agent.

I nod with a smile, silently telling him that I can handle my own, and not to worry.

It isn't long before Adam Westwood's eyes find mine.

His gaze is stern, but somehow it doesn't feel as frigid as it has in recent months.

"Interesting choice," he says quietly, returning to his book. "Though I suppose now the entire place is going to smell like brownies for days."

"I didn't know that was necessarily a bad thing," I say, crossing my legs as I sit back in the chair. "Are FBI Agents not allowed brownies?"

He scoffs quietly to himself, glancing once more into the kitchen while watching Jessica playing with her dolls.

"She's a cute kid," he says quietly, his face softening ever so slightly. "But my God, she looks a lot like—"

"Her mother," I finish softly. "I know."

He stares at me once more, as if he wants to reply, but chooses not to, once again burying his eyes back in his book.

This might be more difficult than I thought.

However, this conversation needs to take place, and I know that there's no way in hell that Jaxon would be able to handle it diplomatically.

So, unfortunately, this task has fallen to me.

"Look, Agent...I mean, Adam," I say, swallowing hard. "I was hoping that you and I could chat?"

"Is something stopping you, Mrs. Pace?" He asks, without looking up at me. "Or is this part of your...agenda?"

Although his abrasiveness instantly puts me on edge, I take a deep breath and continue.

"I didn't come here with an agenda," I say, taking a deep breath. "Aside

from letting Rachel and Jessica have some quality time together.”

“Supervised time together,” he says, looking up at me over his glasses.

“Semi-supervised,” I correct him gently. “Which given the circumstances is more than what most people would do. And far more than what was expected a week ago.”

He says nothing, his brown eyes burrowing into mine for what feels like a small eternity.

But, finally, he removes his glasses and sets his book down beside him.

Okay...he's at least going to let me talk.

“I understand that this isn’t an ideal situation,” I say empathetically. “But all any of us can do is make the best of it.”

“You think that this is making the best of it?” He says sarcastically.

“No, but it’s a start. And despite what you may think of me, it’s a start that I worked very hard to achieve.”

“Are you hoping for a medal, Mrs. Pace?”

“No,” I snap firmly, trying to hide the way my heart pounds in my chest. “But I am hoping that you and I can find some common ground.”

He blinks, stunned by what I’ve just said.

I lean forward on my knees, crossing my hands together.

“You love Rachel, just as much as I love Jaxon,” I say, locking eyes with him. “And because we love them, it means we take on their battles and struggles as our own. It means we’ve both heard the story of their relationship from two completely different perspectives, and seen them both as villains, and as victims.”

Even from where I’m sitting, I can see Adam swallow hard, and place his arm on the back of the couch.

“It’s no secret that you and I didn’t get off on the right foot, and I accept that we might never see eye to eye on a lot of things,” I continue slowly. “But at the end of the day, we have *them* in common. And they have a daughter. A daughter who deserves to have both her parents in her life, as often as she can.”

Adam lowers his eyes to the floor, his face softening slightly.

I take a deep breath, shifting in my seat and smoothing the top of my jeans.

“I didn’t come here with an agenda, Mr. Westwood,” I say quietly, slowly looking back up at him. “I came here with an olive branch. Because no matter

how awkward, or complicated this might be, I want Jessica to have Rachel in her life. And Jaxon, no matter how much he might grumble, wants the same. As do you.”

He looks back up at me.

“You married into this, just as I did,” I continue, trying to stop my voice from cracking. “Which means, that like me, that little girl is now your stepdaughter too. So, what you think of my husband, or me, or any of this mafia bullshit, doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that little girl in there.”

He turns and looks at Jessica, now seated in Rachel’s lap, happily squeezing pink Play-Doh between her fingers.

The longer he stares at them, the softer his face becomes.

“All I want, Adam, is for you and I to be united for Jessica’s sake,” I say as he turns back to face me. “Can you do that?”

Time stands still, and I can almost feel the crackling static in the air between Agent Westwood and I.

“I’m, uh...sorry about your ex,” Adam finally says, clearing his throat. “When is the funeral?”

“I...I’m not sure,” I say shifting uncomfortably.

“Well, considering he’s your ex I assume you’re not attending anyway.”

“I’d still attend,” I swallow. “If Jaxon allows it.”

“If he allows it?” Adam snorts. “Forgive me, but I didn’t take you for the kind of girl who took to men ordering her around.”

“He doesn’t order me around,” I snap, trying to contain my venom. “He makes the decisions regarding our safety because he’s the Don Supreme.”

“The Don Supreme...” Adam scoffs quietly to himself.

And for a second, the fragile trust we’ve brokered is in danger of being fractured.

No. I cannot break that easily.

“I know that title means nothing to you,” I say, gritting my teeth. “Or maybe it’s just another fancy name for a man you’ve already written off as being a bad man. But let me explain something to you. The Don Supreme is the leader of the bad men in our world.”

“Is that supposed to—”

“But he’s also all that stands in the gap. He’s what stops worse men seeping out into the rest of the world, because he’s the only thing they

actually fear,” I hiss acidly. “And if all that isn’t enough to convince you, then let me remind you Agent Westwood that he’s also been the only one who stood between you and certain death...more than once.”

Adam’s sarcastic grin immediately drops.

“Jaxon could’ve left you to die in Michael’s warehouse, but he didn’t,” I seethe. “And he could’ve ordered his men to kill you, hundreds of times, especially after your little interrogation nearly broke his back. There was nothing stopping him, and I promise that less noble men would’ve slit your throat and dumped you in a river without so much as a second thought. But Jaxon didn’t. Why?”

I glare at Adam’s face, seeing his expression blank, his arrogance evaporated.

“I’ll tell you exactly why. Because despite what you may think, my husband *isn’t* some deranged monster. He’s a monster for his family, and for the people he cares about. And even though he doesn’t like you, he’s risked his life to protect *yours*! Being the Don Supreme isn’t a privilege, Mr. Westwood. It’s a *burden*. And it’s a burden that always exacts a heavy price, and one that must be carried by the right man, or everyone suffers. So maybe instead of being so determined to hate him, you should be grateful that he isn’t the fucking monster you think he is.”

And with that, my diplomacy has reached its limit and I turn and storm out of the room.



Chapter Ten

JAXON

“Would you at least consider it?” Natalie asks pleadingly.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You already know the answer to that question, Nat,” I sigh. “It’s too much of a risk.”

“I don’t see how a funeral could be a risk, Jaxon,” Natalie argues. “Colton is already dead.”

“It’s not Colton I have to worry about,” I sigh, taking a sip of coffee and looking over the paperwork Levi gave me. “Besides, there isn’t a funeral on the schedule to worry about.”

I set my coffee down and take my coat from Trinity, who stands waiting in the foyer.

“Well, no, not yet, but obviously there will be.”

“No,” I say, slipping it over my shoulders. “There won’t be.”

Natalie freezes.

“What?” Steph asks.

“What do you mean there’s not going to be a funeral,” Natalie says, narrowing her eyes at me. “Of course, there will be a funeral. Colton’s parents will want to bury their son.”

“Sweetheart, the goal right now is to eliminate more...noise.”

“Yes, of course. I know that,” she says. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that to do that, we need to keep the suspiciously violent deaths of people that could be connected to either of us, or any *inquiries* into those deaths, down to a minimum. Which means telling the Reynolds family that their son was shot in the head by a psychopath is probably not the best course of action.”

“So then...what are you going to tell them?”

“Nothing,” I shrug, slipping on my coat. “It will be easier on everyone involved if Colton just becomes one of those people who just moved out west for a new job and unfortunately vanished into the aether.”

Reaching into my pocket I find that my gloves aren't where I thought I left them.

Maybe I left them in the kitchen?

"Trinity," I say, turning to her. "Run and see if my gloves are on the breakfast bar."

"Yes, Sir!"

Swiftly she walks back toward the kitchen.

"You're not serious," Natalie chuckles quietly. "Like you're joking. You know, about Colton disappearing."

"I'm always serious. Especially when it comes to protecting this family," I say nonchalantly. "And believe me, this is a better plan."

"Here you are, Sir!" Trinity says, appearing in the doorway with my gloves in hand.

"Jaxon!"

Natalie's voice suddenly echoes loudly in the foyer, startling everyone around us.

"What?"

Confused, I look up at her, and then Steph for support, but when I do I find the expression on her face is just as shocked as Natalie's.

"You're honestly going to tell me that your 'better plan' is to tell them Colton just disappeared?!"

"No, my better plan is to tell them nothing and let them figure out the disappearance part for themselves."

"You can't do that," Natalie breathes, her breath trembling. "He can't just disappear off the face of the earth."

"It happens quite often, Natalie, it's not that—"

"Oh my God..." she breathes, stepping away from me throwing her hands into her hair.

"What? It does," I say defensively. "People go missing every day. Colton will just be one of those people."

"No!"

"What do you mean no?" I snort. "It's the better plan."

Natalie sets her jaw and pinches her eyebrows.

"Listen, Jaxon, I know you didn't like him and all, but I can't believe you would sit here and think this is the better plan. Do you have any idea what that would do to his parents?"

“First of all, my feelings for Colton have nothing to do with this. This is just the safest option,” I say, trying to keep my temper down. “And I promise you, this is a kindness.”

“It’s not a kindness, Jaxon! It’s barbaric!” Natalie fires back angrily. “His parents will search for their son! They will scour the earth for him, losing sleep, and exhausting their resources!”

“Jaxon...” I hear Steph caution. “I hated Colton maybe even more than you did, but I have to agree with Nat on this one. I really don’t think that’s the correct play.”

Seriously?

“Well, then I suppose it’s fortunate that it’s *my* job to worry about these matters,” I growl, glaring at her. “And I say this is the safer option.”

“I...I won’t allow that!” Natalie shouts at me, her voice cracking. “It’s not right that they would all be worrying about him and—”

And just like that, I feel myself snap.

“Do you honestly think they’d prefer to see him with his head blown off?!” I shout, causing all activity in the house to come screeching to a halt. “Do you think they’ll notice which pieces of his skull are missing, because they’re still on the walls and furniture of the fucking Valentine Estate?! I saw it, Natalie, and I promise you that letting them believe Colton just disappeared *is* a kindness!”

The sound of my voice echoes down the hall as Natalie glares back at me.

But it’s not her rage that stops my rage in its tracks. It’s the tears that silently begin to stream down her cheeks.

Shit.

“Nat...” I start to say but before I can finish, she’s already turned on her heel and is storming up the stairs.

The master bedroom door opens and slams shut with such force that it rattles one of the pictures on the stairwell.

No one says anything.

Instead, any staff in the vicinity scatter and my Alpha Squad quietly excuse themselves into my office. I find myself left alone with Steph who folds her arms across her chest, and clicks her tongue inside her mouth.

“I really wasn’t trying to...” I sigh, running my hand through my hair. “I’m just trying to protect her.”

She stares at me, saying nothing.

I take a step toward the staircase, but Steph stops me, shaking her head.

“I’d wager that’s not the best course of action right now, Don Supreme,” she says quietly.

“You don’t think I should...go after her?”

“I mean, yes, but even though you just acted like a total ass, I still like you enough to want you to keep your head on your shoulders,” Steph snorts.

“And I know my cousin enough to know when she needs a minute.”

Slowly she looks up at me.

“...And I’d reckon you do too.”

I sigh, closing my eyes.

“I’m just fighting battles on so many fronts right now,” I sigh.

“I get that, Jaxon,” Stephs nods, before taking a step toward me. “But maybe you need to remember that she is too. Colton may not have been a good guy at the end of his life, but he was a part of her life for a really long time. And she watched him die and feels responsible in some ways.”

“But she’s not responsible,” I scoff. “Why would she...”

However, my voice trails off as Steph raises a brow, telling me silently that she’s already had this conversation with my wife, and likely doesn’t understand the depths of my wife’s compassion any more than I do.

“Give her a minute, and then apologize,” Steph says softly. “Although, I will say, I don’t think you need to go as far as to empty the city of white roses this time around. But I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

She offers me an empathetic smile, before tapping me on the arm, and heading out the door.

Damn it. She’s right.

Natalie has always been so strong, and so resilient, it hadn’t even occurred to me that maybe she *is* struggling with what happened with Colton.

I glance back up the staircase.

Part of me hates the idea of leaving the house with her so upset with me, but the other part of me realizes the truth in her words.

No. I can’t leave things like this.

“Get the cars ready,” I bark at the men in the study heading for the stairs. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

But when I reach the master bedroom door and go to turn the handle, it doesn’t budge.

She’s locked me out.

“Natalie?” I knock softly.

Pressing my ear to the door, I’m sure I can faintly hear her sniffing on the other side.

I raise my hand to knock again, but then consider what Steph said. Perhaps she is right. Perhaps Natalie just needs a little space, and I have to be the one to sit in the mess I created.

Leaning my forehead against the door, I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“Look, you don’t have to open the door, but I just want you to know I’m sorry. Truly, sorry. And I just want you to know that I love you.”

I wait, a part of me hoping that she will open the door, let me put my arms around her, and let me tell her how much I love her in person.

But she doesn’t.

Shit. I did fuck this up.

Not wanting to pester her too much, and risk further angering her, I simply turn and head for the staircase.

If I’m being honest, I listened for the sound of the bedroom door opening all the way to the front door, and even paused to wait as I stepped over the threshold.

But just as the cars reach the end of the driveway, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket.

Natalie

10:21am: For the record, you’re still an ass, and I’m still mad at you. But I love you and look forward to talking this out with you later. Be safe.

A soft smile spreads across my face as I stare down at the phone in my hands. I realize yet again, how much I truly do love this woman and could never, ever, hope to deserve her.

And yet I’m certain, I would happily die trying.



“Afternoon, Mr. Pace.” A scantily clad brunette says, as she walks over to me. “Miss Bordeaux is just parking her car; she’ll be here in just a minute.”

“Thank you,” I say gruffly.

Next, I turn to Deylan, the young ex-military kid I’ve assigned to handle the security of the girls here at the club.

I’d had him splitting his time between working security at the club, and working security for Natalie until the incident the other day with the paparazzi.

And although I’d been more than a little impressed with his level of loyalty to my wife, as well as his skills in hand-to-hand combat, I still felt it best that he stays off the radar of the press until we’ve brushed it under the rug.

“What have you seen?”

“All in all, Sir,” he says with a nod. “Things have been pretty quiet here. There’s a decent number of regulars that keep to schedules, but the nights have been pretty packed.”

“Any trouble?”

“Nothing but the usual scuffles that happen when horny men drink too much and are told no.”

I snort.

But it’s then that he stiffens, and I notice the way his eye twitches. It’s almost as if he wants to tell me something but isn’t sure if he should.

“What is it?” I ask, eliminating his silent conundrum.

“I’m sure it’s nothing, Sir,” he sighs, but purses his lips. “But if I’m being completely honest with you—”

“I hope always,” I say firmly.

“Well, there are a few things that have happened that just seem a little odd.”

“What do you mean *odd*?”

He shifts uncomfortably, glancing around before leaning in toward me, careful not to let anyone else hear our conversation.

“As I said, I’ve seen nothing out of the ordinary during business hours,” Deylan continues. “But afterwards when it’s just us here, I’ve overheard Miss Bordeaux mentioning that she thinks she’s going crazy.”

“What do you mean?”

“You assigned me to watch over the club and girls,” Deylan explains. “For most part I just observe. I’m there to help if they need my assistance, but don’t get in their way. That being said, I’ve spent a decent amount of time here and I’ve noticed that Miss Bordeaux is very meticulous with how she keeps her office.”

“Okay…”

“However, on two separate occasions, I’ve heard her mention that things have been moved from where she left them,” Deylan says, lowering his voice even further. “Now she brushed it off as absentmindedness, but something happened this morning that’s sat weird with me all day.”

“Which is?” I ask.

“She was yelling at one of the girls,” He whispers. “Something about a necklace? I think it used to belong to her old girlfriend. I guess it’s been hanging on this figurine on her desk, and today it was…missing.”

Goosebumps impulsively form on my skin, realizing exactly who that necklace belonged to, and why it’s significant.

That necklace belonged to Ayakka Tatsuko. Glow’s former girlfriend who was brutally murdered by Michael.

“Again,” Deylan snorts, shaking his head. “I’m not even sure if it means anything, or if I’m just going crazy myself. But for some reason it’s been on my mind all day. I guess something about it just felt…*odd*.”

Even though my mind begins spinning, I slap the kid on the shoulder.

“No,” I nod slowly. “You were right to tell me. In my experience, anything that pricks your instincts like that, tends to be something that *is* significant. That’s exactly the kind of thing a good soldier notices.”

Deylan smiles broadly, straightening his posture proudly.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Hello there, handsome,” a pretty blonde woman says as she approaches the two of us, her blue eyes glued on me. “Is there anything I can get for—”

“No.”

My answer is short and callous, but for some reason doesn’t dissuade her.

“My, my, aren’t we moody today,” she winks at me, clicking her tongue

inside her mouth. “Perhaps me and my sister could help you with that bad attitude?”

She reaches for the lapel on my suit coat, but Deylan intervenes.

“Ma’am,” he says, blocking the girl with his arm. “Do not touch Mr. Pace.”

“But look at him, he’s irresistible,” she says, looking me up and down. “And from what I understand, he’s the one responsible for our new accommodations.”

“He’s also the Don Supreme,” Deylan growls. “So perhaps you should show some respect.”

“I want to do more than show my respect,” she says, winking at me. “I want to show my *appreciation*.”

“That’s unnecessary,” I say firmly, checking my watch.

Where the fuck is Glow?

But as I turn to look, another blonde girl, materializes next to me. She looks almost identical to the one being restrained by Deylan, and smiles at me as she places her hand on my arm.

“Besides,” she purrs. “Resolving bad attitudes is kind of our specialty.”

“I promise you won’t resolve mine,” I growl, stepping backwards. “It’s a permanent condition. As is my answer. Now fuck off.”

“Don’t be like that—” she starts to say, playfully reaching for me again.

“April!” Glow snaps, appearing in the doorway and storming toward us.

Her usual sultry voice has been replaced with one of terrifying authority.

“Have you lost your damn mind?!”

April immediately shrinks, as does her sister, the two of them instantly stepping together and lowering their heads, crossing their arms behind their backs.

“Yes, Mistress,” April’s sister says quietly. “We’re sorry.”

“You’re *sorry*?” Glow hisses. “How many times do I have to remind you, throwing yourself at customers is not how we do things. I don’t care how you two operated in the streets, or whatever shithole town you come from, but here in this establishment we honor *consent*. And Mr. Pace here, is a happily married man, who told you no!”

She takes a step toward the girls.

“Are you deaf?”

“No, Mistress,” April whispers.

“Then hear me now, this is your last warning,” Glow snarls, leaning forward between the sisters. “If you two cannot abide by my rules, then I will not hesitate to show you the fucking door!”

She points angrily toward the front of the club as the two girls before her start to tremble anxiously.

“No, please!” April whimpers pleadingly. “We understand and won’t disappoint you again.”

“Then I suggest,” she whispers venomously. “You get back to work and get the hell out of my sight.”

“Yes, Mistress!” April’s sister whispers before the two girls turn and scurry for the back room.

Well, damn.

The moment they disappear, I hear Glow sigh, and see her roll her eyes.

“I sincerely apologize, Mr. Pace,” Glow grumbles, cursing under her breath. “These new girls are going to be the death of me, I swear.”

“No harm done,” I say politely. “Shall we?”

She nods silently, and the two of us make our way back to her office,

“I gotta say,” she says closes the door. “I really like that kid you sent.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he’s the strong quiet type,” she says as I take a seat at her desk.

A slow, deliberate smile spreads across her face.

“...And as you already know, I like that.”

I might not be the most observant man, but it’s clear to me that she’s referring to Josiah.

She walks around the desk and is about to take a seat before she suddenly changes her mind and instead walks over to a cabinet, removing a small dark blue bottle.

“Do you drink saké, Jaxon?”

“Er...no, sadly I don’t,” I say. “Unfortunately, I had too much of it at a club one night in New York. Not sure if it was the raw fish I had with it, or the saké, but to this day, I can’t drink it.”

“Ahh,” she chuckles. “I see. Whiskey it is then.”

“Whiskey is always a good option.”

With two bottles and two very different glasses in hand, Glow makes her way back to the desk and sits down.

“Something tells me that since you requested this meeting with me today,”

she sighs, pouring the drinks. “That you have news I’m probably not going to like.”

I inhale deeply, opening my mouth to reply, but Glow interrupts me before I can.

“...And I have news for you as well.”

Her eyes find mine briefly.

“Although I want to hear yours first.”

“Typically, I like to let the lady go first.”

“Well, I’m not typical,” she says, sliding the glass over to me. “And I want you to go first.”

I stare at her, momentarily stunned and somewhat impressed by her unconventional boldness, a quality that I have in very few of my subordinates.

And one I rarely oblige.

But this is Glow, and from the very beginning we’ve been somewhat unconventional.

“I have two pieces of news,” I say, taking the glass off the desk. “The first being that I don’t think we need to be as concerned about Agent Westwood as we previously were.”

“And why is that?” Glow asks, taking a sip of her saké from the small earthenware cup in her hand.

“Because he and Rachel Valentine are married.”

Glow freezes, her brown eyes widening above the cup still held in her hand.

“What...did you just say?”

“Adam Westwood has married Rachel Valentine,” I say, with a nod, taking a sip of the whiskey. “The mother of my child.”

“Holy shit,” she says, her jaw slack. “You’re serious.”

“Always.”

“How did...when...I...” Glow stutters, blinking rapidly.

“I don’t know. I don’t have any of the details, and to be honest, I don’t really want them,” I sigh. “But they’re both...in love it seems.”

Glow stares at me, shaking her head silently.

I take a deep breath.

“That being said, with him onside, he’s no longer a threat to us, or our operations.”

“How do you know that though?” Glow asks, narrowing her eyes at me. “I mean, he’s not in love with *you*.”

I chuckle to myself, sitting back in my chair.

“No, he’s really not,” I say, clicking my tongue.

“...Then do you worry he would try to bring you down in order to take Jessica from you?”

I shake my head.

“No,” I say, pressing my fingertips together. “Because he loves Rachel, and Rachel knows as well as I do, that not even Agent Westwood can protect Jessica the way I can. Having me alive, and in power, is the best option for everyone.”

Clearing my throat I shift in my chair, adjusting my tie.

“We just have some of the semantics to sort out on the personal side.”

This time Glow chuckles. “You mean co-parenting.”

I say nothing, taking another sip of my whiskey.

“Damn, Jaxon,” Glow snorts, shaking her head. “Of all the things I thought you could be here to tell me, I gotta say, that wasn’t one of them. But I guess you’re right, no bad news is good news I suppose.”

“Well, I didn’t say there *wasn’t* bad news,” I say, lowering my voice.

Downing the rest of my glass, my eyes find hers.

I watch as my words register in her eyes and the bemused smirk on her face falls.

“What do you mean?”

“The night before the Valentine Manor exploded, Rachel and I broke into Michael’s Dolar Domas,” I explain darkly.

“Oh shit,” Glow gasps.

“And aside from it being every bit the nightmare fuel you’d expect from Michael Valentine, and getting ourselves nearly blown up in the process,” I sigh. “We did happen to find something significant.”

Glow looks at me for a moment, curiosity written all over her expressive face. She then leans forward and pours us both another drink.

“Continue,” she whispers quietly.

“Antonio Luca has been working with Michael to traffic girls out of the city,” I say, sighing heavily.

“*What?*”

“From what I can tell, the two of them, with the financial backing of

Celeste Donahue, have been working to send girls overseas to Europe,” I continue. “From what I learned from Luca, Michael went around him forcing his hand.”

“Oh my God...”

“...Problem is,” I sigh. “Michael contacted La Fratellanza.”

“You’re sure about all of this?” Glow says quietly.

“Positive,” I nod, my voice low. “But because we stopped their shipment, there might be some...backlash. And they could very well expect us to honor the deal they struck with Luca and Michael.”

“Holy shit,” Glow gasps, pressing her hand to her chest.

“Now, we’re going to try and stop that from happening,” I say, sighing deeply. “But as I said, this is bigger than just us. La Fratellanza will expect the girls in time for their annual European auction, which will be near the end of the summer.”

“We cannot allow that to happen,” Glow snarls.

“No, we cannot,” I nod. “But we also can’t stop there.”

“What do you mean?”

“Denying the shipment won’t stop the spread. And the only way to stop an infestation is to scorch the nest,” I say, locking eyes with her.

“You want to stop the auction?” Glow asks.

“No,” I smile darkly, leaning forward. “I want to stop *all* their auctions.”

Glow stares at me.

“La Fratellanza though, Jaxon...” she says slowly. “They are dangerous.”

“So am *I*,” I growl. “And these fuckers went around me and made a deal with Michael Valentine. So, I plan to send a message back to them, and anyone like them, about what happens when a foreign mafia tries to invade *my* territory with their filth. So that the next bastard will think twice.”

She nods slowly, pressing her tongue against the back of her teeth.

“Alright, Don Supreme,” she smiles wickedly, a vindictive resolution shining in her eyes. “Where do I come in?”



“So, what do you think?” I ask, setting my empty whiskey glass down.
“Honestly.”

She leans forward in her chair, tapping a pen softly on the top of her desk and appraising me carefully.

“Honestly?” Glow finally whispers. “I think it’s one hell of a risk.”

Sighing heavily, I nod, lowering my eyes to the floor as my stomach twists.

Glow’s not wrong. It’s more than just a risk.

It’s a fucking *gamble*.

“...But,” Glow continues. “I also think that’s why it just might work.”

Instantly I look back up at her.

“Normally, I’d never consider something so...dangerous,” she says, narrowing her eyes at me. “But I’m starting to understand that’s my fatal flaw and mistaking my caution for weakness. And if we’re going to beat motherfuckers like these at their rigged little game, we have to start thinking outside the box.”

“Exactly. We have to adapt,” I say quietly.

I snort quietly to myself, as a realization hits me.

“What’s so amusing?”

“It’s just,” I say, shaking my head. “My wife said something similar to me a while ago. About Michael.”

“Did she now?” Glow says, smirking and a brow at me.

“She warned me not to underestimate Michael’s depravity,” I whisper, my voice lowering into a deep growl. “And I promised her I wouldn’t.”

This time a wicked smile spreads across her face.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” she snorts, collapsing back against her chair. “I reckon this just might be a first.”

“What first?”

“A Don Supreme with a strategic Regina by his side,” Glow says, batting her lashes at me. “And one he’s willing to *listen* to.”

This makes me chuckle.

“Yeah, well, on more than one occasion she’s been ten steps ahead of me,” I shrug. “Just took me a little while to catch on.”

“Not your fault, Sugar,” she smirks. “You are a man, after all.”

But as I go to respond, I see it:

Blood.

It trickles slowly from her left nostril...and from the corners of both of Glow's eyes.

However, she makes no movement to wipe it away, as if for some reason she can't feel the sensation of it dripping down her face.

"Jaxon?" she asks, scrunching up her face. "What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Glow, you're...bleeding," I say, the words choking in my throat.

"I'm what?"

She touches her cheek, smearing the blood before looking down at her fingers.

"What the hell?!" She gasps.

Her chair flies backwards and she jumps to her feet, quickly walking toward the mirror hanging on the wall.

Thankfully, I'm only seconds behind her as the moment she sees the bright red blood pouring from her nose and eyes she screams in terror...and instantly faints into my arms.

"Josiah!" I shout, knowing he's standing just outside the door.

The door swings open and both Deylan and Josiah come barreling into the room, screeching to a halt when they see Glow hanging limply in my arms.

"Sir!" Josiah gasps, rushing to my side. "What happened?!"

"I have no idea," I say as we gently lower Glow onto the floor. "One minute she was fine, the next she was..."

Josiah leans over her, feeling for her pulse.

"She's still breathing!" He says, looking up at me. "Should we call an ambulance?"

"No, on this side of town it will take too long," I say, shaking my head. "Where's the car?"

"It's right outside, Sir," Josiah says, checking Glow's pulse again. "Glow? Sweetheart, can you hear me?"

What the fuck just happened?!

But as I glance around the room, my eyes fall on the small bottle of saké that Glow had been sipping from, and deeply an unsettling thought floods my veins.

"Deylan, grab those bottles," I say pointing to the two bottles on the desk. "They need to come with us. But don't let your skin touch the liquid or the inside of the glasses."

“Yes, Sir!”

Josiah gently scoops Glow into his arms and the three of us quickly make our way down the hall.

“Oh my God!” One of the twin girls who had been speaking with us earlier gasps, throwing her hands over her mouth. “What happened to her?!”

But I ignore her, brushing past her and out the door.

Travis jumps from the driver’s seat and runs around to help assist Josiah with getting Glow loaded into the back seat.

The moment the doors close, the car lurches from the curb and I dial Levi.

“Hello, Sir—”

“Call Dr. Franklin and have him meet us over at St. Joseph as soon as possible,” I bark into the phone. “I think Glow’s been poisoned!”



Chapter Eleven

NATALIE

“Uggh! He’s just so damn stubborn sometimes, Ethan!” I huff, my feet stomping along the gravel of one of the gardens at Pace Manor. “It’s like he thinks he knows everything, and he won’t listen to anyone!”

But when I hear Ethan chuckling beside me, I blush momentarily feeling bad.

“Crap,” I sigh, closing my eyes. “I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not fair for me to complain to you about my frustrations with Jaxon. You know, considering he’s your son and all.”

“No, no,” Ethan says warmly. “If anything, I think *because* he’s my son, I know exactly how frustratingly stubborn he can be sometimes.”

I snort quietly to myself.

“However,” He continues gently. “I feel as if I should probably point out that, stubborn or not, he’s always looking out for you. And decision making is kind of in Jaxon’s blood. He’s been trained to imagine every scenario, playing out simultaneously, in an effort to try and stay one step ahead of his enemies.”

Well, shoot. I can’t argue with him there.

“I promise,” Ethan says, extending his arm to me as we step into the next tall green hedge maze. “Everything he does is for your safety.”

“I know,” I sigh quietly. “Jaxon is just doing his job.”

We continue walking the path in silence, although the thoughts inside my head are anything but quiet.

I’d caught Ethan about to go out for a walk just after Jaxon left for work, and accepted his offer to accompany him.

I don’t know what I expected Jaxon to say about Colton’s funeral, but I guess part of me should’ve expected it to be a hard no from my mafia don husband.

But what I can’t bring myself to say to Jaxon, or to anyone, is the fact that several times over the last few days, I’ve had vivid nightmares about seeing Colton’s head exploding.

As we round another corner, we come to stop in front of a small man-made pond. At the center is a fountain, and even though most of the pond is covered by a thin coating of ice, there is still a steady trickling of water pouring from a pitcher in the hands of a life-size carved statue of a woman in long flowing robes.

“Oh my goodness,” I breathe, stunned by the beauty in this hidden little oasis. “I didn’t even know this was here?”

“Many people don’t,” Ethan whispers playfully. “It’s why it’s my favorite spot. Would you mind if we stopped here for a minute?”

He motions with his cane to a small wooden bench by the edge of the snow-covered pond.

“No, not at all,” I smile.

“It’s quiet in here,” he says as we both take a seat. “And the hedge barriers block out a lot of the harsh gusts off the water.”

“I can see why you like it.”

“You should see it in the spring,” Ethan smiles. “Flowers everywhere, hummingbirds whizzing about.”

He leans toward me.

“...And if you’re trying to sneak away, I’ve learned that it’ll take people ages to find you in here.”

“Ha ha!” I chuckle. “Duly noted.”

My eyes return to the statue in the pond.

“Do you know who carved that?” I ask.

“She was a sculptor I commissioned from Greece,” Ethan says with a nod. “Well, technically I’d commissioned her *father*, but sadly the old man passed away before he could make the trip over. Thankfully, however, his daughter had been his apprentice for many years, and had the same immaculate craftsmanship.”

“It’s gorgeous,” I whisper. “Does the statue have a name?”

“Not officially, but I always called it Eizabeth at the well,” he says, his face softening. “I had it made after the death of my wife, and thankfully my brother allowed me to place it here.”

“Oh wow,” I whisper, my chest tightening. “That was very kind of him.”

Silence once again settles over the two of us as we sit.

“Natalie,” Ethan says gently. “I hope you know that what happened to Mr. Reynolds wasn’t your fault.”

How did he know I was just thinking about that?

“Is mind-reading on your list of superpowers, Ethan?” I say with a soft laugh, trying to fight the way my chest immediately tightens. “Or did Jaxon already talk to you?”

“No, but I know what guilt feels like,” he says quietly. “...And more importantly, what it *looks* like.”

Holy crap.

“When my wife and kids were killed in the car accident,” he says as he looks across the garden. “I blamed myself. Even though I knew that logically, I hadn’t been driving the car that killed her, in some way, I still felt like I had. As if it was her proximity to me, and my life here in the mafia, that sealed her fate.”

My heart breaks, hearing this man, still so clearly wrecked over the loss of his late wife...and knowing exactly why he’s choosing to tell me this story.

“I know that you blame yourself for what happened to Colton,” he says quietly. “But I promise you, it wasn’t your fault, Natalie.”

There’s no stopping the tears now, and I feel them welling in my eyes.

“It feels like it was,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “I was the one who told Michael that he didn’t *need* Colton.”

My lip trembles and I feel my body start to shake, all of my pent-up guilt over Colton’s death bubbling to the surface as the hot tears now streak down my face.

“...He was finally getting his life together,” I choke. “He was in a good place and had so many opportunities in front of him and he...he...”

But I can’t even finish the sentence.

The moment I feel him wrap his arm around me, I cave, collapsing into his shoulder. Ethan holds me while I sob softly for what feels like a small eternity, finally allowing myself to feel what I’ve been deliberately avoiding for a week.

Eventually, I’m able to collect myself, as Ethan hands me his handkerchief.

“I know you’re hurting,” he says quietly. “And I also know that being the empathetic soul you are, telling you not to feel a certain way would be like telling the tide not to come in. So, I won’t do that.”

I wipe my eyes, breathing in heavily as I straighten my back and run my fingers through my hair.

“Colton getting his life together was definitely a good thing, and from what you’ve told me, it sounds like he had at least had a few months of peace after rehab.”

“Yes,” I nod softly.

“However, Colton put himself in Michael’s path the night of the bachelor party when he involved himself with Black,” Ethan says gently. “He chose that. Just as he chose to come back to Chicago, despite being warned against it, multiple times, from multiple people...myself included.”

“What?”

I look over at him, seeing him leaning forward on his knees, staring into the frosty pond.

“I told him that coming back here could be dangerous,” he says quietly. “And I hate that I was right.”

Oh my God.

He turns to face me.

“But above all of that,” he says, his eyes sad. “At the end of the day, it was Michael who pulled that trigger. And Michael alone.”

I swallow hard, suddenly reminded of a similar conversation I had with my mafia don husband about carrying guilt over the loss of our son.

He looks back up at the statue.

“The mind will always try to explain the pain that the heart experiences. But unfortunately, sometimes there isn’t always a rational explanation. Sometimes there’s just heartache.”

His eyes are glassy, as if for just a moment he’s lost in a thousand memories that perhaps he’s had to bury too.

“I struggled for a long time after Eliza’s death to make sense of it all,” he says quietly. “And for a time, the only place I found any peace was here, walking through these gardens. That’s why I wanted to bring you here.”

Oh my...

He turns back to me, smiling warmly.

“I know you need time to reach that place for yourself, Natalie. But for what it’s worth, what happened with Colton truly wasn’t your fault,” he says pleadingly, once again placing his hand on mine. “And I promise that eventually, if you allow *yourself* some grace, you will find some peace with all of this.”

He’s right. I know he’s right.

I'm unsure of what to say, so instead I just throw my arms around him, hugging him tightly.

"Thank you, Ethan," I whisper, tears streaking down my cheeks. "Thank you."



Ethan and I sat by the pond casually talking for the next two hours.

However, apparently our disappearance caused Wesley to panic, and believing something had happened to us, my valiant security detail had scoured the property, eventually finding us by the pond.

"Mrs. Pace," he breathes heavily, nearly doubling over. "Thank God!"

"Oh, Wesley!" I say, feeling immediately guilty. "I'm so sorry! We didn't mean to make you worry!"

"We should probably head back inside," Ethan says, standing to his feet. "The last thing I need is to be responsible for the Regina Vestra getting pneumonia."

I roll my eyes, but nod in agreement, and the three of us set off back towards the house.

We've just stepped out of the hedge maze when I hear a soft buzzing sound overhead. Looking up I see a small drone, scanning the length of the property.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Pace," Wesley says with a grin. "It's just one of Levi's new drones."

He looks down, somewhat sheepishly.

"I, uh, may have asked him for help when I couldn't find you and Ethan."

"I'm sorry we made you worry, Wes—"

However, I'm unable to finish my sentence as I feel a wave of dizziness come over me out of nowhere.

"Mrs. Pace?" Wesley asks.

My eyes try to find him, but I'm hit with a flash of vertigo and suddenly I feel as if the world around me is spinning in circles.

Or maybe I'm spinning in circles?

“I...I...”

This is the last thing I remember, before I feel myself falling, and strong arms catching me before I hit the pavement.

And then the world goes dark.



Chapter Twelve

JAXON

“How is she, Doc?”

I keep my voice low and quiet, careful not to alarm any of the nurses fluttering about us in the hallway.

“Well, she’s a bit shaken up, and very disoriented,” Dr. Franklin replies. “But given how quickly you arrived, and how quickly we were able to treat her, I think she’s going to be alright.”

Although he says nothing, I hear Josiah breathe a sigh of relief, exhaling the breath he’d been holding from the moment we arrived at St. Joseph’s Hospital.

“Smart thinking to bring the bottle with you,” the Doctor continues. “We’ve taken some standard poison reversal measures for the time being, but I sent a sample of it over to Armaan. He’s working on deciphering it now.”

I nod slowly, rubbing my chin.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to test you as well, Mr. Pace?” Dr. Franklin asks. “Just to be sure?”

“I didn’t drink the saké,” I say darkly. “But I don’t understand. How could it have been poisoned? The bottle was unopened.”

“How do you know?”

“I watched her break the wax seal in front of me.”

“Wax?” Dr. Franklin asks.

“Yes, wax,” I snap, irritably. “It was what sealed the bottle.”

“Well, if that’s true, Mr. Pace, then theoretically,” he says, rubbing his chin. “One could puncture that wax seal, inject the poison, and reheat the wax to hide the evidence.”

Holy. Shit.

“When do you think that she’ll be able to return home?” I ask.

“Once we’re convinced her condition is stable, I’ll have her moved back to her residence,” Dr. Franklin nods, sensing my apprehension. “And I’ll stay with her until then.”

“Not alone,” I say, turning to Josiah. “I’m sure you’ll want to stay with

her as well?”

Josiah swallows, glancing back at Glow’s hospital room door.

“My loyalty is to you, Sir,” he says, though his emotional struggle is evident enough on his face.

I place my hand on his shoulder.

“I’m well aware of your loyalty, Josiah,” I say quietly. “As is everyone else. But I know you want to be here.”

He opens his mouth to respond but I cut him off.

“...And I need to know that Glow is safe,” I say, locking eyes with him. “Dr. Franklin too. If he’s gone this far, and gotten this close, God knows who Michael could send in here.”

Josiah stares at me a moment before lowering his eyes to the floor respectfully.

“Yes, Sir,” he says quietly. “And...*thank you*, Sir.”



An hour later I’m storming back into my office at the Jefferson.

“Travis, get Armaan on the phone and tell him that Dr. Franklin is going to be sending over some samples later on today. I want him to drop everything he’s doing and find out exactly what kind of poison was in that bottle,” I bark. “Charlie, call Levi and have him review all the footage from the Apparatus Room security cameras. I want to know everyone that has come and gone from that building in the last month. And someone find Ethan because I want—”

Suddenly the door to my office flies open and a very panicked Sally comes rushing into the room.

“Sir! Ethan White just called and said he’s been trying to reach you!” She says breathlessly. “It’s about Mrs. Pace!”



“Natalie?!”

I burst into the house with such force that I nearly knock the two gigantic solid oak doors off their hinges.

However, if I was expecting to ease some of my worry, I’m immediately disappointed.

Wesley paces in the hallway, Steph sits by the foyer fireplace, wiping her puffy red eyes with a tissue, and Deylan stoically stands in the corner, unable to look at me. Ethan, who’d already been making his way down the white marble stairs, crosses over to me.

“Ethan,” I breathe, my chest tightening. “What is it? What’s happened? Where’s Natalie?”

I glare at Wesley, snapping my head in his direction.

“I swear to fucking God, commander,” I shout angrily. “If anything has happened to my wife, I’ll tear your—”

“The doctor is in with her now,” Ethan says quietly, gripping my shoulder. “You should go up there and see her.”

“The *doctor*?” I choke, the words strangling with my throat. “What the fuck? Why? Why is the doctor here?”

“Jaxon,” he sighs. “Just try and remain calm and—”

But I’m already racing up the stairs, my heart pounding in my ears.

“Natalie!” I shout down the hall.

Twisting the handles, I throw open the doors, and see Dr. Franklin standing next to the bed, taking my wife’s blood pressure. Across the room, a silent Marta pours a glass of water.

My wife rests against the headboard of our bed, leaning back against the pillows. A white washcloth is folded across her forehead, and she looks concerningly pale. But the moment she sees me, her face brightens ever so slightly.

“Jaxon,” she smiles softly. “You came home.”

“Of course I did, Sweetheart,” I say, rushing across the room to her, sitting down on the bed. “What happened? Are you alright?”

“She’s alright, Mr. Pace,” Dr. Franklin says, gently removing the cuff from around Natalie’s arm. “Her blood sugar was low, as was her blood pressure. But it seems to have stabilized now.”

He looks up at Natalie.

“We’ll just have to keep an eye on it.”

“Keep an eye on *what*?” I snap, taking her hand in mine.

But he doesn’t answer me, apparently having some silent conversation with my wife in the stare shared between them.

Natalie breathes in sharply, and I suddenly feel her hand start shaking.

“Nat,” I whisper, stroking her cheek. “What’s going on?”

My mind is racing a million miles a minute.

Had there been an accident? Has she too been poisoned? Is she sick?

“Jaxon, I…” Natalie says, tears welling in her eyes. “I didn’t mean to worry you, and I hate for you to find out this way.”

“Natalie,” I breathe, closing my eyes, trying to reign in my spiraling thoughts. “Baby, whatever it is, we will figure it out, I promise. But will you please just tell me—”

“I’m pregnant.”

Time itself suddenly stands still.

I’m pretty sure I watched her mouth form the words, and being only inches away from her, I know there’s no way I could have misheard what she just said to me.

But the only thing I’m actually sure of is that I’m not breathing.

All I can do is stare at Natalie’s trembling bottom lip and her emerald green eyes sparkling in the glow of the fireplace.

“You’re…*pregnant*?”

The words escape me in a whisper, reverent as a prayer.

Slowly, a smile spreads across her face, and she nods, causing tears to fall down her cheeks.

Holy. Shit.

“You…you’re sure?” I stutter, blinking rapidly and staring down at her hand in mine.

She pulls it tightly to her stomach, pressing softly.

“A baby, Jax,” she whispers, her voice cracking. “Doctor Franklin and I think I’m nine or ten weeks along.”

My breathing stills, and warmth floods my veins. A complicated mix of

emotions explodes within my chest as the last eight months of memories begin flashing behind my eyes in vivid colors.

The joy I felt the first time Natalie had said these exact words to me, fueled only by my love for her and the excitement of the family I'd get to build with her and Jessica.

The crippling fear I'd battled, nearly every day, constantly worrying if I'd be strong enough to protect her from the dangers and darkness of my world.

And the devastating heartbreak we'd suffered when our first child was taken from us, and the agonizingly slow process of healing and acceptance we've endured since.

At times our joy, fear, and pain had swirled around us like a hurricane, threatening to drown us in its current, and shatter us in its ruthless chaos. But day by day those storm waters had receded, fading into the fabric of our lives as the two of us tried to heal together, without knowing for certain if this moment, right here, would ever happen for us again.

But now it *has*.

"Natalie..." My voice cracks. "A baby."

She says nothing, but then again, nothing needs to be said. Instead, she sits up, cupping my face in her hands and crushing her lips to mine, the tears on her cheek mixing with my own.

I pull away, pressing my forehead to hers, as the two of us hold each other tightly, whispering our love for one another.

"Congratulations, you two!"

Steph's voice echoes behind us, and I turn, seeing her leaning against the doorframe of the master bedroom, a playful smirk on her face.

"Now, tell me, was my performance convincing enough?"

"You're telling me you were *faking* those tears?" I ask, raising a brow at her.

"No, no," she winks. "Those tears were real. They were just happy tears. Not sad ones. A technicality. But I've been reliably told that even you embrace those from time to time."

I chuckle, shaking my head before turning back to Natalie.

"She knew before me?"

"Well, as I said it wasn't ideal," Natalie says, sheepishly, scrunching up her face. "And but when I fainted, she was almost as panicked as you were, and I guess she kind of, well... *pressured* Dr. Franklin into telling her."

“Pressured?” I ask, looking up at the doctor as he packs up his tools.

“More like arm-wrestled,” he mutters under his breath, shooting an unamused look at Steph.

“Really?”

“She was very persuasive,” he says, somewhat defensively. “I wasn’t sure I’d be leaving the house in one piece if I didn’t at least confirm it wasn’t something more serious.”

“...But we *are* sure that it isn’t something more serious, right?” I ask tentatively, glancing between my wife and the doctor. “I mean, you fainted, Nat. That seems like that should be a bit concerning, right?”

“Light-headedness is relatively normal in early pregnancy, and the drop in blood-sugar can happen for a variety of reasons,” Dr. Franklin says reassuringly. “I’ve already contacted Dr. Townsend. She’ll be following up on Monday to do more blood work and just monitor everything a bit more closely. For now, just drink plenty of fluids, and try to eat something small a few times a day.”

Seeing that he’s leaving, I kiss Natalie’s hand before standing and walking him to the door.

“Thank you, Doctor,” I say, extending my hand to him.

Shock briefly flashes across his face, as I’m sure Dr. Franklin can count on one hand the amount of times, I’ve actually thanked him for his services.

He smiles before grasping my palm, shaking it firmly.

“Congratulations to both of you,” he says warmly. “You’re already one a hell of a father. And you know, it’s kind of nice to deliver some good news for a change.”

I chuckle softly to myself as he steps outside.

“Is there anything I can get you from the kitchen, Mrs. Pace?” Marta asks with a smile.

“You know, I’d love some tea,” Natalie smiles.

But when I turn back to her, raising my brow, she rolls her eyes with a sigh.

“...And maybe some toast,” I add.

“Couldn’t agree more, Mr. Pace,” Steph says with a grin.

“Pregnant ladies need to eat. Now that the majority of my work is done here, all I’m going to need you to do is apologize to Wesley and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Apologize to Wesley?” Natalie asks, crossing her arms and shooting me a disapproving look. “Why? What did you do to him, Jaxon?”

“Nothing,” I scoff. “I didn’t touch him.”

“No, he just snapped at him when he thought that something might’ve happened to you,” Steph continues. “So now the kid is out here pacing and fidgeting, and it’s driving me crazy.”

“I’m not fidgeting!” I hear Wesley whisper forcefully from the other side of the door.

“Oh for fucks sake,” I groan, closing my eyes. “You know, it’s feeling a bit crowded in here. Could you all fuck off and give me a moment alone with my wife?”

“Shoo!” Marta barks at Steph, pushing her into the hallway. “You too, Mr. Lee. Mr. Pace isn’t strangling you today.”

She shoots me a polite smile before closing the door behind her, leaving me alone with Natalie.

I turn and walk back to the bed, climbing in beside her.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

“What on earth are you sorry for?”

“For making you worry,” she sighs, collapsing against my chest. “Now that I know what happened with Glow, I can only imagine where your head went.”

“You didn’t worry me,” I say, kissing her forehead. “Technically, Wesley did. So, if I have a bone to pick with someone sending me stroke-inducing text messages, and then refusing to answer my calls, it’s him.”

“Well, to be fair he couldn’t answer your calls because he was a little busy carrying me inside,” Natalie chuckles, threading her fingers in mine. “So, cut him a little slack.”

“We’ll see,” I grumble, squeezing her closer to me.

“How is Glow?” She asks, looking up at me.

“Alive. Which is a miracle all things considered.”

Silence settles over the two of us, and I sit with her somehow trying to reconcile everything that’s happened in the last twelve hours.

But one thought screams louder than the rest: Natalie is pregnant.

On one hand, I’m thrilled. I love the idea of growing our family together, but more important to me is the fact that I know this is something Natalie has wanted since we suffered the loss of our first. And I will forever want to give

her anything and everything her heart desires.

However, I can't deny that my chest tightens at the thought of the dangers a new baby could bring to our life.

While every don in existence is obsessed with legacy and the continuation of their bloodline, there's a dark duplicity to that process. Dons have to accept that their children will always be in danger. They can be seen as bargaining chips—either by another clan seeking to secure a marriage alliance, or by those seeking to secure power and control.

And some clans, even within our syndicate, have even been known to stoop to some despicable means to acquire an heir. Their hope being to ransom them off...or at the very least eliminate the competition in order to pave the way for a different family to have their moment in the sun.

But regardless, the heirs of Dons are always considered a liability to some extent.

Natalie has already suffered so much. And survived so much. The only thing I want to do is protect her, and the very last thing I want to do is allow anyone, or anything to hurt her again.

No. I will not allow that.

I squeeze her a little tighter, inhaling the scent of her.

"We have so many threats," she whispers, echoing my own silent thoughts. "On so many different fronts. I'm...I'm sorry. I feel bad now that I gave you grief earlier today about Colton. Knowing everything I know now...well, I can at least see why you didn't want to cause any more noise."

"Nat, don't apologize," I whisper back, pressing my lips to the top of her head. "I was the one in the wrong today. I was so focused on keeping the status quo, I forgot my humanity. And I forgot that this person was someone who meant a lot to you for a period of your life."

I clear my throat and take a deep breath.

"...Which is why I've decided to find a way to communicate Colton's death to his family, and when and if there is a funeral for him, I will take you. You have my word."

She turns slightly to look up at me.

"You...you mean that?" She chokes out, tears welling in her eyes. "You'd give me that?"

I smile, before stroking a strand of hair back behind Natalie's ear.

"Sweetheart, I will always give you everything that is within my power to

give you,” I whisper gently. “I could never deny you anything. Especially when it’s something that gives you peace.”

Gently she places her hand on top of mine and brings it to her lips, kissing it softly.

“Thank you, Jaxon,” she smiles, a single tear rolls slowly down her cheek.

After wiping it with my thumb, I then lean in and kiss her softly.

“Thank you,” I reply. “For not being afraid to tell me when I’m wrong, and for helping me make the right choice.”

Natalie opens her mouth to say something but before she can, there is a rapid knock at the door.

It’s the kind of knock that tells me something is wrong.

“Enter.”

Charlie opens the door, the worried expression on his face instantly making my stomach flip.

“What is it?” I ask. “What now?”

“Sir,” he says, clearing his throat. “I’m so sorry to disturb you, but... well...you’re going to want to see this.”

He swipes the remote for the flatscreen and presses the button.

“Businessman Antonio Luca has been found dead this morning in his West Chicago Estate,” the reporter says solemnly as the camera pans to the smoldering remnants of the Luca mansion.

“What the fuck?” I say, my jaw dropping.

“We’re unsure of the details right now, but we have confirmed that around nine this morning, an explosion rocked this quiet little neighborhood. A neighbor has come forward claiming that they smelled natural gas while walking their dog this morning. Although the alarms immediately alerted first responders, by the time they arrived this historically beautiful mansion was a blazing inferno. Unfortunately, Mr. Luca, his wife Cherise, and their young son Anthony, along with several household staff, are all suspected casualties of this horrific tragedy.”

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

“Jax?” Natalie whispers. “Is that...who I think that is?”

But I can’t respond, my entire body feels frozen in place.

Of two things I am certain:

This was no accident.

...And very soon I suspect we will be hearing from La Fratellanza.



Chapter Thirteen

NATALIE

“The coverup is always worse than the crime, Natalie.”

That’s what my father always used to say.

Well, to be fair, I only really remember him saying it to me once when I was seven years old.

Despite knowing I wasn’t supposed to play with my mother’s makeup as a child, I still found myself sitting at her vanity, playing with the makeup brushes, and pretending I was a grown up.

But one day, while my parents were out to dinner with friends, and the disaffected teenager in charge of babysitting me sat tangled up in our landline, I picked up one of the forbidden bottles I’d seen my mother use hundreds of times.

However, almost as if it knew I wasn’t supposed to be touching it, the bottle slipped from my hands, crashed onto the floor, and spilled out all over the carpet.

The dark *green* carpet.

Seven-year-old me panicked. I rushed to my parents bathroom and grabbed a hand towel and began furiously trying to rub out the stain. But to my horror, all it did was make the stain bigger, and worse.

So, instead I scooped up my towel, shut the door, and went straight to my room where I hid the evidence in my toy box.

When my mother came home, I was already in bed, but I wasn’t asleep.

No, I was laying there, staring at the ceiling feeling guilty.

Or at least I was after I heard my mother scream, cry, and then call the teenage babysitter and accuse her of the makeup mess in her bedroom, firing the poor girl on the spot.

However, the next morning, when my dad came to wake me up for school, he saw it all over my hands, and immediately knew what happened. And when he asked me for the truth, I simply burst into tears and confessed my horrible crime.

“The only mistake you made,” I remember him saying calmly. *“Was that*

you didn't tell the truth. It was an accident, but instead of being honest, you tried to cover it up. The coverup is always worse than the crime, Natalie. You should always try to tell the truth."

For the most part, my dad was right, and I've tried to live by that logic for most of my life.

But I've also learned, that everyone once in a while, a little white lie can be kinder.

Or in the case of the mafia vs. murdered ex-fiancé, a big gray lie can be much kinder, and the crime far worse than the cover-up.

True to his word, Jaxon came up with a solution to rectify the Colton situation. And while it was kinder, it certainly wasn't any easier. In fact, it was definitely far more work to make up a story as to how Colton died, rather than just tell them the truth.

But I knew they couldn't handle it. And I also knew that an inquiry right now into this gigantic mess, is the very last thing any of us needed to deal with.

So, we committed to our story.

Levi hacked into Colton's phone, sending a text and email to his parents telling them that he'd won a sweepstakes, and been gifted a two-week, all expenses paid, trip across Europe with two of his friends. The email stated that signal would be scarce, but he would keep in touch via text and email every day to let them know where he was.

Alexei was a whiz with photoshop, using some of Colton's old photos spliced into photogenic backgrounds.

With state-of-the-art voice-matching technology and some remote VPN wizardry, Levi was even able to make a brief phone call to Colton's parents and leave a voicemail. Given that a mother or father would likely be quick to recognize their own child's voice, or point out inconsistencies in a phone conversation with an imposter, Levi specifically made a point to call at a time when we knew neither of them would be home. He layered a static feature on top of the voicemail, giving the effect of the signal cutting in and out.

This way, it hopefully put their minds at ease that their "son" had at least called once while on his trip, but sadly had bad cell service.

However, the real struggle became what horrific end Colton was going to meet in Colorado.

Although Colton's body had thankfully been removed from the Valentine

Manor mere minutes prior to Michael's bomb detonating, the problem was that no matter how you spliced it, half of his skull was missing. It was a detail that would be too hard to explain away in a simple car accident, or fire. And although it would certainly have been believable to just tell Colton's parents that he'd fallen *back* into drugs and got mixed up with some violent characters in a new town, it didn't feel right.

Yes, Colton had been a real douche-canoë to me when we were together, and especially at Ryan's wedding. But as I've learned in the last year, sometimes people can get their lives together, and Colton had spent six months getting clean and trying to repair some of the damage he'd caused.

And that was how I wanted to remember him.

So, in the end, the story that we decided to tell the Reynolds, was that their son had unfortunately been the victim of a natural gas explosion. And with the help of a debt-ridden landlord, desperately eager to collect on his rental property's insurance policy, the scene was set so perfectly that even the police wrote it off as a true accident.

Which also helped in convincing the Reynolds of the same.

And while losing a child is never easy at any age, when Jaxon and I attended Colton's celebration of life service a month after his death, it seemed as if Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds had come to accept the news of their son's "tragic accident."

Somehow, we'd found a way to cover up our giant elaborate mess, and not destroy Colton's parents in the process.

"Thank you for taking me today," I say quietly, taking Jaxon's hand as the two of us exit the highway into the city. "I know how much work that was for you and your team. And I just want to tell you how much I appreciate it. And you."

Gently he lifts my hand to his lips, kissing it softly.

"This might sound crazy, but I'm actually glad we did it this way," he says, placing his hand back on my thigh.

"Really?" I ask, smiling up at him. "Even though it was for Colton's parents and even though it was a lot of extra work?"

As we pull back into the valet at the Jefferson he throws the car in park, and immediately leans over the seat, pressing his lips to my neck.

"I hope you know that everything I do, I do for *you*, Natalie. Even if it's just to make you smile," he says, kissing my earlobe and impulsively making

my thighs clench together. “And I also hope you know by now, that I’m always more than willing to put in any extra work that you require, Mrs. Pace.”

Holy crap.

I breathe shakily, as he kisses down my jaw before finding my lips.

“Sure you don’t want to go upstairs to the penthouse and let me put in a few hours before your meeting with the Benefit Board?” He says, his voice husky and deep. “Because you know, I’m more than willing to punch my timecard, for you Baby Girl.”

He bites his bottom lip, winking at me playfully.

“Oh my God,” I giggle, pushing him off me. “That might be the cheesiest line I’ve ever heard. Don’t quit your day job, Mr. Pace.”

One of the valet guys opens the door for me and I step out of the car.

“Afternoon, Ben!” I say, greeting the elderly valet manager with a smile. “How’s it going?”

“Feeling young and full of life, Mrs. Pace!” Ben smiles. “How about you?”

I smile, touching my stomach.

“You know, I’d say I have to agree.”

“Congratulations by the way! I saw the announcement in The Tribune. So happy for you both.”

“Thank you, Ben,” Jaxon says, appearing beside me and slipping his hand around my waist.

Looking up at him I can see the famously frigid Jaxon Pace fighting a smile.

God, I love seeing him so happy.

“Sweetheart?”

He moves me forward toward the double doors of The Jefferson’s lobby.

“You know, returning to our previous conversation...”

“Oh, Lord,” I laugh quietly, stepping up to the counter “You’re really not going to let this go, are you?”

“Morning, Mrs. Pace,” Sally says with a smile, handing me an envelope. “Here are those reports you requested.”

“Thank you, Sally!”

“...And here is the coffee that you sent out for, Mr. Pace,” Sally says, producing the signature blue cardboard cup from Roast.

“Thank you, Sally,” Jaxon says, taking a sip, without looking away from me.

“Also, Ethan phoned just a little while ago, and told me to tell you he’s stuck in a bit of traffic, but that he’s reserved the court for your racquetball game.”

“Reserved the court?” Jaxon scoffs, scrunching up his face. “Doesn’t he know that I own the fucking court?”

“Erm, yes, Sir,” Sally says with a polite smile, before flagging down one of the bellmen. “I’m sure he does.”

As she walks away to deliver a message, I playfully slap my arrogant mafia husband on the chest.

“You’re such a snob sometimes,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“Yes,” he smirks, biting his lower lip. “Why, yes, I am. And circling back to your little comment about my day job...”

“You know, I do have a meeting this morning,” I tease.

“I’m starting to wonder if perhaps you don’t understand what my day job actually is.”

Without warning he steps forward and pulls me flush against him, threading his fingers up into my hair and landing a bruising kiss on my lips.

“Because I think if you knew what I actually do,” he growls against my lips. “You’d find me a bit more scary.”

Kissing him back I smile.

“Oh, don’t you worry, I know exactly what you do, Jaxon Pace,” I breathe, batting my lashes up at him. “But perhaps it’s you who hasn’t figured out that maybe I like you *because* you’re a little scary.”

And just before turning on my heel and walking off toward the ballrooms, I watch with satisfaction as Jaxon’s jaw drops ever so slightly.

Gotcha, Don Supreme.



I’m walking down the hallway from the ballrooms when I see a sight that instantly surprises me.

Rachel Valentine. In the flesh.

“Rachel?” I ask, walking over to her. “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she sighs. “Just going stir crazy in that penthouse. I was worried for Adam’s safety.”

“Why?”

“Because if the man asked if I was okay one more time, I was going to yeet him over the balcony like a vacuum cleaner.”

“Like a vacuum cleaner?” I ask, raising my brows.

She rolls her eyes and waves her hand.

“Never mind. You had to have been there.”

Even though I don’t get the reference, I can’t help but chuckle.

“Well, I have some time before we meet again for the gala meeting,” I sigh, silently dreading it already. “I’ll walk with you. Unless of course you want space, that is.”

“You’re fine,” she shrugs. “As long as you don’t ask me to talk about my feelings.”

“Consider it moot.”

We take the long way back through the hotel.

And while I don’t get her to talk about her feelings, I do manage to get her to tell me about how her Adam came to be, and how they were able to work through their past together.

She’s just finished telling me about his surprisingly romantic proposal, when the two of us round the corner and see Amaryllis talking with my husband in the hallway leading to the main ballroom.

Thankfully, I manage to pull Rachel back around the corner before either of them notices us.

“...As I was saying, I tried explaining to your, um, *wife*,” she says, clearing her throat. “The children’s hospital always gets the full proceeds.”

“That bitch!” I growl under my breath.

“Oooh, what bitch?”

“Some rich snobby *girl* who didn’t like my answer about diversifying the charity proceeds this year,” I say, peeking back around the corner. “So now she’s trying to go above me with Jaxon.”

“Who is she?”

“Amaryllis Ward,” I whisper back.

“No shit,” Rachel snorts. “I know her.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, she’s a trust fund clout-chaser,” Rachel grumbles. “And her dad is even more of a scumbag. He owns a restoration company, that’s got a reputation for fucking people over after a disaster. The dude’s been cited for fraud and tax evasion nearly every year he’s been in business.”

“Holy shit.”

“I never liked that girl,” Rachel sneers, looking past me down the hall.

“Yeah, we don’t exactly get along either,” I mutter under my breath.

“Wouldn’t mind tossing her over a balcony.”

Rachel chuckles to herself.

“That bad, huh?” she snorts. “Well, I don’t have anything nice to say about her. To be honest, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve been defrauding Jaxon every year.”

“Is that true?” I ask tentatively.

She nods.

“This is one of those rare occasions where the truth is too juicy to lie about.”

For a moment I feel a smile tugging at my lips, that is until I turn back and see Amaryllis slip her hand on my husband’s chest.

Then all I see is red.

“I’d expect you to let most shit go,” Rachel whispers in my ear. “But *that* cannot stand.”

I watch as Jaxon steps back, politely withdrawing from her unwanted touch.

“And what would you have me say?” I whisper back. “Don’t touch my husband.”

“Yes! Say that. Say whatever the fuck needs to be said to make that bitch, and every bitch like her come to fucking heel, Natalie,” Rachel continues quietly. “There are a lot of women like her in Chicago. Women who think their money and influence give them free access to whatever or whomever they want. They need to fear you, or they will never respect you.”

I turn to face her, finding her honest intentions written on her face.

“Trust me on this,” she says softly, before looking back up at Amaryllis and Jaxon.

I stare at her, unable to think of anything to say, still mildly stunned by her candidness.

She grabs my shoulders firmly.

“He chose you to be Regina,” she whispers urgently, before slowly turning me to face them. “But don’t just accept that power from Jaxon, take it. Own it. And be the fucking Regina.”

“Right, but she doesn’t know about that part of our lives—”

“Who the fuck cares,” she snaps. “She knows your husband has money and power, and she’s attempting to go around you to get what she wants.”

Fuck me. Rachel has a point.

I am the Regina.

And as I watch this woman once again place her hand on my husband’s arm I something inside me snaps.

She has crossed the line. And I’m about to teach her a lesson.

With a fire burning in my stomach, I approach the two of them.

“Ah, there you are,” I say, slipping my hand around my husband’s chest and sliding in next to him. “I was just coming to find you.”

“Hello, Αγαπημένη,” Jaxon says with a relieved grin, gently kissing me on the lips.

“Ooh, that’s pretty,” Amaryllis says, crossing her arms and pressing her tongue behind her teeth. “What does it mean?”

Neither Jaxon nor I say anything.

I’m not gracing that question with an answer.

Instead, I turn to my mafia husband and smile.

“What were you two discussing?”

“The annual gifting,” Amaryllis says, laughing nervously. “I was just updating him on what the hospital board had said to me.”

“Interesting. If that’s true, then why didn’t you didn’t mention anything about it in our meeting this morning?”

My question is pointed, and my tone is frigid.

“I...erm...well, I...” she stammers, her cheeks turning red as she tucks a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear.

“...Because you thought that you could go around me and speak directly to my husband about things, I’ve already clarified for you, correct?”

Amaryllis says nothing, and neither does Jaxon though I feel his arm tighten around me gently.

“Let’s get one thing straight here, Miss Ward,” I say, narrowing my eyes at her. “This function is a joint venture with my husband and I, however, I am

the one in charge. And I have already explained to you how we plan to go about the gifting this year. And there will be no deviation.”

“Natalie, I was just—”

“It’s *Mrs. Pace*, to you,” I growl. “And if you try to circumvent me one more time, I will have you removed from my board. And then I will contact the hospital administrative staff as well.”

She gasps, as I step closer to her and lower my voice.

“...Since apparently,” I growl. “You can’t keep your hands to your fucking self.”

Amaryllis blinks, inhaling sharply.

“Mrs. Pace,” she says quietly. “If I’ve offended you, I’m sorry.”

I say nothing, slowly looking her up and down.

“I...I promise I won’t be a problem for you,” she whispers.

“Good,” I smile. “Go and tell the group we are done for the day.”

Turning back to my husband, I gently place my hand on my stomach.

“I think I’d like to go home now,” I say quietly, shooting my husband an incendiary look. “The *baby* is making me tired.”

Jaxon grins wickedly, his eyes slowly canvassing my body.

“Absolutely.”

The three of us stand there in silence, until I turned to a stunned Amaryllis.

“You may go now.”

She nods quietly before practically bolting down the hall.

My husband’s hands wrap around me, pulling me to him for a deep kiss.

“Mrs. Pace,” he growls against my lips. “That was...hot.”

I stare up into his beautiful empyrean blue eyes, placing my hand on his chiseled jaw.

“You,” I whisper, my breath becoming ragged. “Are mine. And I want to have you.”

“What the lady wants.”



The second the elevator closes Jaxon, and I are tearing at each other's clothes. He rips open my blouse just as I free his cock from his trousers.

We haven't even reached the penthouse when he picks me up and presses me against the elevator wall, slamming his throbbing cock inside me.

"Jax," I breathe.

"You are the sexiest woman on earth, Natalie," Jaxon grunts, thrusting harder into me. "And I cannot get enough of you."

Over and over, he presses into me, filling me completely.

And when the elevator dings, signaling our arrival in the penthouse, Jaxon still refuses to release me.

Still buried inside of me, he carries me to the little table in the foyer. Keeping one arm firmly around my waist, he shoves the vase sitting on top of it, sending it smashing to the floor.

He places my ass against the table and lays me down, continuously slamming himself in and out of me.

"Nat," he groans as I moan loudly. "You're so fucking tight I'm...I'm... shit I'm going to cum."

I sit up, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him hard as I feel his cock swelling within me.

"Do it," I snap breathlessly. "This pussy is yours, Mr. Pace."

He throws his head back just as my own orgasm wracks my body.

"...Just like this cock," I whisper, pressing my forehead to his, and savoring every second. "Is mine."

Jaxon groans one last time, emptying himself inside me. Seconds pass with him holding me closely, the only sound filling the penthouse is the sound of us panting.

"All of me is yours, Natalie," he breathes. "Now and always."

"Have you had enough, Mr. Pace?" I say, biting my lip.

A wicked grin spread across Jaxon's face.

"Never."

"Good," I smile darkly. "In that case, come with me."



Chapter Fourteen

JAXON

Natalie takes me by the hand, pulling me into the bedroom.

Once inside she shoves me backwards, causing me to fall back on the bed.

She quickly undoes my tie and whips it from my neck.

“Give me your hands,” she says breathlessly.

I stare at her, stunned by her boldness.

But I’m certainly not going to fucking stop her.

“Yes ma’am,” I grin, licking my bottom lip.

She hastily wraps the tie around my wrists before pressing against my chest, forcing me to lie back against the bed.

“I don’t know what’s come over you, Mrs. Pace,” I snort softly. “But I gotta say I like it.”

“I’m just taking what’s mine,” she growls, climbing on top of me.

Holy. Shit.

“Nat...” I groan, feeling her lower her pussy on my cock. “Fuck.”

She steadies herself, laying her hand against my bare chest, and rolling her hips slowly against me.

“Jesus Christ...Natalie,” I groan, the sensitivity making me shudder as she throws her head back, grinding against me hard.

Part of me is sure I’m dreaming, as I’ve rarely seen this side from her. But hearing her subtle little moans as she continues to ride me has me melting beneath her.

“Oh God,” she groans, throwing her head back.

“That’s it, Baby Girl,” I growl, feeling her tremble. “Take it.”

She grinds against me harder, her perfect nipples erect.

“Fucking hell, Nat,” I breathe, her climbing rhythm making my heart pound in my chest. “You’ve gotten really good at that.”

“You...are...mine...Jaxon Pace,” she whispers breathlessly, grinding her hips down with every word.

“Yes, I fucking am.”

Realizing how close she is to climax, I pull my feet up on the edge of the

bed, giving me a deeper angle inside of her deliciously tight pussy.

“Oh God, Jax!” She moans. “I’m...I’m going to...Shit! I’m cumming!”

I feel her pussy contracting around me.

She slows her rhythm, throwing her head back again, and exposing her neck to me.

Perfect.

Wriggling out of the loose knot she tied around my hands I wrap my hand around her throat. In one motion I pull her down and swing my hip over hers and pinning her beneath me.

“Oh, Naughty girl,” I growl wickedly, squeezing her breast in my hand and sucking hard on her nipples before running my tongue up her neck to her ear. “You’re going to do a lot of that. But now it’s *my* turn.”



“Boomslang venom.”

“What?” I ask, looking up from the report on my desk and seeing my laboratory technician, Armaan, standing before me.

“Boomslang?” He repeats, glancing over at Ethan who stands with his arms crossed in the corner. “You’ve never heard of them?”

“Clearly not,” I growl.

“Oh! Oops!” He stumbles nervously. “Well, it’s a snake, you see, endemic to South Africa.”

“What about it?”

“It has a highly potent venom, the effects of which are some of the strangest and most deadly in the world,” he says, rattling on excitedly.

“And why is this—”

“It was one of the components I found on the bottle of saké that Dr. Franklin sent me,” he rattles off quickly. “When I heard about the hemorrhaging Glow experienced, you know, where she was bleeding from the nose and eyes like that?”

“Yes,” I say slowly, my jaw flexing. “Trust me, I remember it vividly.” Armaan’s eyes go wide, evidently sensing my frustration.

“Right, um, well...I realized that was interesting because *that* is a very specific symptom. And while there are hundreds of thousands of different poisons in the world, that kind of a symptom is somewhat...unique.”

I glare at him, actively fighting my impulse to strangle him outright for suggesting that what happened to Glow was “unique” or “interesting.”

“Anyways, I had an aunt who lived in Cape Town. I used to visit her as a teenager every summer with my mother,” Armaan continues. “I’ve heard stories about how there are markets there where one can find just about anything. Including poisons.”

Ethan and I lock eyes, his concern reflecting my own.

“I see. Is that all?”

“Uh...no, Sir. Not entirely,” Armaan stutters nervously, before gingerly reaching forward and flipping the page on the report that sits directly in front of me. “As you can see here, I also found a partial fingerprint on the bottle.”

“A print?” I say, relief suddenly flooding my veins. “That’s good right? Levi can probably—”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up, though, Sir,” Armaan says sheepishly. “It’s only a partial. There’s no other indicators about the owner. And unfortunately, until you have at least some idea of the source and can narrow down some of the variables, he’ll be looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Well, that’s fucking disapp...” I start to say before my voice trails off. “Wait a minute, did you say South Africa?”

“Um...yes?” Armaan says sheepishly. “Boomslangs are naturally exclusive to that region.”

“Ethan,” I say, turning to him. “We need to get back to the Manor. And I need an Alpha Squad briefing.”



“Driver,” Dakari Nam says nonchalantly as he pulls his massive frame inside the vehicle. “Take me home.”

The vehicle pulls away from the club, and sets off down the street. It continues in silence with a drowsy and heavily intoxicated South African

man drifting in and out of sleep in the backseat.

However, when the car makes an abrupt right turn down an alley, and into an abandoned strip mall parking lot, even the inebriated Nam wakes back up.

“Oiy!” He snaps. “Did you hear me? Take me home.”

But again, the car doesn’t move.

He lifts his giant fist and bangs angrily on the glass.

“Hey! Fuckhead! I don’t pay you to ignore my—”

“Evening Darkari,” I say, turning around in the driver’s seat to face him.

“Mr. Pace,” he gasps, his face paling. “What are you...”

“You really should be careful getting into cars with strangers, Dakari,” I shrug, pulling on the bottom of my left glove. “Especially on this side of town.”

“You gave me quite a fright,” he laughs nervously. “If you wanted a meeting, you could’ve just said so.”

“You’ve just been so busy Nam, I’ve barely seen you.”

“I’ve been in South Africa,” he says, starting to sweat. “Sorting out marriage proposals for my daughter.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Yes,” he sighs, visibly starting to relax.

“Has the young Daliah found love so soon?”

“No no,” he says, shaking his head. “She just has too much of her mother in her. She’s got opinions about things that shouldn’t concern her. So, it’s time I find her a husband so she can be reminded of her place in the world again. Becoming a wife and mother of her own will give her life some meaning.”

“Forgive me, but I thought her life had meaning?” I ask, hearing him fruitlessly fiddle once more with the locks in the backseat. “She’s your daughter, and your only heir.”

“Jaxon, be sensible,” Dakari chuckles to himself. “You know that can never be. A woman clan leader? That’s a joke.”

From the rear-view mirror, I see him roll his eyes, before once again fruitlessly fiddling with the door handles.

“Well, considering those are your sentiments toward women,” I say, tightening my grip on the steering wheel. “I wonder if you have anything to do with the attacks that have been propagating all over the city?”

“What attacks?” He asks indignantly, before scoffing quietly to himself.

“Jaxon, my friend, if you want to talk, we can always talk. Just let me out of here.”

“Women being carved up, or sold off to foreign emissaries,” I say, my eyes now finding his in the mirror. “...Or poisoned.”

His face is set, but his eyes flash in the light of the car console, reflecting his true panic.

“What?” He laughs. “Of course not! I know nothing about such things!”

But he does.

Nam is lying to me.

“I’m going to ask you one time to reconsider, Dakari,” I say darkly.

“Before this really gets ugly.”

“Jaxon,” he says calmly, but even I catch the way his hand casually frees the button on his jacket, making his gun more accessible.

“I also would warn you not to fire a gun back there,” I say, trying to hide my wicked grin. “All of the glass is bulletproof.”

He pauses a moment, impulsively looking over at the thick sturdy glass.

“Came in handy when a group of heavily armed gunman attacked the police chief and I outside of St. Stephens,” I smile. “Nearly blew my head off. Strange though, that most of the weapons recovered with the corpses had the serial numbers soldered off.”

I watch as his eyes widen.

“Funny,” I say, pulling out my own pistol and holding it up. “That this one is exactly the same. The same quality and caliber that our warehouse produces...our *joint* warehouse.”

“What are you trying to say?” He chuckles nervously. “You’re not actually suggesting that *I* had something to do with that attempt on your life?”

His eyes hold mine once more before he reaches into his pocket, searching desperately for his phone.

But he won’t find it.

As Don Supreme, it’s my job to know the weaknesses of both my enemies...and my supposed allies. Dakari’s weakness is arrogance, and had he been paying any attention when he left the club, he might’ve noticed that the second bodyguard in his detail tonight wasn’t a man he’d seen before.

It was Deylan, who conveniently managed to swipe the device from his pocket.

“What the fuck?” He murmurs, now checking all of his pockets frantically.

“Problem?” I ask, disingenuously.

“Mr. Pace, look, there’s obviously been some sort of miscommunication,” he says, obviously sensing his impending predicament. “Why don’t you let me out of the car, and we can talk about it, man to man.”

“And why don’t you answer my question.”

“It’s a ludicrous question!”

“I see,” I say, turning to look out my window with a nod.

All of a sudden there is a pounding on the back of the car, the sound of someone climbing up onto the roof.

“Mr. Pace! What is going on?” Dakari shouts. “There’s...there’s someone on the fucking roof!”

“Yes, there is,” I growl. “A viper.”

Pressing the remote for the sunroof, it slowly begins to retract. However, before it has barely opened three inches there is a very loud hissing sound, and a soft thud.

“Holy fuck! It’s a fucking snake!”

Dakari’s unusually high-pitched voice reverberates inside the car as he throws himself against the corner trying to get away.

I press the button on the console and the sunroof slides closed once more.

Normally, the idea of having a deadly pit viper in my vehicle would concern me, however tonight my car has been outfitted specifically to prevent the slithery little death rope from sliding underneath the front seats and becoming a hazard.

He’s still shouting when the passenger side door opens and Gabriel steps into the car.

“Oh my fucking God!” Dakari screams, as the hissing animal lunges at him. “It’s a fucking snake!”

“No, as I said it’s a viper,” I say with a shrug.

“Ahhhhh!” Dakari squeals loudly as it lunges at him again.

“You would know it as a Fer-de-lance, but where I’m from the people call it *muerte de terciopelo*,” Gabriel says, glancing over at me with a wicked grin. “Or velvet death.”

Dakari once again yanks his gun from his holster, and pulls the trigger. But even this doesn’t afford him any protection, as the light-fingered

Deylan was also able to switch out his pistol for one with an empty clip.

“I’d suggest you calm down, *esé*,” Gabriel sighs. “Because otherwise she’s going to—”

It’s then that we hear the snake hiss once more before Dakari lets out a blood curdling scream.

“It bit me! The fucker bit me!”

“Ahh,” I say, smiling over at Gabriel. “How much time should we give him?”

“A man his size?” he says, glancing into the backseat. “Thirty minutes.”

“*Thirty minutes?!*” Dakari exhales.

“Give or take.”

“Oh my fucking God! Pace!” Dakari says, frantically yanking at the door handle. “Let me out of here! Let me the fuck out of this car damnit!”

He smashes his elbow hard into the glass of the window, but the strong bullet proof glass doesn’t budge an inch.

“As I said, I suggest you calm down,” Gabriel cautions again. “That time will be cut in half if he bites you a second time.”

“Oh my fuck!”

I hold up the vial in my hand.

“This right here is the anti-venom,” I say, listening to Dakari finally stop struggling. “Something that I promise is in short supply here in the US.”

“What do you want?!” Dakari pleads, pressing himself as far away from the snake as he can possibly get.

“The truth,” I snap forcefully. “And since I know you like to try and beat around the bush, I figured this would speed things up a bit.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know!” Dakari breathes. “Anything at all!”

“Were you behind the hit on the Police Chief and his wife?”

Even from the front seat I can hear him sigh, as he cradles his rapidly swelling arm.

“Tick-tock, Nam,” I shrug, shaking the vial of antivenom in my fingers.

“Indirectly!” He finally says. “It was Michael’s plan, I just provided the men and the munitions.”

“Pretty direct if you ask me,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him. “And pretty convenient that those weapons could be tied to me, should the right people ever come sniffing.”

“Pace! Look! I...I...I wanted to expand my business, okay?” Dakari winces, his brow now dripping with sweat. “And everyone knows you’re against joining the sex trade.”

“For good fucking reason!” I growl.

“Michael approached us, yes,” he continues.

“Who the fuck is “us?”

“Luca, Xiang’s father, and myself. He promised ties to the European trade routes, saying they would be harder to trace and double the profits.”

“And Glow Bordeaux?” I snap. “Did he have you poison her bottle of saké as well?”

“What?”

“Don’t get coy on me now, Nam,” I hiss. “You’re running out of time, remember?”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!”

“Oh, come on!” I laugh sarcastically. “Boomslang venom? Hardly a lot of places around the world where *that* can be harvested.”

“Yes, I acquired the poison,” Dakari pants heavily, his eyes starting to sag. “But not for Michael.”

“Then for who?!”

“A woman,” Dakari groans. “A Japanese woman.”

All the blood freezes in my veins.

“What?”

“She...approached me,” Dakari winces once again, starting to cough. “She paid me for it.”

“What was her name?” I demand.

But Dakari cannot answer, as he is now coughing heavily and grasping at his neck.

Gabriel looks at me, and I nod, understanding that our time is up.

From his suitcoat he produces a syringe and quickly plunges the needle into the vial, drawing out the liquid.

He steps from the car, and opens the back passenger door, before easily collecting his pet viper into the container he transported it in.

And although Dakari is now able to leave the vehicle he doesn’t. He can’t, instead laying slumped against the back seat, unable to move.

The sounds of heels clicking on the pavement echoes through the quiet night air, and a beautiful dark-skinned woman steps up to the open passenger

door.

She is tall, with light hazel eyes, with pencil thin curls that frame her face. Her gold hoop earrings match the gold lipstick shimmering in the streetlight.

Her eyes find mine and she stares back at me with ferocious intensity.

“You heard everything?” I ask.

“Every single thing,” she says quietly.

Slowly, I reach across the seat and hand her vial.

“I leave it up to you then.”

Taking the syringe from my hand she then turns to the backseat.

“D...Daliah,” Dakari moans, weakly reaching for her. “Help your father.”

She glares at him, tears welling in her eyes.

“Is that my place, father?” She hisses angrily. “To forever feed your vanity, while never being worthy?”

“Daliah...”

“You told me you went to South Africa for business,” she snarls. “But as it turns out, you were just trying to get rid of me. Why? Because I told you how I felt about you joining the sex trade?”

“Pl...please...” he groans, his breathing weakening. “I’m dying.”

“If I help you,” she hisses angrily. “You step down. I think it’s time for a change in leadership.”

“Daliah!” He groans.

“Say it,” she says firmly. “In front of your Don Supreme, so I know you will have no choice but to honor your word.”

“Fine!” he grunts, just before his eyes roll back into his head.

She nods before grabbing his arm, and plunging the needle into his vein.

Silence envelops the car, and for a moment, it appears that perhaps we waited just seconds too long before administering the antivenom.

“Father?” She asks.

But just as she is reaching up to feel his pulse, Dakari’s hand suddenly latches around her throat, squeezing tightly.

“You cocky little bitch,” he growls. “You think you can strong arm me? Me?!”

Dahlia hands scratch at his hand just as I jump out of the front seat.

However, just as I race around the car to assist her a single lone gunshot goes off, the steam from the pistol rising into the cold night air.

...A pistol placed against *Dakari’s* heart.

And as the startled girl looks up at me, it's then that I realize.
Dahlia Nam is now the leader of her clan.



Chapter Fifteen

NATALIE

It's funny what can happen in a year.

A year ago, I was just a regular nurse, living a peaceful and quiet life in Miami, spending my Friday nights with my rescue dog and watching old movies.

Now I find myself surrounded by the Alpha Squad, walking hand in hand with my billionaire Mafia Don husband down the hallway of The Jefferson... to meet with the heads of the most powerful mafia leaders in the country.

The Viper, or "Gabriel" as I've come to call him, has flown up from Miami with Sofia, who has also become one of my closest friends. Additionally, Roman Antonov, the head of the New York Russian Mafia, has also joined the gathering, bringing with him his beautiful new wife, Abigail.

And with the exception of Antonio Luca, all of our local Mafia clan leaders have joined us as well. Glow Bordeaux, Dahlia Nam, and Xiang Li have all taken their seats at the giant round conference room table.

I'm not sure if it's the power possessed by the seven people in the room, or the escalating situation for which we've called them all here, but when Charlie and Josiah open the double doors for us, I feel a shiver run down my spine.

"It's alright," Jaxon says quietly, sensing my apprehension.

I feel his fingers squeeze my hand and bring it to his lips as we step inside.

"Just remember who you are, Αγαπημένη."

"A terrified and clueless outsider?" I chuckle awkwardly. "Who is clearly under qualified for this war council?"

"No. The goddamn Regina Vestra," Jaxon whispers, kissing my hand. "And *my* wife."

Although I'm still moderately nervous, his gentle words, and the reverence with which he says it warms my soul.

Jaxon shoots me a playful wink and pulls out my chair, gently placing a soft kiss on my neck as he pushes it in.

Then he takes his seat beside me.

After taking a deep breath I straighten my shoulders.

I have power in this room too. A lot of it actually.

“I’m sure you all know why I’ve asked you here today, so I’m not going to waste anyone’s time with bullshit,” he starts to say. “Michael Valentine is dead.”

“As in...actually dead?” Xiang asks.

“Considering he’s laying face down in the rubble of what’s left of the Valentine Estate,” Jaxon snaps back sarcastically. “I’d say yeah, he’s probably fucking dead.”

He pauses a moment inhaling deeply.

“However, before he died, Michael allowed another enemy entry to our city, and as a result, it now threatens to destabilize everything we’ve worked for.”

He nods to Roman and Gabriel sitting directly across from us at the table.

“I’ve asked you both here because his actions, particularly regarding the sex trade, could likely have far reaching effects.” he says with a heavy sigh. “And because we need allies.”

“As always,” Roman says with a wicked grin. “You have our support.”

Gabriel says nothing, as usual, instead voicing his support with a gentle nod.

“From what we were able to uncover through various—”

But Jaxon is instantly interrupted when the doors fly open once more and Rachel Valentine appears.

...With Adam Westwood in tow.

“Now Jaxon Pace, you weren’t seriously thinking of starting your little war council without me, were you?” She says with a sarcastic grin, limping across the conference room floor with her casted leg.

“Actually, yes, I was,” Jaxon growls venomously.

He clearly wasn’t expecting her to join the meeting.

“Well, that’s not very prescient of you,” she chides. “Considering you’re discussing my brother.”

“Perhaps that’s exactly why he left you out,” Xiang Li says. “Considering no one really knows where your loyalties lie.”

“My loyalties lie with my daughter!” Rachel snaps at Li, making him jump. “And they ceased supporting Michael when he went rogue and tried to kill her as well as me.”

She fingers the gun on her hip.

“If you have a problem with that Xiang—”

“Rachel!” Jaxon barks forcibly.

“Sir?” Charlie asks. “Would you like me to remove her?”

My husband inhales sharply, locking eyes with Rachel, who simply folds her arms across her chest.

“No,” he snarls between gritted teeth. “She can stay. As long as she doesn’t cause any further distractions.”

Adam Westwood grabs two of the chairs from the wall and drags them across the floor. The obnoxious and deliberate scraping sound of the metal screeching is like nails on a chalkboard.

Approaching the table, he not-so-politely forces Li to scooch down and allow them access.

“Such a pleasure to have you join us, Miss Valentine,” Glow says sarcastically, shooting Jaxon a look. “It’s certainly never boring.”

“There’s never a dull moment with her,” Jaxon mutters irritably.

“...Although I am curious as to why your *companion* has joined us,” Glow continues, turning her scrutinous gaze to Rachel. “Considering he’s a *Fed*.”

“What?” Xiang Li says, sitting up in his seat.

“Oh, has Jaxon not told you?” Rachel grins, batting her lashes. “Adam and I got married.”

Holy. Shit.

My stomach drops, realizing the potential gravity of what Rachel just admitted to the table.

The room immediately falls silent.

“Wait... is this for real?” Li asks. “He’s...a *Fed*?”

“Yep!” Rachel smiles, smacking her lips before staring dramatically down at her nails. “He works for the F-B-I...”

“Rach,” Adam admonishes quietly.

“He...But that’s...I mean...” Li stumbles anxiously.

“Calm down, Li, before you have a stroke,” Glow says, rolling her eyes. “If the Feds cared about what you were up to, they would’ve taken your father out years ago. Lord knows the drunken bastard gave them more than enough opportunities.”

“That’s not the—”

“I’ll vouch for the agent,” Jaxon thunders over him, cutting him off. “And at any rate, he’s technically unemployed, as he’s currently placed on suspension from the Bureau. Isn’t that right, Adam?”

“Technicality,” Adam growls, snapping the pencil in his hands in two.

“Right, well around here, we embrace those,” Jaxon smiles sarcastically, in a way that doesn’t reach his eyes.

Jaxon is only trying to actively diffuse the bomb that Rachel has just casually dropped in a room filled with highly armed, highly dangerous, and highly volatile people.

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Daliah says under her breath. “But how are we supposed to trust him? Well, *either* of them really?”

“You can trust them because I said you can trust them,” Jaxon hisses, clearly annoyed as he crunches his hand into a tight fist. “Because right now he’s only interested in taking out anyone who was connected to Michael Valentine, who was the biggest threat to *my* daughter...with Rachel.”

My breath hitches in my throat, as every eye in the room slowly falls on me.

Even though it’s no secret that Rachel and Jaxon share a daughter, and I have made my peace with it, it doesn’t help the awkwardness I feel at this minute.

Even from where I’m sitting, I can feel the waves of frustration radiating off of Jaxon. His hand is still balled into a fist, and the vein in his neck is practically protruding from the skin, throbbing in time with the clock on the wall.

It’s clear my husband is mere seconds away from boiling over and turning this peaceful meeting into a bloodbath.

I have to do something.

Gently I place my hand on top of Jaxon’s, waiting until his fist softens and he opens his palm to me before turning back to the table.

“What can I say?” I shrug, smiling politely. “Families can be complicated. *C’est la vie.*”

Once again, the room falls silent.

That is until a soft giggle erupts from the other side of the table.

“Wait, wait, wait. I’m sorry, back up,” Abby snorts. “So, you’re like *actually* in the FBI? That’s not a joke?”

“Yes,” Adam replies flatly. “I’m a federal agent.”

She giggles once more.

“And um, what exactly do you do for them?” She says, biting her tongue between her teeth. “As in, is your relationship with the government pretty serious? Or do you, you know, wander a little?”

“I do a lot of things in my position,” Adam says, tapping his finger on the table before glancing up at her. “But for the last fifteen years I’ve been tracking down sex traffickers...and serial killers.”

“Is that so, And I’m sorry, what did you say your name was again?” Abby purrs, narrowing her eyes at him. “Mister...?”

“Westwood, sweetheart,” Adam winks at her sarcastically. “FBI Agent Adam Westwood. Try to keep up.”

“Watch it,” Roman growls lethally, pushing his chair back from the table. But Abby stops him, pressing her hand with her massive diamond ring on his chest.

“Tell me Agent Westwood, are you any good at your job?”

“One of the best.”

“Then I’m curious,” Abby teases, pulling a blade from her hip and pressing the tip to her finger. “Do you hunt them down, your targets? You know, the serial killers?”

“Methodically. There’s a whole process. It’s all very complicated and I wouldn’t expect you to understand it, at least not on the first try,” Adam snaps back arrogantly. “All you need to know is that as I said, I’m quite good at it.”

A droplet of blood appears on her finger, and she stares down at it for a second before sucking it off the tip.

What the hell?

“And do you...*kill* them?” Abby asks, unable to contain the wicked smile on her face.

It’s then that I understand why Abby is so interested in this line of questioning:

Because *she*, is a serial killer.

Now from what I understand, Abigail’s marks were usually men who abused their wives or girlfriends. However, she also told me once that she thoroughly enjoyed serving them the poison that ultimately took their lives.

“Sometimes people die in my line of work, yes,” Adam scoffs with a shrug. “Casualty of the trade I’m afraid.”

The dark grin that spreads across Abby’s face is unmistakable, and for a moment, it’s so creepy and callous that it even sends shivers up *my* spine.

But then, as quickly as it appeared, it fades, and she erupts into maniacal laughter.

Sofia shoots me a very confused glance, as her cartel husband unbuttons

his jacket, presumably to give himself better access to his gun should he need to use it against the unhinged crazy lady.

“Foxy,” Roman says pointedly, shooting her a look. “Stop playing with your food.”

“I’m...I’m sorry...I can’t!” She says, her chest heaving as she continues laughing. “It’s just...kind of ironic. And, a little bit funny.”

“I don’t understand,” Adam asks, flexing his jaw. “What is so damn funny?”

“You hunt *serial killers*,” Abby says, still wheezing. “And technically, you’re currently sitting in a room full of them, as everyone here has killed more than one person.”

Not entirely sure how I feel about that to be honest.

She takes a deep breath, wiping the tears from her eyes all the while still holding the very scary-looking dagger in her hand.

“But the best part,” she says, taking a very satisfied breath. “Is that technically, *you’re* a serial killer too.”

“What?” Adam asks, looking absolutely dumbfounded. “Of course I’m not a fucking serial killer!”

“Didn’t you just say that you methodically track and hunt them down?” Abby smiles venomously. “And that sometimes, people die?”

She sits back in her chair and folds her hands on the table.

“Systematically tracking, hunting, and slaying. Isn’t that the definition of a serial killer?”

“No!” Adam scoffs incredulously. “There has to be motive and—”

Yet before he can finish his sentence, Roman suddenly chuckles too. He tries to fight it, but one look at Abby and he can disguise it no longer.

Next to him, Gabriel also joins in, before being smacked softly on the arm by Sofia.

But perhaps the most amusing of all, is when I catch Rachel covering her face with her hand, also clearly trying to hold back her amusement.

“Jesus Christ,” Glow snorts, shaking her head. “Your honor, I think the lady has just won her case.”

Within seconds the entire table is engulfed in raucous laughter, and I even catch my husband fighting a smirk.

Adam on the other hand, says nothing, instead crossing his arms and slumping back against his chair.

Eventually our little diversion comes to an end, and the faces around the

table slowly return to their ominous originations.

“I suppose we should get back to business,” Jaxon says with a nod. “The fact is, we have a problem in Michael Valentine that is going to extend far beyond this city, if it hasn’t already.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Michael wasn’t negotiating with the Sicilians,” Jaxon sighs. “He was working with La Fratellanza.”

At the mention of their name, everyone around the table shifts uncomfortably.

However, as Jaxon begins to explain the human-cargo deal with La Fratellanza, I watch in real time as Abigail’s face goes white, a far cry from the laid-back giddiness she had just displayed. She glares at Jaxon for a moment, breathing heavily, before glancing up at Roman, who looks absolutely murderous.

Abby shakes her head once, stoically staring back at her husband, the two of them having a silent conversation.

They know something. But they don’t want to say it here.

“...And now they want us to deliver human cargo for their networks in Europe.”

“Had Michael...You know, sold any of them yet?” Dahlia asks tentatively.

“We’re not entirely sure,” Jaxon replies, glancing at Rachel before lowering his eyes to the table. “Rachel and I visited Michael’s Dolar Domas recently and found the email detailing Michael and Antonio’s shipment.”

“But...La Fratellanza?” Xiang asks, his voice low. “What were they promising in exchange?”

“That’s also unclear, but I think it can be reasonably assumed that cash was transferred before delivery,” Jaxon swallows.

“If that’s true,” Roman says, rubbing his chin. “They will be expecting what they were promised. And they will get it one way or another.”

Jaxon looks up at Glow, who nods once.

“They will get what was promised,” Jaxon says, painting a smile across his face. “And something extra.”

“Jaxon,” I breathe, my chest tightening. “You can’t be serious. We’re not actually considering giving them female hostages?!”

“No, we’re not giving them hostages, my love,” Jaxon says, placing his hand on mine. “We’re giving them *war*.”

“What?” I ask, confused.

Jaxon smiles at me before looking back up at Glow.

Tapping the edge of her whiskey glass with her finger, she throws it back and takes a deep breath.

“For the last few years, I’ve been developing a team of girls,” she smiles at me. “I’ve nicknamed them the *Black Lotus*. They are a task force of sorts, or a sledgehammer I wield when I need to establish boundaries.”

“What do you mean by boundaries?” I ask.

“The limits you need to reinforce when clients think they can lay hands on my girls, or when they get a bit too clingy. Either way, my Black Lotus girls are highly trained, versatile, disciplined...and *lethal*.”

“What exactly will you have them do?” I ask, my heart still pounding.

Jaxon’s face darkens, a wicked smirk tugging at the corners of his lips.

“La Fratellanza has crossed the line. When Michael Valentine opened the door to them, they thought they could come here and threaten us, and disrupt our carefully crafted ecosystem,” he growls. “So, we’re going to bring the whole thing down.”

He pushes his chair back and stands up from the table.

“The Italian Mafia are much bigger than any singular family,” Jaxon says calmly, walking around behind us. “Similar to ours, there are multiple families, some of which participate in the sex trade, and some that don’t. Luckily for us, we have secured an ally that supports *our* viewpoint, and who also wants to see La Fratellanza defeated for good.”

He pauses, producing a small remote from his pocket.

“There’s a famous quote by Sun Tzu that says, *‘the art of war is to fight the enemy where they aren’t,’*” Jaxon thunders. “So that’s exactly what we’re going to do. For the better part of the decade, La Fratellanza has been making it clear that they neither respect, nor fear women.”

He smiles, outstretching his arms.

“Which is why they will never see our hit coming.”

“With respect, I appreciate the concept, Mr. Pace,” Daliah says, tilting her head. “But don’t you think it’s slightly unfair to put Glow’s girls at risk by forcing them to go in as moles? Especially considering how dangerous La Fratellanza is?”

Jaxon locks eyes with Glow, who smiles.

“First of all, Darlin’, I never force anyone into any situation, ever. And second, the only girls who will be coming with me are ones who have

personally volunteered of their own free will,” she says. “Which just happens to be all of them.”

“Forgive me,” I chime in delicately. “But may I ask why they *volunteered?*”

“Many of them have lost friends in this industry because of Michael and his brutality,” Glow says with a sigh. “They know the risks, and they have bravely volunteered to step into that slot for us.”

Holy shit.

Once again Glow takes a deep breath, but this time her face softens.

“Mrs. Pace, I know that a concept like this likely feels very foreign to you, and I appreciate your concern for them. I respect it. However, believe me when I say, my Black Lotus girls are not your regular dancers. These women are my eyes and ears. They are masters in BDSM, roleplay, submission, disguise...and mental manipulation. So, believe me when I say they will not crack under pressure.”

She smiles darkly, clicking her tongue inside her mouth.

“...But they will make their captors think they *have*. Which is far more important when you are trying to blend in.”

Oh wow.

Her tone alone chills down my spine.

And for just a moment, I am in awe of Glow Bourdeau.

She looks like a goddess, the exuberant confidence of the first female Mafia Don in the history of the Chicago syndicate, seeps from her every pore.

She is a powerhouse of a woman, and certainly not one to be trifled with.

I have to admit, there is a tiny part of me that wishes I could be so sure in all my decisions.

But while I truly do believe in Glow’s girls, and have no doubts regarding their skills and capabilities, I still feel my stomach twist thinking about the dangerous line her Black Lotus Girls will be asked to walk.

However, as my eyes scan the room, I watch as Xiang, the Viper, and Daliah nod their agreement, followed afterwards by Roman and Abigail. Everyone seems to feel as confident as Jaxon does.

Everyone except Rachel, who stares back at me across the table, looking just as concerned as I am.

But in contrast to her normal approach, she says nothing, biting her bottom lip and sitting back in her chair as Jaxon presses a button on his

remote, causing the lights to dim.

A screen lowers from the ceiling.

“According to our source,” Jaxon says as a giant sprawling mansion appears on screen. “The only time the key players of La Fratellanza gather in the same place is to facilitate the Annual Buyer’s Ball, in Messina, Italy.”

“What’s that?” Rachel asks.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” Jaxon says, swallowing hard.

“Remember that La Fratellanza runs the most high-end trade in the business. And this annual event is the pinnacle of their existence.”

Jaxon steps next to the screen, pulling up a set of blueprints.

“And we are going to burn it to the fucking ground.”



Jaxon runs his proposal past his new and improved, and significantly *younger* council, for the next hour.

He listens to their concerns, and advice regarding potential plot holes in his theoretical plan.

At the end of that hour, the plan goes as such:

The Black Lotus girls will be outfitted with subcutaneous tracking devices, placed within the soft tissue of their armpits.

Acting as a neutral ambassador and conduit for Jaxon, Glow will personally escort the girls to Italy via one of Jaxon’s converted shipping vessels.

Once there, she will be contacted and will receive instructions on where and when to deliver the girls one week before the Buyer’s Ball. After making the drop off, Glow will return back to Chicago and with Levi’s help, keep tabs on the girls location remotely.

And that’s where we come in. Literally.

According to Jaxon’s source within the non-Fratellanza branch of the Italian Mafia, the “Buyers Ball” is held every year at “Shangri-La,” the gorgeous summer estate of the man in charge: La Fratellanza’s Mysterious Don of Dons: *Kato Katz*.

Although they won’t be joining us, The Viper and Roman Antonov will

assist our cause by helping us acquire conveniently compromised staff. Sourced independently, these silent infiltrators will be our eyes and ears in every corner of the halls, grounds and security of Shangri-La.

They will also assist in stashing weapon caches around the estate and provide periodic observational updates on the Black Lotus girls.

Having made the “donation” required to officially join La Fratellanza, the crowd will gather in the central courtyard, where Kato Katz will begin to formally introduce and induct Jaxon into their ranks of depravity.

This is the moment where the Black Lotus girls will get a chance to show us what they are made of.

Glow’s girls will assist in locating the weapons caches, releasing any and all remaining prisoners, and then side by side, they will rain hellfire down upon all of La Fratellanza’s elite.

“Well, there you have it, my friends,” Jaxon says with a sigh. “If all goes according to plan La Fratellanza’s power dynamic will be forever shattered and will never again attempt to interfere or threaten us with their tyranny.”

The room is silent, but I watch as one by one Xiang, Glow, Daliah, Roman, and The Viper nod their approval.

Apparently satisfied, my husband leans forward on the table and takes a deep breath.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he says gravely. “I know that we didn’t ask for this war. We were dragged into it when a psychopath attempted to offset the balance that we have worked so very hard to achieve and maintain.”

He pauses, biting his bottom lip.

“But if you stand with me now, I promise that when this is over, you will all be justly rewarded, and we will have peace.”

He looks around the table, firstly to Glow, who gives a nod.

As does The Viper, Daliah, and Xiang.

But Adam Westwood sits tapping a pen on the table. Eventually, he looks up at Jaxon.

“Oh, I’m sorry, do I get a vote here?” He asks, raising a brow.

“Well,” Jaxon growls. “Considering you and your wife insisted on being here today, and have sat here listening to all the details of our plan, I’m afraid I’m going to need an answer.”

“And what if I say no?”

Jaxon inhales deeply, his jaw flexing.

“Then you’re going to have to forget you heard anything at all,” He says

flatly.

“Suppose I can’t do that?” Adam shrugs.

“Then I suppose your wife will end up a widow,” Jaxon growls, narrowing his eyes and shooting him a venomously cold smile. “And we will have to forget about *you*. Though, I suppose for most of us, that won’t be that difficult.”

Oh fuck.

The vein in Jaxon’s neck begins pulsing again as he holds Adam’s glare across the table.

Tension instantly blankets the room, falling like a heavy blanket all around us.

But just when I fear things might come to blows or bullets, Adam sighs and sits back in his chair crossing his arms across his chest.

“Well, I don’t give a fuck about your peace,” he says matter of factly.

“You really should,” Jaxon seethes. “Because as I said, your wife’s happiness is tied to my daughter’s safety, which is unfortunately tied to peace in the syndicate.”

Adam clicks his tongue inside his mouth, narrowing his eyes at Jaxon.

But then suddenly, he smiles.

Not a real smile indicating happiness, but a smug smile, indicating opportunity.

“You’re right,” he says, with a nod gently placing his arm around Rachel’s shoulder. “I am married to Rachel, and I do care about her happiness and *her* daughter’s safety.”

His deliberate choice of words is not lost on anyone, as all eyes briefly flit to Jaxon, who continues glaring unceasingly at Adam.

“And while I might not understand why on earth, she needs to keep you alive to ensure Jessica’s safety or give a fuck about how you all pretend to want peace in your little underground crime syndicate, I do understand there is something I want that only you can give me,” he says with a smirk.

“And what is that?”

“I want the names of La Fratellanza’s customers,” Adam says flatly. “If you give me that, then I’ll give you, my blessing.”

“I don’t need your blessing,” Jaxon snorts, wiping his chin. “...And I’ll give you my support,” Adam finishes. “But I want a list of anyone and everyone who has done business with La Fratellanza. That is my bargain.”

Jaxon stares at him, slowly moving his jaw back and forth, his finger

tapping on the table.

He shoots a look over at Roman, who nods once.

“Fine,” Jaxon replies. “You have my word that I will give you a list of everyone who has been associated with La Fratellanza. But only after the job is done.”

“Deal.”

Adam smiles, sitting back in his chair.

“Well, Agent Westwood,” Abigail says, leaning forward on her elbows and resting her chin on her hands. “Welcome to the dark side.”



Chapter Sixteen

JAXON

I check my watch.

12:09pm.

Dr. Townsend is officially nine minutes late.

“Jaxon, you don’t have to be here for this if there’s somewhere else you need to be,” Natalie says calmly. “It’s just a checkup and possibly a gender reveal. I can always just update you later, I don’t want you to stress yourself over it.”

“I’m not stressed,” I shrug, pacing the floor. “It’s just that this fancy doctor is fifteen minutes late.”

Okay, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration.

“Babe, you know how Chicago traffic is,” Natalie sighs. “Cut the woman some slack.”

I sigh, probably louder than I should, but unable to stop myself as I start to pace the floor of the guest bedroom Natalie has recommissioned as a mini exam room.

“Why do you like this woman again?” I ask, walking over to the window. “I mean, it feels like we’re always waiting for shit with her.”

“What?” Natalie scoffs. “What are you talking about?”

“It seems like we’re always waiting for test results, or waiting for exams, or waiting for ultrasounds,” I sigh.

“Well, I hate to break it to you, darling,” Natalie snorts. “But pregnancy is just a lot of waiting. Nine whole months of it to be exact. At least.”

“Yeah, obviously I already know that,” I scoff. “I just mean I feel like we are always rearranging our schedule to accommodate this woman. I mean, honestly, does she have any idea who I am? I’m Jaxon Pace, I don’t wait for anyone!”

“Oh my Goodnessssss,” Natalie groans, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms across her chest. “Don’t look now, Mr. Pace, but I think your entitlement is showing.”

“I just think,” I say, throwing my hands up defensively. “That she should be slightly more accommodating to us.”

“Jaxon,” Natalie says, shooting me a disapproving look. “She is accommodating to us. First of all, she’s the best OBGYN in Chicago, so she’s always in high demand. And because you refuse to step off your high horse and set foot in her office downtown, the poor woman has to block off time to drive across town in the middle of rush hour, just to be here for us. For every appointment!” Natalie says, raising her brows at me. “Speaking from experience, traffic doesn’t care about my schedule, nor does it care about hers, or even yours. She can only do what she can do, and we have to understand that it takes time! I mean Christ, Jaxon, it takes fifteen minutes just to get from the street to our front door because your driveway is like five miles long!”

“Well, I think it’s just under a mile, actually,” I wink at her sarcastically. “So I’d say that’s a bit of an exaggeration there, Mrs. Pace.”

“Grrrrrr!” She huffs loudly, blowing a few disobedient hairs from her face and crossing her arms tightly across her body.

Shit. Now I’ve upset her.

But why does she have to look so adorable when she’s angry?

Perhaps it’s the soft green exam-friendly maternity dress she’s paired with her favorite pair of fluffy wool socks. Socks that she coincidentally forgot upstairs and implored me to retrieve from the bedroom. Or maybe it’s just the exasperating way Natalie’s so efficient at putting me in my place and combating my obnoxious snobbery, but I’m suddenly overcome by how extraordinarily beautiful my wife is, right here in the simplest of moments.

Her skin is unbelievably soft and practically glowing in the warm spring sunlight, and Natalie’s perfect tits have somehow gotten even perkier with this pregnancy.

Her pussy also tasted so fucking good this morning...

And despite knowing that at any minute the good doctor could arrive and walk into the room, I feel my cock swell inside my pants as my eyes continue to canvas her body.

But when I see the semi-aggressive way she swings her feet over the edge of the exam table, and the way she’s practically bouncing up and down, it occurs to me that perhaps she’s just as on edge as I am.

Slowly I walk toward her, careful to avoid her kicks, which she deliberately continues in a passive aggressive effort to keep me away from her.

But I’m not having that.

“Hey,” I say, gently catching her calf with my hand and stepping between her legs. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m... Well, I’m just nervous, I guess. And I’m sure you are too.”

Softly I cup her chin, rubbing my thumb along her cheek.

“But I shouldn’t be adding to your stress level by acting like a dickhead. Especially today.”

She stares at me, saying nothing. However, her big beautiful green eyes silently reflect the true level of her anxiety at this particular moment, making me feel even more guilty.

Natalie opens her mouth to say something but suddenly there is a knock at the door, and she jumps.

“Mrs. Pace?” A woman says softly. “It’s Dr. Townsend. I’m so sorry I’m late, traffic was—”

I hear the door handle jiggle, but instinctively I grab it, and press it closed.

“We need a minute,” I bark loudly, engaging the lock.

“Jaxon!” Natalie gasps, her eyes wide. “That’s Doctor—”

“I’m aware who it is Nat, and I don’t care,” I say, gripping her hips and pulling her toward me, gently brushing her hair from her face. “We waited for her for nearly twenty minutes, so she can wait for a minute.”

“But—”

“Fuck her,” I say, instantly cupping her face in my hands and crushing my lips to hers, silencing her with a kiss. “I need to make sure that we are okay first. I love you. I love the shit out of you. And I need you to know that there is nowhere I’d rather be than right here, with you, at this appointment, about to learn the sex of our baby.”

Natalie smiles, but then her eyes drop from mine, landing in her lap.

“What is it?” I whisper. “Talk to me, Baby Girl.”

“I’m... I’m just scared,” she chokes out. “I mean, Jaxon, what if we get excited about this, and then I... I... what if I...”

She screws her eyes shut, her lip trembling softly, and then I understand what she cannot bring herself to say.

I place my finger under her chin.

“Look at me, Αγαπημένη,” I command gently, waiting for her tearful eyes to find mine. “No matter what happens today, or tomorrow, next week or even next month, I promise you we will be fine. Wanna know how I know? Because I love you. I love you more than I ever thought I could love another person. And after everything we’ve been through together, and everything

we've survived, I know that there's nothing in the world stronger than my love for you."

She blinks, a single tear streaking down her cheek.

However, her eyes light up, and a soft blush settles across her cheeks.

"I know I'm a pain in the ass sometimes," I say, playfully narrowing my eyes at her, making her giggle. "And I know that I'm impatient, stubborn, arrogant and reckless. But I'm also deeply, madly, completely, head-over-heels in love with you. So, regardless of if today is easy or difficult, or there's going to be a baby or no baby, at the end of the day, I am the luckiest man on earth because I have you. And I get the honor of sitting here in this hospital room, with the most incredible girl I've ever met, acting like a total ass, and driving her crazy, because for some reason that incredible girl chose to do this life with me. And that's all I need to know to believe that you and I will get through whatever life throws our way. And we'll do it together."

This time there is no mistaking the smile that spreads across my wife's face. She wraps her arms around my neck.

"Always," she whispers against my ear. "I will always choose you, Jaxon Pace. Right, wrong, and definitely insane."

"Just the way we like it," I grin, before crushing my lips to hers.

She moans into my mouth, and for a moment, poor Dr. Townsend is in serious danger of waiting for more than just a few minutes.

But to my minor disappointment, Natalie pulls away, regains her composure, and nods toward the door.

"Okay, Jaxon," she whispers, wiping her eyes. "I'm ready. Let's do this."



"Well, Mrs. Pace," Dr. Townsend says, pulling the stirrups closed for Natalie and yanking off her gloves. "I can happily say that everything is looking really, really good. I see no obvious signs for concern or worry. At least at this juncture."

"What do you mean '*at least at this juncture?*'?" I say, taking Natalie's hand. "Is that supposed to be a riddle?"

"Jax," Natalie admonishes, shooting me a look.

"As I've explained before Mr. Pace, a pregnancy after a massive trauma

such as your wife's has to be taken day-by-day, and week-by-week," Dr. Townsend says. "But the human body is remarkable. And your wife is healing even more beautifully than I anticipated."

"Oh," I grunt, swallowing back my annoyance.

Inexplicably, I can feel myself fighting some sort of stifled animosity, but I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

The only thing I can come up with is that no matter how prepared I think I am, or how much I remind myself that it's just a medical check-up, I'm somehow never prepared to watch Dr. Townsend's fingers swirling around up inside my wife.

Irrational or not, Natalie's pussy belongs to *me*. And I don't share well with others.

"So, now the big question is," Dr. Townsend asks. "Do you want to know both sexes?"

"Well," Natalie starts to say, smiling up at me. "Yes, I think we'd like to..."

But then she stops mid-sentence, staring up at the doctor before looking back at me.

Wait, did Dr. Townsend just say...

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, clearing my throat. "Did you just say *both* sexes?"

"Why yes, I did."

"Both," Natalie breathes, her jaw dropping. "As in *plural*?"

"As in there's...two of them?" I say, instantly feeling my heartbeat in my ears. "Two babies?!"

"Two boys by the looks of things," the doctor says, pointing to the ultrasound machine. "Congratulations, Mom and Dad, you're having *twins!*"



If I thought I was happy with the news, Ethan is elated.

"Twins?!" He laughs excitedly. "That's fantastic!"

He smashed into me, engulfing me in a giant hug so tight it practically knocks the wind from my lungs.

"Holy shit! We needed some good news around this place."

“I can’t help but agree,” I sigh. “It’s been nothing but doom, gloom and bombs lately.”

Ethan chuckles, placing his hands on his hips and wiping his chin.

“Ahh...twins,” he mutters again to himself, the biggest smile plastered across his face. “And two boys at that.”

I stare at him, sure that it’s been ages since I’ve seen him this happy.

“You know, Dimitris and I were a year apart,” he says, glancing out the window. “And we were inseparable. We did everything together, and if there was trouble, it was a joint adventure.”

“You? In trouble?” I snort. “Forgive me, but I find that kind of hard to believe.”

“Believe it,” he nods. “One time when we were kids, the two of us wanted to camp out in the backyard. My father agreed, I assume thinking a little survival training couldn’t hurt and how much trouble could two boys get into in the backyard of Pace Manor?”

I smirk, leaning back against my desk.

“We were mostly behaved, until night fell, and it got cold. We decided that to warm up we should build a campfire. But as you know, the wind off the bluffs can be quite strong, and we couldn’t even get it started. That’s when we decided to move our campsite somewhere with a bit more shelter from the wind. So we packed up everything, and moved ourselves back behind the garage. The only problem was, there were a lot of dried leaves and pine needles back there, and it was also where the caretaker at the time had stored some of the groundskeeping utility vehicles, and the fuel cans to fill them. Well, to make a long story short, we thought that by adding a little gasoline to the fire, we could make it go faster.”

“Let me guess,” I say with a grin. “It worked?”

“Boy did it ever,” Ethan chuckles. “Within five minutes, we’d lit our tents, trees, and half the damn garage on fire.”

He looks up at me, but within seconds the two of us are both laughing.

“He was so pissed,” Ethan laughs, shaking his head. “We both got our asses whipped for that one.”

Looking out the window once more he snorts quietly to himself.

“God, we had a good time together though.”

Laughing I walk over to the bar and pour two shots of whiskey.

“You’ll find out for yourself,” he says with a smirk. “You’ll be raising two at the same time, so you’ll have both hands full.”

“Good thing you live here now, eh?” I say with a grin as I hand him a glass.

As usual he tries to resist, but I insist.

“You’re retired. And for the next few minutes, we’re celebrating.”

He snorts, but begrudgingly takes the glass from me, clinking it against mine.

“And uh, what happens after two minutes?” He asks, gingerly taking a sip.

After throwing back the shot, I inhale slowly, savoring its flavor as it trickles down my throat.

“In two minutes,” I say, pouring myself another. “I’m going to give you the *bad* news.”

When I look up Ethan is staring at me, pausing with the glass on his lips.

“Why do I have this sneaking suspicion I’m really not going to like whatever it is you’re about to tell me?”

Picking up the glass, I grab the bottle of whiskey too.

“Because you’re not.”

I walk around my desk, collapsing back into the chair.

“Where are Glow’s girls?”

“The captain radioed in that they were a half a day from the Strait of Gibraltar this morning,” Ethan says, sitting down across from me. “And Leo informed me that the safe house is ready and waiting for them.”

I tap my fingers on the arm of my chair.

“When will Katz make contact?”

Ethan shrugs.

“We don’t know,” he says with a sigh. “The Ball is scheduled for three weeks from Sunday, so it could be any time before then. But, until the transaction is made, the girls will be safe.”

“And the preparations?” I ask, reaching for his glass.

“As I understand,” he nods. “You’re scheduled to fly out in two days. Charlie is handling everything, impressively, I might add. Also, I’m glad you went ahead and promoted Deylan and Alexei to Alpha. I think those are good additions, both kids have a lot of potential.”

“Alexei trained extensively under Levi, so while we’re actively keeping him out of Agent Westwood’s wandering gaze, Alexei can bridge the gap. And Deylan...well,” I say with a grin as I pour us both another shot. “He’s quick with his hands, and a firearm. I don’t know, I just like the kid.”

Ethan smiles.

“As I’ve always said, you’ve got great instincts. It’s nice to see you trusting them every once in a while.”

I slide the glass over to him, and he stares down at it before looking back up at me.

“So,” he says, slowly picking up the glass and staring down at the expensive whiskey within. “What is it that you need to tell me that I’m not going to like?”

“We’re not leaving in two days,” I say, raising my glass to my lips. “I’m leaving *tonight*.”



Later that evening I lay curled up in bed with Natalie, the two of us winding down after a late dinner and movie night with Jessica.

Her head rests on my shoulder, and my hand on her belly.

“I still can’t believe it,” she gushes.

“Me neither” I chuckle softly, squeezing her tightly. “You know, of all the things I expected Dr. Townsend to say today ‘twins’ was never on the list.”

“And twin boys,” she whispers softly. “It’s like you got your wish, and it was a BOGO!”

“A what?”

“A BOGO!” Natalie giggles looking up at me. “You know, like a buy-one-get-one free?”

“Oh, I see,” I chuckle. “That’s cute. I’ve never heard that term before.”

Even though I can’t technically see her face, somehow, I can immediately sense that Natalie is rolling her eyes at me.

“Offfff course you don’t,” she says playfully.

“I’ve just never really paid attention to how much something cost before, or if it came with free shit. If I wanted it, I bought it. It’s like the one perk of being a billionaire I suppose.”

She shifts, so that she can look up at me, and now I can definitely see her rolling her eyes, nuzzling further into my neck.

“Well, regardless of what you want to call them, we’re going to have two babies, Jaxon,” she says sleepily, placing her hand on top of mine. “Two baby *boys*. You got your wish. You get the best of both worlds now.”

I stare down at her, convinced that she is the best part of my world.

Running my hand down her cheek I watch as the setting sun over the bay showers her face with a radiant glow, making her green eyes reflect a beautiful mossy green.

She's so fucking beautiful it hurts.

Well, maybe it isn't just her beauty that hurts tonight, but rather the fact that I know I'm going to have to leave Natalie in a few hours...and she has no idea.

I lean forward to kiss her, my lips lingering on hers, trying to commit the sensation to memory.

"I love you, Jaxon Pace," she whispers. "Right, wrong, or insane. And with two babies on the way, I can promise you, our lives are about to get even more insane than they already are."

"Αγαπημένη," I whisper back, kissing her forehead. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

It isn't long before Natalie falls asleep on my chest.

And as the moon finally pulls high into the sky out over the bay, I lay here in the darkness, wondering if maybe I'm making the wrong decision.

Of course, I'd love to take Natalie with me to Italy, as she and I had already discussed multiple times.

But this isn't a vacation.

It's a risk.

A dangerous risk and a power move that I'm about to make against one of the most powerful mafias in the world.

It's also a gamble, not only with my life, but also with the lives of my men, Glow, and the eight brave women who volunteered from her Black Lotus.

And as I explained to a less-than-thrilled Ethan earlier today, I can't justify putting Natalie, as well as our two unborn boys anywhere near a situation like this.

No. As much as I hate leaving her, I have to do this alone.

When I see an alert silently light up my phone, I know that it's time to go, and careful not to wake my sleeping pregnant wife, I gently roll her onto her side and slip out of the bed.

I slip into the closet, and grab the go-bag I stashed in the closet with passports and our new flight plan after the appointment with Dr. Townsend.

Quietly, I pull out the short letter I'd written apologizing to Natalie and

explaining my reasoning and set it on the nightstand beside her.

“I love you, Natalie,” I whisper, kissing her forehead. “I will see you when I get home.”

And before I have any chance to lose my nerve, I turn and walk out of the bedroom.



“Otto, we’re here,” I say into the phone when we finally pull up at the airstrip forty-five minutes later than I anticipated. “Sorry we’re running late.”

I glance in the mirror at Rachel sitting in the backseat of our vehicle.

“Someone apparently didn’t get the memo that when the call time is four a.m., one should be ready at four a.m.”

She rolls her eyes.

“No problem, Sir,” Otto replies. “We are ready to get wheels up as soon as you get here. And don’t worry, we’ve got good weather conditions so I’m sure we’ll make plenty of time up in the air.”

I snap the phone closed.

“Charlie, please be sure to load Miss Valentine’s luggage for her,” I say flatly. “Lord, knows if she does it will take another forty-five fucking minutes.”

“Oh go fuck yourself, Jaxon,” Rachel snaps at me, kicking the back of my seat with her foot. “I already told you, *Adam* was the delay. You know, my husband wasn’t exactly thrilled with a plan that involves him staying behind and me going off to Italy with you. Especially since you’re leaving Natalie behind too.”

“I think we’ve both established enough personal disdain for one another than it’s safe to assume there’s nothing for him to be worried about,” I grumble, turning down the road toward our airplane hangar. “And second, you couldn’t have had your little discussion earlier?”

“Jaxon, you just changed the plan twelve hours ago!”

“That’s still twelve hours that you’ve both known about the plan!”

“Well,” she shrugs, turning to look out the window. “*He* didn’t know.”

“What?” I breathe, bringing the car to a screeching halt in the parking spaces outside our hangar. “You didn’t *tell* him?”

“No, because I knew how he would react!”

Charlie clears his throat, raising his brow.

Shit. Perhaps that is a bit hypocritical of me to say.

Rachel yanks open her door and jumps out of the car.

“And for the record, asshole,” she snaps at me angrily, shoving her finger into my chest just as I shut the door. “The next time you ask me to accompany you on some stupid suicide mission at four in the fucking morning, the least you could do is stop for fucking coffee!”

And without another word she turns on her heel and storms toward the plane’s stairway where Otto stands waiting.

“Morning!” He says politely.

“Don’t fucking talk to me!” Rachel snaps, storming up the steps. “At least for the next four hours.”

I sigh, rubbing my eyes.

Charlie grabs the luggage from the trunk and follows me toward the plane where the rest of my Alpha Squad is already waiting, having left directly from the manor.

“I must be a masochist,” I mutter irritably as we step onto the plane.

“Leaving my pregnant wife at home and taking my psycho ex to Italy to fight La Fratellanza. What the fuck am I thinking?”

“That’s exactly what I’d like to know, Jaxon Pace.”

This is the moment I look up to see that waiting for me in the galley of the plane is my pregnant wife.

...And she looks *pissed*.



Chapter Seventeen

NATALIE

“Natalie?” Jaxon breathes, his eyes wide. “What are you doing here?”

“See, that’s funny, because I was about to ask you the same fucking thing, Jaxon.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but then immediately closes it, a low sigh escaping his lips.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I thought,” I snort angrily. “I didn’t expect you to have an answer for this.”

“Nat—”

“How could you?” I whisper, shaking my head. “How could you do this?”

“I promise this was done with the best of intentions,” he says, taking a step toward me and raising his hands defensively.

“The *best* of intentions?” I scoff, blinking rapidly. “Well, if leaving without telling me is the best you can do, Jaxon, then that’s really disappointing! Especially since it seems you were intending on leaving your pregnant wife at home while taking your ex-girlfriend on a vacation!”

“Oh, it’s definitely not a vacation,” Rachel snorts, taking a seat in one of the chairs. “I didn’t even pack a swimsuit.”

Jaxon shoots Rachel a pointed look, as does Charlie.

“So tell me, was it your intention to keep me thinking we were just living our life, celebrating our happy news, while you were off making your secret plans and writing letters?”

“Natalie…”

“Because you know. I certainly didn’t intend to get a phone call from your ex-girlfriend, at three in the morning, telling me that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men were heading to Italy, and that the king himself was on the way to her house to pick her up.”

“Dude,” Rachel scoffs, looking up at Jaxon. “I really can’t believe you didn’t tell her. Especially for all the flack you just gave me about Adam.”

“Rachel,” I snap. “I appreciate you telling me about this, but I don’t need your help arguing with my husband. I’ve got it covered.”

“You got it, Regina,” she smirks with a finger salute before settling back

into her chair with a magazine.

My husband sighs, running his hand through his chestnut brown hair before placing it back on his hip.

“Well?!” I demand, crossing my arms.

I’m not letting you get out of this conversation, Jaxon Pace.

He looks up, glancing at Deylan, Wesley and Josiah who are standing around us, awkwardly trying to look elsewhere.

“Nat, can we just step outside for a minute?” He says calmly, motioning for the door.

“No!” I snap.

“This,” he says, his voice low. “Is a private conversation.”

“It ceased being a private conversation when you had it with everyone on this damn plane—except for me!”

The plane grows quiet, and the lingering boarding staff in the galley quickly disappear.

Charlie steps around Jaxon.

“Gentlemen,” he says motioning to the sitting area near the back of the plane. “Why don’t we go ahead and get started with our debrief.”

I think I know Charlie well enough to understand he’s only trying to appease Jaxon’s request for privacy. I also think Charlie knows me well enough to know that I rarely argue with my husband in public.

Perhaps that’s why he shoots me a sympathetic look as he walks past me, telling me silently that even if he agrees with Jaxon’s reasoning for leaving me behind, he also agrees this could’ve been handled better.

Additionally, Otto takes the opportunity to excuse himself and rejoin his co-pilot in the cockpit.

The only person who remains behind is Rachel, who looks visibly amused at the spectacle Jaxon and I are causing. And as much as I’d normally hate causing a scene in front of her, of all people, tonight I don’t give a shit.

In truth, I knew something like this was about to happen before Rachel called me this morning.

That’s because prior to our appointment with Dr. Townsend, I’d been searching for the green dress I wanted to wear and stumbled upon Jaxon’s stashed go-bag, complete with passports, flight plans, wads of cash...and his letter.

I knew he was planning to leave; I just didn’t know when.

...Until Rachel called.

Thankfully, she'd had a suspicion based on how quickly Jaxon wanted to get out of town, and agreed to stall him as long as she could to give me time to gather a few things and meet him here at the airport.

Because I wanted an answer, and an explanation.

I place my hand on the back of the seat next to me, tapping my finger and glaring at my frustrated and semi-guilty looking husband.

"I want to know why?" I demand, my voice low. "Why did you want to leave me behind?"

"Natalie, I didn't *want* to leave you behind," he sighs. "As I said, it was the only way to—"

I interrupt him with a laugh.

"I swear to Christ, Jaxon," I say sarcastically, shaking my head. "If you say that you did this to protect me, I might actually strangle you."

"Of course I did!" He pleads. "You're the love of my life, and you're pregnant with my sons! What kind of husband would I be if I asked you to come with me, on some dangerous mission to some mafia lord's summer home, risking harm to you or our babies?"

"An *honest* one!" I thunder.

"I am honest with you, Natalie. Always. And I honestly love you too much to risk anything happening to you!"

"Even if I believe that's true, I still would at least expect you to have a conversation with me about your plans."

"Trust me, I wanted to tell you about them," he says pleadingly. "But I knew there was no way that you'd be okay with what we are about to do—"

"So your only solution to an uncomfortable conversation is to sneak off into the night without even saying goodbye?" I shout. "Because if so, I find that a bit hypocritical considering how pissed you were when it happened to *you!*"

My husband recoils as if I have slapped him.

Rachel on the other hand tosses her magazine to the side and crosses her arms, smiling up at Jaxon.

"*That,*" he says quietly, pointing to the floor of the plane. "Was not the same thing."

"Welllllllll..." Rachel says, tilting her head.

"Rachel!" I glare at her. "Shut the hell up."

"Oops," She whispers playfully, grabbing her discarded magazine. "My bad."

Jaxon stares at me, as if for once in his life he has no idea what to say, and silence settles over the plane.

“Pardon me, Sir,” Otto says, finally breaking the tension. “Would you like me to go ahead and start preparing for takeoff?”

“No—”

“Yes,” I say firmly, interrupting Jaxon. “I think we’ve already delayed our trip enough.”

If I thought my husband looked shocked before, it’s nothing compared to his face as I say this.

“Nat, you can’t.”

“Oh, yes, I can,” I say with a smile. “Because Ethan, who I suspect was also never on board with this plan, has agreed to stay behind with Jessica and between him, Adam, and the rest of the Pace Family Mafia, I think she’s the safest little girl in America.”

“No, I believe that, I just can’t ask you to come with us,” he says, his brow furrowed. “It’s too dangerous.”

“When is it ever not dangerous, Jaxon? And technically you didn’t *ask* me in the first place,” I fire back. “So now I’m *telling* you that I’m coming with you.”

“But...you’re pregnant,” he scoffs loudly. “Aren’t you not supposed to be flying?”

“I’m a nurse, which means I know full well when I’m no longer allowed to fly, and five months isn’t enough for it to be a concern. Especially on a private jet where I have space to get up and walk around, and especially since I see Dr. Franklin sitting back there with the men,” I say, moving to the left and pointing behind me. “Because you know, you obviously thought it would be a good idea to bring *him*, as well as enough medical supplies for an army. Suffice to say, I think we’re plenty prepared.”

My chest is heaving, and my face feels hot.

“And just so you know,” I say with a smile, narrowing my eyes at him. “If you try and give Wesley, or Charlie, an Alpha Command to take me home, I’ll just get in my car, drive my ass to the airport and fly Italy the old-fashioned way. Though I suspect that the wife of a mafia don flying commercially is probably a risk too, is it not?”

Jaxon inhales sharply, setting his jaw.

Slowly I walk down the aisle toward my visibly furious husband, stopping close enough to him that I can smell his soft cologne.

“So, yes, Otto, you can prepare for takeoff,” I say.

Gently I reach forward and stroke the lapel of Jaxon’s coat before leaning in so that only he can hear me.

“...Because I’m not getting off this fucking plane.”

My eyes find his and I can practically hear the pulse beating furiously inside the throbbing vein in his neck.

There’s no question Jaxon is livid.

But so am I.

“Erm...Sir?” Otto asks. “What is your direction?”

My husband tilts his head to the side and stares at me as if he’s unsure whether or not to be impressed, worried, or absolutely furious. Though my suspicion is on the latter.

“You heard my wife,” he says, still holding my gaze. “Get this plane in the fucking air.”

“Right away, Sir,” the pilot says before he turns to the staff. “Begin pre-flight checks. Now!”

Holy shit. That actually worked.

Honestly, for the entire ride here I’d been preparing for more of a fight, especially in regard to me coming along.

So I don’t put up a fight when Jaxon silently takes my hand, and pulls me toward the back of the plane, and past all of the men doing their debrief with Charlie.

However, the moment he closes the door to the bedroom, my heart begins to pound, unsure of what comes next.

But he answers that immediately, walking toward me, gripping the back of my head and crushing his lips to mine in a deeply passionate kiss.

Whoa.

“You might be the death of me, woman,” he growls. “But fuck I love it.”

“Jaxon, I—” I start to say, but he kisses me once more, this time shoving his tongue into my mouth.

“No,” he whispers against my lips. “I just heard more than enough words from you, Mrs. Pace. So now, the only thing I want to hear right now, is the way you moan my name when you cum.”



After my husband was satisfied with *my* satisfaction, as well as my acceptance of his apology, we curled up under the covers and fell asleep for a few hours. When we woke back up, he decided to explain his reasoning for bringing Rachel along.

Obviously, Rachel was skilled in combat. However, the real reason Jaxon forced her to accompany us was ultimately because of her brother.

When Michael reached out to La Fratellanza, it had intentionally put Jaxon in a very precarious situation. One in which the Pace Family Mafia, who had famously and aggressively kept the sex trade out of the Midwest, now looked weak, and the territory appeared open for the taking.

Refusing to give La Fratellanza a foothold in his city, Jaxon forced Luca to call off the deal, even though he suspected that they would retaliate in some way.

And when they did, showing how far they were willing to go, Jaxon decided to play the long game.

He knew it was only a matter of time before they made contact and when they did, he made sure to spin a very different tale.

Jaxon told them that he was open to the idea, and claimed that he'd instructed Micheal to make inquiries on his behalf. He also took ownership for organizing the deaths of the Mayor and the Police Chief, claiming it was to eliminate any possible hindrances to any expansion.

It was a clever way to make what happened at the Opera, St. Stephens, and Valentine Estate appear to be strategic moves on Jaxon's part, rather than surprise blows from a challenging opponent.

He sold it well enough to convince the representative from La Fratellanza, but now that Michael was conveniently dead, Rachel could be necessary in corroborating this story.

It made sense. It was simply business.

However, Jaxon was surprised as to why Rachel called me.

"She said she thought it seemed odd to her. Not because you were asking but the way you were asking. She said she knew you well enough to know when you were up to something you shouldn't be...or trying to get away with it."

Jaxon lays on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He says nothing for a moment before running his hand through his hair.

“Huh,” he mutters.

“What?”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s never just nothing,” I say, turning on my side so that my belly is touching him. “And I think the whole purpose of our *fight&fuck* a few hours ago, was over poor communication, wouldn’t you agree Mr. Pace?”

He turns to me, rubbing his hand on my pregnant stomach before looking up at me, gently stroking a strand of my hair out of my eyes.

“Just that it seems so strange for her to do that. It’s so uncharacteristic.” Jaxon says quietly. “It was...classy.”

But then his eyes fall from mine, and he sighs.

“Maybe I really did bring out the worst in her,” he says softly. “But you... well, maybe you elicit the best in her.”

“No, Jax,” I scoff quietly.

“Why not?” He asks, his blue eyes finding mine. “You do it with practically everyone else you meet. You have this uncanny ability to bring out the best in people. Your empathy and humanity improves the lives of everyone you come in contact with, and it’s as if somehow that kindness makes them want to do and be more. It’s like a superpower.”

I blush, biting my lip.

“Jaxon, I’m not that cool,” I laugh sheepishly. “It might look that way to you or even like I know what I’m doing but I promise I don’t. I’m just out here winging it the best I can.”

Jaxon smiles, running his thumb down along my cheek.

“That’s just it though, Natalie,” he whispers softly. “Your best is something beautiful to behold. It’s inspiring. I know...because you’ve been inspiring me ever since I saw you sitting on my couch in my office after fighting off a kidnapper.”

Oh my God...

He leans down, cupping my chin and kissing me deeply.

“I realize now that me hiding my plans from you was a mistake. I should’ve trusted you,” he says, his eyes darting between mine. “But I want you to know that it was never because I didn’t want you with me, or because I doubt how capable you are. I don’t. I know *exactly* how incredible you are, and how you light up every room you enter. You are always a sense of peace

and anchorage in my life, no matter how chaotic the world gets, and I'm so fucking lucky I get to call you, my wife."

He kisses me once more, pressing his forehead to mine.

"And selfishly, I'm really glad you stormed onto this plane. Because there is no one I want by my side at the Buyer's Ball this weekend."

His words wash over me, warming me from within and silencing any lingering doubts I had about whether me demanding to come was a good thing.

He wants me here. He needs me.

But then I realize something he just said, and suddenly panic slips into my stomach.

"Oh my God, Jaxon," I gasp, rolling back onto my back and throwing my hands in the air. "The Ball!"

"The Buyer's Ball?" He asks, looking slightly confused.

"Yes!" I breathe. "I forgot to pack a *dress*!"



Chapter Eighteen

JAXON

After a long flight, we safely landed in Barcelona, and even though I'd made hotel reservations, our entourage quickly and discreetly transferred our transportation to the wharf, where my new yacht was waiting for us.

Months ago, I'd ordered the commissioning of The Calliope, a hundred-meter luxury yacht complete with a helicopter pad, trans-atlantic fuel efficiency, and a solar-based back-up power source in the event of an emergency.

But the most impressive part of the Calliope isn't the fact that she has onboard salt-water conversion and filtration systems, or hydroponic vegetable gardens, or even the fact that she can comfortably sleep nearly four dozen guests and sixteen staff.

No, the most impressive part of the ship is her long-range technical capabilities...and her military grade hull.

She isn't just a beautiful ship, she is a living breathing self-sufficient water tank, capable of practically waging a war.

She is a *battleship*.

And considering the hostile territory we are entering; a battleship is exactly what I require.

In order to preserve our anonymity at sea, I made sure that The Calliope wasn't registered to me but rather a shell corporation, inside of another shell corporation. This added layers of protection, ensuring that La Fratellanza would be expecting us to stay on land, and not be disproportionately prepared for our visit.

That being said, the ship itself was *sexy*.

Even Natalie thought so.

"Jaxon, this is beautiful," she says, as we anchor just outside of the port.

She runs her hand along the smooth black resin banister on the third-floor deck.

"It practically needs its own zip code."

I look her over, seeing she's changed from her Chicago spring clothes into a light blue linen dress with long sleeves and an open back.

She's also apparently chosen to forgo a bra, as her perky nipples are now rigid against the thin fabric.

My God, I want them in my mouth so bad.

"Fuck a zip code," I smile, pulling her against me and running my fingers down her spine. "Honestly, fuck humanity altogether. I'm sure we can just have our mail air delivered and sail wherever we want."

Pressing my cock against her thigh, I inhale the scent of her.

Fuck it. I'm having her. Right now.

"You mean," she breathes as I discreetly let my hand slip down her front, and brush against her clothed pussy. "We could disappear?"

"I would happily disappear with you, Mrs. Pace," I whisper, sucking on her earlobe. "But, I'm also happy to have you any way I can get you."

Keeping her pinned between the railing I slip my hand inside the slit on her dress, caressing her soft ass cheek.

"J...Jaxon..." She breathes shakily, gripping the railing as I slowly push her panties aside and stroke along her slit.

"Yes, Baby Girl?" I whisper in her ear.

"What if...what if someone sees us?"

"Then that would be very embarrassing, wouldn't it," I growl, kissing her neck. "My naughty girl, getting wet for Daddy, right on the stern of the ship."

I push my middle finger inside of her, and Natalie moans, in a steady rhythm I work my finger in and out of her, taking my time to swirl it around in the way I know she likes.

"Do you like this, Mrs. Pace?" I ask, feeling her legs starting to shake. "Does it drive you crazy to think that at any point someone could walk out here and find my fingers inside you?"

"Oh God," she groans.

"What if I did this?"

With one hand I unbuckle my belt, and unzip my fly, pulling my rock-hard erection out of my pants and rubbing it along the crack in her ass.

Suddenly to my surprise, she reaches back with one hand and begins to stroke me.

"Mmmm, that's a good girl," I encourage, seeing beads of precum forming on the tip of my cock. "Very, very good girl. You know I think you've earned *two* fingers."

"Jaxon!" she whispers breathlessly as I add in my index finger. "Fuck!"

“Oh, we’re definitely going to do that,” I grin, working my fingers harder and faster inside of her. “After all, I do need to christen our new ship. And I know exactly *what* I want sprayed all over the deck.”

“Oh shit,” she gasps. “No...you don’t mean...”

“Oh but I do. I want you to be a very messy girl for me,” I growl, sucking on her neck. “And then I’m going to make a mess inside of you.”

“Fuckkkkkkk!” Natalie moans, her legs now trembling as I feel her cum starting to drip down my hand.

“Cum for me, Natalie,” I whisper aggressively into her ear. “Give me all of it.”

With my free hand I help her arch her back, giving me better access and allowing me deeper, before reaching around her and using it to rub her swollen clit.

“Jaxon! I’m...I’m...cumming!” She whimpers.

Relentlessly I rub against her G-Spot, forcing her to cum all down my hand and onto the deck.

“Messy girl,” I whisper, slowing my rhythm as Natalie’s body convulses under my fingers. “Such a messy, messy, girl.”

“Oh God,” Natalie whispers sheepishly.

“Don’t be ashamed,” I whisper, grabbing my cock and positioning it at her entrance. “Let me reward you.”

And without another word, I shove myself deep inside her.

“Holy shit,” I groan. “You...you...feel so fucking good, Natalie.”

Every thrust feels incredible, her still-spasming pussy feeling even tighter than usual.

Grinding my hips against her and forcing myself deep inside of her, I reach up and pull down the front of her dress, exposing her erect nipples to the cool breeze off the water.

“Ja...Jaxon!” Natalie gasps, realizing just how exposed she is pressed against the railing.

“Yes, Messy Girl?” I growl.

Taking both her breasts in my hands and kneading them firmly, I flick her nipples with my thumbs making her shudder.

“Now, I’m going to cum inside this perfect fucking pussy, but I want to hear you beg me for it.”

“Please...come inside me,” Natalie whispers.

“Louder,” I growl, pumping faster.

“Come...inside...my pussy,” Natalie moans, with every thrust.

“Beg for it!” I bark, feeling my orgasm building.

“Come inside my pussy, Daddy!” Natalie shouts, throwing her head back.

“What the lady *wants*.”

And with a final thrust I feel her tight little cunt contract around me and I bust deep inside of my beautiful wife while staring at the sunset over Barcelona.

Damn, sometimes it's good to be me.



There are only a handful of Italian families actively fighting La Fratellanza, and only one of them is doing it from within.

Leonardo Andiamo is a dinosaur.

A short, portly man, with a full head of bright white hair, he's a remnant of a time long past, and a descendant of one of the original Italian mafia families.

Unfortunately, in the last decade since La Fratellanza has taken power, he has seen more members of his family butchered than in the last five decades combined.

The fatal blow to his family, however, was when both his brother and his only son were killed in an accidental shoot-out several years ago with another family.

A family that had previously been an ally to the Andiamo family...until Leo had resisted La Fratellanza's assimilation.

Today, he's convinced the accidental shooting wasn't so much of an accident, as it was a deliberate hit. One that was intended to rob him of passing his family's legacy down to an heir.

“It never used to be this way,” he says, sitting on the deck of my ship. “I mean, sure the families had fights occasionally, but there was never this level of unnecessary slaughter. Things were chaotic in the sixties and seventies, but everything calmed down a bit by the mid-eighties. Families were tired of war and burying their loved ones. Most of them just wanted a simple life, and just to survive long enough to see their grandkids grown and settled somewhere, you know?”

Tonight, despite my offer of any top shelf liquor known to man, he drinks a simple Chianti, from a glass and bottle that he brought with him. It's a habit he picked up after his wife was intentionally poisoned by bad wine at a dinner party. Since then, he no longer trusts the hospitality of strangers.

"For a while, everyone just kept to their little section of the country and didn't fuck with anyone else," he continues. "But the brotherhood has completely stripped the Italian mafia of its heritage, and replaced it with something far more macabre and cheap."

He takes another sip of his wine, slowly swirling it around in his glass.

"Unfortunately, there's only a few of us left with the means and resources to resist them. If you try, you're essentially blacklisted and cut off from the community financially."

"How do they do that?" Natalie asks, pulling her sweater tighter around her shoulders.

"They have lots of different ways. They try to dig up any dirt they can possibly find on you, and use it to blackmail you into submission or silence. And on the rare chance that they can't find anything on you, they will employ the rumor mill to make up whatever lies they want. One minute, you could be a well-respected member of the community, the next you're a sexual deviant who murders children. So, naturally, most people don't end up choosing to get on their bad side."

"So, you eventually joined," I ask, sipping my whiskey.

Leo sighs.

"La Fratellanza has killed off my entire family's future," he continues. "And even that wasn't enough. The last threat I received was that they would execute my neighbor's small, handicapped children if I continued to resist them."

"Oh my God," Natalie says, covering her mouth.

"That's the level of depravity these fuckers are willing to sink to ensure your compliance. They are relentless, and they don't care who they hurt as long as they get what they want."

Jesus Christ.

Admittedly, the stories that Leo is divulging to me about La Fratellanza make what Ethan told me about them seem mild.

And if I feel uneasy thinking about the dangers of associating with such a group of people, Natalie looks downright nauseous.

...Or terrified.

“Tell me about Kato Katz,” I say, resting my arm around Natalie’s shoulders. “What family did he come from?”

“That’s the most ironic part about it,” Leo snorts, shaking his head. “No one knows. No one is even sure he’s Italian. Yet his name is whispered in corners like he’s the Boogeyman.”

“No one knows where he came from?” I ask, confused. “How is that even possible?”

“He keeps a very low profile and always wears a disguise. Some people speculate, quietly of course, that he’s disfigured in some way.”

“Which might explain why he’s so callously able to disfigure others for monetary gain.”

“Tell me about the Buyer’s Ball,” I say. “What are we going to be able to get away with bringing inside?”

“Not much. The place is a fortress,” Leo says. “And no guests are allowed weapons inside the mansion. They will have metal detectors and will relieve you of them before you even set foot on the property.”

Natalie glances up at me, a flash of worry in her eyes.

“But I assume they will be armed, correct?” She asks.

Leo nods.

She takes a deep breath.

“Well, I’m not loving *that*,” she says quietly.

“I’ve witnessed three initiations,” Leo sighs. “None of them have been exactly the same. The time of the event is set the day of, to make it more difficult for any kind of risk from intervention by law-enforcement.”

“Has there ever *been* any police intervention?” Natalie asks tentatively.

Leo shakes his head.

“No, but it makes the buyers feel better to know someone is thinking about the potential and there’s a contingency plan in place.”

“So, wait a minute, you’re saying I’ll be notified of the time on the day of the event?” I ask. “How?”

“Could be a phone call,” Leo shrugs, taking a sip of his wine. “Or a text, or an email, or even a parcel.”

I take a deep breath, shaking my head.

“No matter what time it starts, there will be a cocktail hour, for mingling and socialization, before they will do your initiation ceremony.”

He pauses, looking between me and Natalie before sighing heavily.

“...And I’m not sure you were prepared for what that is really going to

involve.”

“What will it involve?”

He hesitates, swallowing hard and offering a sympathetic glance to Natalie.

“Well...murder, usually,” Leo says, closing his eyes and hanging his head. “...Always, actually.”

“Oh, my God” Natalie gasps.

“Again, they want to make sure that they have *leverage* on you, so whatever you do, you can’t let them see you fold,” Leo says, gesturing with his hands. “Because if they even smell hesitance on your part, it’ll be a bloodbath.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused.

“Look, I’ve only seen one other guest chicken out and refuse to join,” Leo says, lowering his voice. “And it wasn’t...well, let’s just say it wasn’t pretty. So, whatever they ask you to do for your initiation, just do it.”

I feel Natalie instantly tense, her reaction mimicking my own.

“What?” I snort incredulously. “I can’t just agree to blindly do whatever they tell me. Obviously, I have a wife and men I need to protect and—”

“They won’t ask you to harm any of your people,” Leo says, shaking his head. “That’s not how they work.”

I feel Natalie releasing the breath held in her lungs.

“...They’ll ask you to harm an innocent,” Leo whispers.

“What?!” Natalie scoffs, unable to contain her disgust and horror any longer.

“Someone you don’t know, that’s never met you, and has no connection to you whatsoever. Because the guilt will weigh on you, and keep you... subservient.”

“That’s...that’s...” Natalie says, shaking.

She looks up at me, looking for me to say something. And I want to, but I also know that this is the extremely grim reality of how other mafia’s can operate.

I nod, squeezing her shoulder and pulling her closer to me.

“It’s alright,” I say, whispering in her ear. “I know.”

My stomach tightens, seeing the look in Natalie’s eyes, telling me that she might have sat through about as much of this conversation as she can handle.

“Sweetheart,” I say gently, rubbing her back. “If you want, I can finish out this conversation with our guest if maybe you want to get some air?”

She bites her bottom lip and nods.

“Alright,” I smile, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ll come find you in a little bit.”

I wink at her as she stands to her feet, letting her know that I truly do understand this is a lot to stomach.

“It was very nice to meet you, Mr. Andiamo,” she says politely. “Please excuse me, I’m just feeling a little tired. You know, the baby...well, *babies*.”

She touches her stomach delicately.

Wrapping my arm around her waist I pull her to me, kissing her stomach.

“It was nice to meet you too, Mrs. Pace,” Leo smiles graciously.

“Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

Natalie excuses herself, and with Wesley diligently on her heels, heads down the deck toward the sleeping quarters.

“Sweet girl,” Leo says, with a nod. “Where did you find her?”

“I didn’t,” I chuckle. “She found me. Stumbled into my hotel one day and chewed me out. Well, more or less.”

Leo laughs for a second, before his face falls for a minute.

“I’d ask you if you were sure you wanted to do this,” he says solemnly.

“But sadly, I think you’re in too deep now to get out.”

I stiffen, my own anxieties building.

“What is the status with the girls?” I ask.

“The girls are being held at my estate. And while they are protected, and well looked after, I’m sure Katz is already aware they are there.”

“When will he be...calling on them?”

“To be honest, I don’t know,” Leo shrugs. “He could come get them tonight, or tomorrow, or in a week. No one ever knows his methods or motivations. But...”

His voice trails off, a sad look in his eye that immediately makes my chest tighten.

“But?”

He pauses, inhaling sharply but then biting his lip.

“If it were me, and I was the man that you’d aggressively denied for the better part of a decade,” Leo sighs. “Well, I’d want a spectacle of bringing you onside.”

It’s then that I understand.

“You think he wants to parade them?” I ask. “Like...spoils of war?”

Leo says nothing. But then again, he doesn't have to.
In this instance, the old man reads as open as a book.
He's afraid...for me.

"I won't be his spectacle," I growl. "Nor will I allow them to be."

Leo stares at me, smiling politely and nodding slowly.

"You've got guts kid I'll give you that," he says sympathetically. "But after meeting that beautiful wife of yours and seeing how much you love her...I feel like I should at least warn you that at least a dozen families have tried to resist them resulting in their total annihilation. And if you fail, they won't just kill everyone you've brought with you to Italy. They will kill everyone."

"You're still here," I point out with a nod. "They didn't kill you."

He shakes his head.

"They killed my soul," he whispers. "I resisted for as long as I could, but after they killed everyone I loved, and threatened to harm *more* innocent children on my behalf, I gave in. I let them make me *the spectacle*. And I regretted that too. Ended up being forced to do things I can never forgive myself for."

He looks up at me, his pain and guilt written on his face.

"To take another innocent life."

"The initiation," I breathe.

He closes his eyes, tears now streaking down his cheeks.

"So how are you...coping?" I ask. "If they are forcing you to kill people?"

"They don't ask me anymore," he snorts, shaking his head. "These days, with this hair, I just act old and senile every time they come knocking. After all, no one hires a hitman with a shaky trigger finger, do they? Especially when there's always some young gun with a steady hand, ready and willing to sign over his soul for a new Maserati and a bag full of cash."

Damn.

"Hey," he says, forcing a smile. "If playing old and crazy saves me from having to knowingly hand over more innocent women to be sliced up and shipped off to sadistic elitists, then I'll happily be whatever jester they require."

For a brief moment, I can see the pain of Leo reflected in his eyes. The man has lost everyone and everything he cares about, and after holding out for so long, he was still forced to make a deal with the devil.

But here he is, still trying to fight back in the little ways he can. And for

that reason alone, I respect him.

“I can’t promise that we’ll win, Leo,” I say quietly. “But I can promise that I’ll do what I can to help restore a little bit of pride to your name and legacy.”

He smiles politely before staring down at his fingers gingerly resting on the bottom of the wine glass.

“As I said, kid, I’m an old man now, I wake up every day in pain and go to bed every day in pain. After you’ve closed the casket on the love of your life, or held your dying son as he bled out on a street corner, pride isn’t something you care about anymore.”

However, then he looks up at me, with a ferocious fire burning in his eyes.

“But I did make a promise,” he says darkly. “I promised myself the last thing I’d do would be to go out swinging against La Fratellanza. To me, that would be an honorable death, something those bastards denied my wife and son.”

I stare back at him, unable to think of anything to say in response.

“I’ve already lost everyone I love, so it’s no longer about legacy or pride for me.”

“Then what then?”

“It’s about *revenge*.”



After seeing Leonardo back to his boat, I find Natalie on the top deck of the ship, wrapped in a blanket, staring up at the moon hanging high above the water.

If I’m honest, Leonardo had left me with more than just a better understanding of La Fratellanza. He’d left me with a whole new slew of anxieties and worries too.

Worries about what would happen to the people I love, should anything go awry in our plan.

Worries if I’d bitten off more than I could reasonably chew.

And worries that once again, Natalie had been faced with the dark grim reality of what life with a mafia don for a husband...and father...could mean.

I step up behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist and burying my

face in her neck inhaling her sweet scent. Instinctively, my hands drift down to her belly, and she leans back against me.

We stand like this for several minutes in complete silence, with me spiraling inside my own head.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper softly.

“For what?”

“For not being a doctor, or a lawyer or even just a regular old billionaire playboy dickhead,” I sigh. “Your life would’ve been a hell of a lot safer if I hadn’t been the Don Supreme.”

She’s quiet for a moment before turning around to face me.

Her mossy green eyes scan mine before she leans in and kisses me deeply.

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “It wouldn’t have been. Because that just means that someone else would’ve been the Don Supreme, and these bad men, who do bad things would still be out in the world doing bad things to innocent people.”

“But Natalie,” I say, my words nearly choking in my throat. “I *am* one of those bad men.”

“No, Jax,” she says, smiling up at me. “You’re just a *man*. A man who has both light and dark inside of him, but who also has the means and the will to do what he can to protect innocent people from the really bad men. A man who could very easily choose to sit comfortably back on his hands and do nothing, but who instead decides to thrust his hands into the muck and fire and get dirty. You’re the man who stands between the truly innocent and the truly damned and who balances the scales.”

Gently she reaches up and cups my face in her hands, kissing me once more.

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good men to do nothing,” she says, her eyes welling with tears. “And you are a man who is willing to *do* something. You are a good man, Jaxon Pace. And you are, and have always been, exactly who I need you to be.”



Chapter Nineteen

NATALIE

It takes us a few days to reach the Italian town of Palermo.

After talking it over with Jaxon, some pleading, and agreeing to take Wesley, Josiah, Deylan and Travis with me, he finally agrees to let me go into town to see about finding something to wear to the Buyer's Ball.

But there was one other person I also wanted to come with me: Rachel.

Perhaps it was because I knew that being cooped up on the yacht, without Adam, or at least minions to torment, had to feel somewhat suffocating for her.

Or perhaps it was because I also just wanted a women's opinion.

The afternoon started off like one would expect with Rachel Valentine.

First she complained about jet lag.

Then she complained about the sun being too bright.

Then she complained about the walking distance between shops.

But then something interesting happened.

When we left the third store, that once again had nothing to fit my pregnant body, I think Rachel could sense my growing frustration and panic.

...And insecurity.

I've never been unhappy with my body, but I've rarely felt entirely comfortable in it either. And I've certainly never seen it as remarkable as Jaxon seemed to see it.

But this was the first time I felt like I didn't even know it anymore.

Obviously, I knew my body was changing, but every dress I seemed to pick, thinking it might fit me, would be too tight in the chest, the arms, or too snug on the hips.

As I could neither speak nor read Italian, trying to gauge the appropriate size of any dress I selected became a total guessing game. And after four straight hours of losing that game, I was ready to concede.

To her credit, this is when Rachel stopped complaining, and started actively trying to encourage and help me.

She'd try and test the elasticity of the fabric I selected, and search for options among the racks.

But as I wiggled myself out of yet another dress that didn't fit, I could feel my composure slipping, and I was practically on the verge of tears.

"No luck?" She asks delicately, shooting me a sympathetic smile as she takes the dress from me.

I shake my head and bite my lip, certain that if I open my mouth to say something, I might actually cry.

Damn pregnancy boobs. And pregnancy hormones.

However, just when I'm about to give up hope, I hear the woman behind the counter speaking in English to a tall, thin beautiful blonde woman, my hope immediately reignites.

Making my way over to them, I politely wait my turn while looking at a pair of pretty champagne colored teardrop earrings on a little rack.

"Yes?" The clerk suddenly says, sounding annoyed. "What do you want?"

"Oh, hi there!" I smile, tucking my hair behind my ear. "I really don't mean to interrupt your conversation, but I saw that you sell some long evening dresses. And I'm looking to purchase something but obviously I might need some alter—"

"No," she says, deliberately looking at me up and down. "We don't have anything in your, erm...*size*."

The tall, thin, blonde chuckles to herself, clicking her tongue inside her mouth.

"Oh...um...well, okay," I say quietly, feeling my cheeks heat. "Thank you anyway."

Well, that went horribly. And now I feel even more insecure.

Feeling the impending burn behind my eyes I quickly turn to leave, wanting to be as far away from this shop as I can possibly get.

However, before I've even reached the door, I suddenly hear a woman rattling off angrily in Italian.

But when I turn to see who is so upset, I see that the pissed off customer is Rachel.

What the...?

Since I don't speak Italian, I have no idea what Rachel is saying, but it's obvious given her tone and violent hand gestures that she's very clearly scolding the shocked salesgirl.

Her voice lowers, and her face darkens, and I happen to make out the words "*Jaxon Pace*" as well as "*Pace Famiglia Mafia*."

That's the moment the snooty clerk's face goes white.

Holy Shit. Rachel just told her who I am.

The salesclerk quickly regains her faculties and turns to me remorsefully.

“Mrs. Pace, I—”

“No!” Rachel snaps, wagging her finger. “Tsk. Tsk. Too late to apologize now, honey.”

She starts to walk toward me but then suddenly changes her mind, turning back around and storming over to the counter. Yanking the earrings, I’d been playing with off the rack, she tosses a few euros at the girl behind the counter.

“Oh, and by the way,” Rachel says venomously. “Body-shaming a pregnant woman? That’s ugly. Just like your fucking dresses.”

She flips her hair and storms toward me.

“Now we can go,” she growls, ushering me through the door with the terrified clerk continuing to offer her apologies.

The two of us pour out onto the packed Italian street.

The minute that Wesley and Deylan see us, they quickly start to make their way over to us.

“What was that?” I gasp, still partially dumbfounded.

“What was what?”

“You speak Italian?”

“A little. Just the important stuff,” Rachel shrugs before grinning wickedly at me. “Like how to tell someone off.”

I snort, slightly bemused.

We stand here, in the crowded street, both of us staring at each other.

“So now where are we going?” She asks. “There’s a few more shops on the next street I think, based on the little chatter I could decipher inside the shop.”

“Chatter?” I ask. “What...were they saying?”

She looks at me, pursing her lips, silently telling me that I probably shouldn’t ask questions I don’t really want to know the answers to.

They were likely talking badly about me.

“Actually, no,” I sigh, looking around. “I think I’ve had enough snobby shop girls for one day.”

I casually rub my hand over my stomach.

“...And trying to find a dress over a size six here is just a masochistic pipe dream, apparently.”

Rachel raises her brows but nods, crossing her arms.

“Well then, if we’re done shopping, maybe we could get some food? I’m getting hungry,” she says, looking around. “I can only imagine you *three* are starving.”

She looks up at me, the slight smile on her face indicating that her little joke was intended to be playful, and not mean spirited.

I grin.

“The three of us certainly wouldn’t say no to food. Especially when in Italy.”



An hour later, Rachel and I gorged ourselves at a little café.

Every dish that the waiter brought to us seemed to be better than the last, and we couldn’t even finish the last course.

Though Wesley and Deylan, who joined us at the table next to us, were more than happy to take it out of our hands, much to the disgust of the ever-professional Josiah.

“So when did you learn Italian,” I say, shaking my head. “Because that was...impressive.”

“My old tutor taught me. He insisted that I know a bit about my heritage.”

“Oh, forgive me. I didn’t know you were Italian. I could’ve sworn Jaxon told me that the Valentines were Scottish.”

“We are,” she smirks at me. “But my tutor always told me I could be anything I wanted. And when I was nine, I watched this documentary on life in Italy, and told him afterwards that I wanted to be Italian. He went along with it.”

“He taught you the language? Just like that?”

She nods.

“He spoke twelve languages, so it wasn’t difficult for him, and I was really into it so...you know. Easier to teach a kid things they actually care about learning.”

“That’s actually really sweet,” I say with a smile. “That he was supportive.”

“I think he was more relieved,” she chuckles. “When I was eight, I told him I wanted to be a bank robber, so this was an improvement.”

Rachel stares at me, her face blank.

But then she cracks, a playful smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth and that's when it happens.

For the first time, maybe ever, the two of us burst into laughter. And not the courteous kind of laughter that you might experience at some awkward dinner party or with a colleague at the office.

But the kind of laugh that makes your sides hurt, and tears stream down your cheeks.

"God," I say, after a good minute of gut-busting laughter. "I can't even say how much I needed that."

"Fuck," she says, dabbing at her eyes. "I probably did too. The past eight months have been..."

"Insane," I finish for her.

She snorts. "Yeah, I don't think I can argue with you there."

I take a deep breath, sitting back against the chair.

"Shit, has it really been that long?" She asks, taking a sip of her wine.

"Close to it," I nod. "Though, for a while, all the days and weeks and months kind of blended together. It was like a non-stop rollercoaster."

"Yeah..." she says, her eyes finding mine before quickly looking away.

Silence settles over the table, but this moment is special somehow.

After everything we'd been through, it's beautiful to know that somehow, we ended up here, having lunch together in Palermo Italy, on the cusp of one of the most dangerous missions The Pace Family Mafia had ever attempted.

There's a serene simplicity to it.

And although she doesn't want people to know, there's far more to her than most people realize.

Even though we had the most chaotic and rocky introduction, and even though I'd hated her at points for the pain she caused me.

I knew there was good in her.

For me it was the moment she saved Jaxon's life the night of the council meeting that had given me a glimpse into the heart that beat within her chest. Only to be confirmed when she'd *personally* gone back for Ethan, and the rest of the Alpha Squad, knowing that if she didn't they would surely die.

Even the situation with the Benefit Bitch who was trying to flirt with my husband, or Rachel calling me to tell me about Jaxon's secret flight to Italy or even what just happened with the salesclerk who was being rude to me— Rachel had stood up for me.

She'd done it in her way, on her terms. But she did it.
...For me.

It occurs to me that Rachel may want me to paint her as the villain simply because that's what she's *used* to. Friendship requires vulnerability and that likely terrifies her more than my hatred ever could.

Jaxon used to compare Rachel to a wounded animal being vicious out of pain or fear. But right now, she's more like a baby doe, trying to assimilate into unfamiliar territory.

But despite my eagerness for a permanent ceasefire, and for the four of us to enter a more cohesive chapter of our life as a blended family, I know I can't push her faster than she's willing to go.

Or she might bolt.

So, for now, I just sit with my husband's ex-baby mama, appreciating the crazy road that brought us here.



“Well, at least they had some floor length stuff,” I shrug, stepping back out onto the street two hours later. “And it could make it over my tits.”

“Uh huh,” Rachel says as we step out onto the street.

“What?” I ask. “This is a good thing. I have a dress.”

“It is a...dress,” Rachel says, raising her brows.

“Wait, you don't like it?”

“Do you?”

I scoff.

“Yes!”

“Oh, okay then.”

“Seriously?!” I laugh, gently grabbing her by the arm and stopping her.

“You don't like it? Honestly?”

“I hate it,” Rachel says flatly.

“What?!”

“You asked!” She says defensively.

“It's a long black dress,” I say, folding my arms. “It's perfectly practical.”

“Yeah, for someone like *me*!” She says, gesturing to herself. “But you are the wife of billionaire Don Supreme Jaxon Pace. You don't need to look

practical; you need to look like the goddamn Regina Vestra!”

“Rachel—”

“Well, well, so it is true,” a sultry woman’s voice, with a soft Russian accent interrupts me. “Jaxon Pace really did get married.”

I turn, and realize that standing beside Rachel and I is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. And it also occurs to me that she is the woman from the shop earlier today, who’d been talking with the salesclerk.

“And here I thought you’d said that just to cause a scene.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, narrowing my eyes at her. “Do we know you? Should we?”

Nodding to Wesley, he quietly approaches, shortening the distance between us and the safety of his gun.

“She does,” The woman laughs, flipping her hair back. “Don’t you...*Rachel*.”

She shoots Rachel a nasty grin before turning her vicious gaze to me.

“Well, I don’t know who you are,” I say, crossing my arms. “So perhaps you can stop playing cat and mouse with me and just tell me who the heck you are?”

“She’s Polina Antonov,” Rachel says, staring at her.

“As in...Roman Antonov?” I ask, looking between Rachel and the blonde woman now glaring at her viciously.

“As in, the Roman Antonov who almost brokered a business arrangement by offering my hand in marriage...”

“Good for you—”

“...To your husband.”

My heart stops.

What did she just say?

“Didn’t pan out though,” she shrugs, before her eyes end up returning to Rachel. “Because someone just had to go and get knocked up right before.”

And speaking of Rachel, it’s at this moment I see just how pale her face has turned.

“Yeah we had a little thing going on,” the blonde woman smiles, flipping her hair. “So, when he called off the engagement—”

“There never was any engagement, and he never wanted to marry you,” Rachel fires back. “He made that abundantly clear; you just weren’t listening.”

The blonde woman glares at Rachel, before stepping closer to her.

“You know, I heard about what happened to you, that night at the club,” she sneers quietly. “Such an unfortunate accident you know...that you *survived*. Not at all what I’d intended.”

What the hell is she talking about?

Rachel says nothing, but I see her chest heaving and her hands balling into fists.

“You fucking bitch!” Rachel says, lunging at Polina, only to be stopped by Wesley’s arm around her waist. “Let me go!”

“No, please, by all means,” Polina says teasingly. “Go ahead and hit me. Let’s have a scene right here in the town square.”

Wesley carries Rachel a few feet away from Polina and I and sets her down, trying to tell her to calm down.

“Rachel!” He cautions. “We cannot draw attention to ourselves. Not here.”

“Well, that was easy enough,” Polina laughs, batting her lashes at me. “It’s always easier to get under the skin of the hotheads. They just need a tiny push in the right direction.”

I turn and see Rachel storming off toward an alley.

“Which just leaves you...”

Looking back at Polina I see she’s crossed her arms across her chest and is now looking me up and down.

“I’m assuming that because I’ve never heard of you that you’re not from our world...or probably even good breeding.”

“Where I come from, is none of your business,” I say, turning up my nose to her. “Do you think I care about my family’s social status, when I have Jaxon Pace making love to me every night? Why no, no I don’t.”

She narrows her eyes at me, her lip curling.

“You’ll never be able to keep him, you know,” she says smugly. “Men like him, well, they wander.”

“You don’t know any men like him,” I fire back. “Though, now that you mention it, I must admit I find it a bit odd for you to be so obsessed with my husband after all these years when I’ve never even heard your name before today. Says a lot doesn’t it. Are you still having trouble letting go?”

“Bit ironic for you to say that considering you’re the one still keeping company with her husband’s baby mama,” Polina snorts, clicking her tongue. “Though I must admit I never saw him as the settling down type, especially after all the years he spent fucking every single whore in the state.”

“People change,” I growl. “Because that’s exactly who he is now. With me.”

“And how long have you been with him?”

“Longer than you, bitch.” I fire back.

She chuckles darkly.

“So not long then.”

“Well, I guess when you know what you want, you just know,” I shrug venomously, flashing my wedding band at her. “And strangely enough, it’s the same as when you know what you don’t want. So maybe you should take a hint and quit pining over a man who clearly never thought twice about you.”

She glares at me.

“Now you listen to me you little cunt,” she snaps. “You have absolutely no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“And neither do you,” I growl, my voice low and lethal. “But I can assure you that I am just as dangerous as my husband, and just as ruthless when it comes to defending the people I love.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It’s a fucking fact,” I hiss. “So, I suggest you fuck off now before I have my bodyguard dispose of you.”

It’s at this particular moment that Wesley steps up beside me, fingering his gun on his belt.

“Is there a problem here, Mrs. Pace?” He asks.

“No,” I snap, interrupting Polina before she replies. “Miss Antonov was just leaving.”

Polina glares at me, and then at Wesley before smiling sweetly.

Without a word, she turns and walks off down the street.

But just as I’m turning to talk to Rachel, I realize that she’s nowhere to be found.

“She’s down the alley over there, Mrs. Pace,” Wesley says, without turning his gaze from the retreating bitchy Antonov sister.

Shit.

“Rachel!” I call, sprinting after her.

Well, maybe not *sprinting*, exactly.

“Rach,” I say breathlessly as I round the corner.

Thankfully, however, she didn’t make it far into the alley.

But when I see her collapse back against the wall, clutching her chest and

struggling to breathe, I realize that Rachel is spiraling.

“Stay here, okay?” I say to Wesley.

“Yes, ma’am!” He nods. “Deylan, go around to the other entrance and cover it. Let no one in or out.”

“On it!”

I walk over to her, hearing her trembling rapid breathing.

“Hey, hey,” I say gently, placing my hand on her shoulder. “It’s alright. It’s okay—”

“No, it’s not okay!” Rachel blurts out, slapping my hand away. “That woman...that bitch! She...she’s the reason I got...that I got...”

Her voice trails off and her eyes glaze over, her lip beginning to tremble.

Knowing Rachel, the way I have come to know her in the last year, her reaction stuns me to my very core and that’s when I understand two things at the exact same time:

Something terrible had clearly happened to Rachel.

And Polina had been the reason.

So despite her pushing me away, I step toward her and pull her into a tight hug.

And for the first time, *ever*, Rachel Valentine falls apart...sobbing into my arms.



Once Rachel and I made it back to the ship, I sent the men away and the two of us settled into two hammock beds under the awning of the top deck.

That’s where she told me the story of what happened with Polina.

How Polina had been excited when her father proposed an engagement between her and Jaxon. But even if he had messed around with Polina, or at least indulged her relentless advances, he’d never been seriously interested in her in that way, only ever seeing it as a business deal.

And when Rachel got pregnant with Jessica, it effectively snuffed out any chance of that deal ever going through.

She walked me through the complicated night of the fight, where her and Jaxon had officially broken up in the alley behind the club and he’d walked off leaving her there.

Tearfully, she recounted how because of that, she'd agreed to get into a car with four men, offering her a ride home, only to kidnap her and rape her. For days.

Until Jaxon came to her rescue, and had doled out the worst punishment the syndicate had ever seen.

But no amount of torture or punishment could ever undo what had been done to Rachel, or how drastically her life changed after it happened.

So hearing Polina say that she had somehow had a hand in the worst thing that had ever happened to Rachel, made my blood boil.

And after getting the full story, I wish I would've just let Wesley shoot her.

Eventually the relentless sun begins to weigh on both of us, and we decide to head inside for a nap.

I fell into a restless sleep, tossing and turning, and only getting comfortable when Jaxon slipped in behind me, holding me tightly. The two of us slept like this for a few hours, waking just as the sun was beginning to set.

When I wake, I can hear the sound of the seagulls chirping from the bay outside.

Slowly I turn to face him, finding he's left his pants on but has removed his shirt.

Gently I brush a lock of his chestnut brown hair across his forehead. His eyes twitch, but his breathing is steady and calm, and his usually tense jaw is relaxed.

God, he's so fucking beautiful like this.

I must admit it's kind of wild to think he loves me, especially in the all-encompassing way that he does.

All of the women he's been with before me have all gotten a very different version of this man than I have.

Rachel, Polina, Britta, and the countless other women who have loved him, experienced a very one-sided or at least very imbalanced kind of love with Jaxon Pace.

They put him first, only to be disappointed when he didn't return the courtesy.

But with me he does.

His love is empowering, giving me strength when I have none of my own left.

This impossible man loves me so impossibly well, that he can make me feel like I'm the center of his universe, while never taking away my power or my voice.

I love him. With every fiber of my being, I love him.

"Hello, Αγαπημέν," Jaxon says softly, startling my mental love fest. "Did you sleep well?"

"Very, but only after you snuggled in behind me."

He pulls me into his arms.

"Good," he says, kissing my forehead. "Because I have a surprise for you."

"A what?" I ask, scrunching up my face.

He looks down, taking my hand in his and pulling it up between our bodies.

"Well, Rachel texted me."

"Oh..." I say, slightly confused.

"She said you couldn't find a dress," he continues.

"I found a dress!" I scoff.

"...And she also said that the one you did end up going with isn't fit for someone of your... *status*."

"Pssh!" I say, rolling my eyes. "It's fine!"

"For the record "fine" is not a word I ever intend on tolerating with you, my darling wife," he says, pulling my chin up to kiss him. "Unless of course, it's to describe that ass of yours."

He slips his hand down my back and squeezes my backside firmly in his strong hands.

Oh my...

"But," he sighs, releasing me. "Considering we've only got him for a few days, I suppose we probably shouldn't waste time while he's here."

"Here?" I ask. "Who's here?"

"Oh, just a guest. Perhaps you've heard of him—Fratzi Delatoro."

My jaw drops.

"Fratzi? As in...the Fratzi from Delator Couture?!"

"The one and only," Jaxon grins. "And he's upstairs, waiting for you...to design you a dress fit for a *queen*."



Chapter Twenty

JAXON

“You’re sure it was her?”

“Rachel sent me a text after their encounter at the shop,” I sigh. “And I know that given their...history...I believe that it really was Polina.”

Roman stares back at me through the screen on my computer, before rubbing his chin, and sitting back against the chair.

“Fuck.”

“What are the chances she’s dress shopping for an evening gown in Palermo, three days before the Buyer’s Ball?” I say, biting my lip. “That’s too many coincidences. And I don’t believe in those.”

“No, neither do I,” Roman sighs, cursing under his breath.

“So, I’m wondering if we should go with Plan B,” I say, running my hand through my hair.

Roman sighs and nods.

“I can try. But this couldn’t be happening at a worse time. I’ve got a thousand fires I’m putting out. Including my brother at the moment.”

“How is Nikolai?”

“Drying out in a cell at my dead father’s mansion,” Roman replies. “It was the only way to get him to stop killing everyone.”

“Jesus,” I say quietly. “Why? What happened?”

“A woman.”

Roman rolls his eyes dramatically. Shaking his head.

“But that’s a story for another time, right now we have a bigger problem in Polina.”

“If she’s there, I promise I’ll do everything I can to get her out for you,” I say begrudgingly. “I know what it’s like to want your own revenge. I won’t take that from you.”

“It’s not just me who wants revenge, it’s Abigail,” Roman says, waving his hand. “If it were me, I’d tell you to shoot her on sight and save yourself the plane fuel to bring her back. For me, dead is dead. But for my wife, who suffered at Polina’s hands...well...let’s just say a bullet would be anticlimactic. She wants to deliver the final blow herself.”

I snort.

“Don’t go getting all romantic and soft on me now, brother,” I tease. “You’ll make me lose my dinner.”

“Fuck off, Pace,” Roman chuckles darkly. “You know how it is with women, you’d give up your own kidney to give them what they want.”

I look up through the glass panel on my ship’s office door, seeing Natalie, standing in the evening gown Fratzi and Rachel are literally sewing on her body.

I hear my phone chime in my pocket.

“Yeah, I do,” I sigh, a slight smile tugging at my lips.

“Speaking of,” he says, looking away from the camera and gesturing aggressively. “Apparently, I also have a hungry and hormonal pregnant wife signaling to me that she is hungry. So, before she cuts off my balls and sews them on my face, I suppose I should probably take her to dinner.”

“You two have the most disturbing past times,” I say, laughing quietly to myself. “And yet somehow it’s still on brand for you.”

“Alright, well—wait,” Roman says, his face turning serious. “I’ll see what I can do about Plan B, but if I can’t make it happen, I’m sure you’ve got it covered.”

“I do.”

“And you do get your name on the list you promised that FBI fuckface...”

“I’ll make sure the Antonov name isn’t on it,” I smile. “Or Polina’s.”

Roman smirks and nods.

After the two of us end our call, I sink back into my chair and watch Natalie as she continues to pose. Meanwhile, Fratzi bustles around her like a honeybee, putting the finishing touches on her gown.

Leo was right, the man really is a genius, and this dress looks nothing like the simple black one she bought yesterday.

The exquisite emerald-green fabric has an almost ethereal quality about it, and the high slit up her thigh showcases her perfect pale skin. And while Natalie’s tits have always looked good in a plunging neckline, the pregnancy has made them swell even more.

I’ve always thought Natalie was a beautiful girl, but she’s been positively radiant ever since she’s started to show. And for some unknown reason I find all the small subtle changes to her body to be incredibly sexy. Everything from the increased softness of her skin, to the elevated sensitivity and darkening of her perfect nipples. And if all that wasn’t already enough, an

unexpected added benefit is the fact that her libido has been off the charts lately, and she now gets insanely wet whenever we fuck.

However, I do love her embarrassment whenever we have to change the sheets.

Smiling, I watch as she looks down, gently rubbing her hand across her baby bump.

Babies that *I* put inside her.

I have to adjust myself in my chair, as my cock begins to swell.

Shit. I want her. No, I need her. Right this minute.

But just as I'm about to walk over to their room and steal my wife for a late-afternoon fuck, I hear my phone chime.

Looking down I see I have two text messages.

Leo:

3:49pm: Cars arrived and collected the girls. We had no warning.

Unknown:

3:57pm: Impressive tribute, Mr. Pace. I'm sure they will fetch a fine price. A car will be waiting for you tomorrow night at the Marina at 9:30. As the guest of honor, don't be late.

Holy shit. It's happening. Tomorrow.



Fratzi Delatoro was obviously a hit with Natalie, and had actually taken the dress Natalie bought for herself and taken it in enough so that Rachel could wear it, making it slightly more glamorous in the process.

And for at least a brief moment on this trip, The Calliope had heard the giggling laughter of women, and my wife had something to smile about.

That was until Fratzi left, and I had to inform her, Rachel, and the entire Alpha Squad that our plan to rescue the girls and take out La Fratellanza was on for tomorrow night.

What followed was an intensive night of strategy, restless sleep, and

contingency plan after contingency plan.

We confirmed our intel with Levi and Glow learning what we could from the tracking software and surveillance drones.

Breakfast was quiet, and even the men seemed lost in their own thoughts, knowing that this would be the biggest battle we'd faced as a mafia.

Natalie and I took dinner in our suite, wanting to spend the next few hours alone together just in case...

Second by second the hours ticked by, the impending battle looming over us like a storm off the coast.

Eventually we could delay no longer and began getting ready. Natalie hopped into the shower as I started to shave the five o'clock shadow that had been sprinkling on my chin.

However, it isn't long before I hear Natalie grunting from inside the shower.

"You alright in there?" I ask, raising a brow.

"I'm fine," she calls.

But as I rinse my razor off for the final time in the sink, I can still hear her grunting and shuffling around in the shower.

I'm about to ask once more, if she really is okay, when I hear her sigh loudly.

"Actually, Jax," she says defeatedly. "No, I'm not."

After wiping the remnants of shaving cream off my chin and neck I walk over to the shower door and crack it ever so slightly.

"What can I do for you, hotcakes," I say with a wink, my eyes instinctively falling slowly over her wet naked body.

She opens her mouth to say something, before quickly closing it again. That's when I see the razor in her hand, and her bottom lip suddenly starts to tremble, and I understand.

"Nothing, it's just I can't shave my legs," she suddenly blurts out, she says crossing her arms across her body. "I can barely even bend over anymore!"

"Nat," I breathe sympathetically, stepping into the shower with her and pulling her against my chest. "It's okay."

"But it's not okay," she sobs, heaving softly. "First, I couldn't fit into any of the dresses at the shop, and since I didn't speak the language, I didn't know how to express what I wanted, so I just looked stupid. But I've just never felt so...so..."

“Beautiful?” I ask, kissing the top of her wet hair.

But somehow this just makes her sob harder.

Shit. Maybe that was the wrong thing to say?

Unsure of what to do, I simply just hold her tightly against my chest.

“I’m not complaining,” she snuffles. “I mean, I’m a nurse. I understand that all of this is just part of the natural process of pregnancy. But my back hurts, my ankles are swollen, I’m crying all the time, and I’m exhausted just washing my hair.”

I rub her arm, gently holding her under the warm water.

“And I know that this is probably just the start of third-trimester hormones for the litter I’m carrying over here, or maybe I’m just feeling a bit self-conscious.”

“Nat,” I say softly.

“...But I *know* how important this event is,” she continues. “And I feel bad because I know you need me to be Natalie Pace, your wife, and Regina Vestra and all that badass stuff, and I’m trying to find my confidence to be that for you—”

“Natalie,” I say, pulling away from her ever so slightly and gripping her chin, making sure to find her eyes before I continue.

“You don’t need to be anything for me.”

“But—”

“No,” I say firmly. “I need you to hear me. I love you, in every single form, at every single stage in your life. On the good days, and bad days, and all the days in between. For richer, for poorer, better or worse, and all those things I promised you when I married you.”

“Jaxon,” she says, placing her hand on my chest.

I lean in to kiss her softly, before placing my forehead against hers.

“I fall more in love with you every day, Natalie,” I smile. “Why? Because you *are* my wife, my Regina, the future mother of my children. You are my little badass every fucking day, without even trying.”

I cup her cheek, and kiss her passionately, before kissing down her neck, hearing her breathe in sharply. Gently, I step behind her wrapping my hands on the underside of her stomach and gently pulling upwards.

“You are carrying my *sons*, Natalie,” I whisper, kissing her neck. “And you’re doing it, in the middle of this whole mess, with strength and grace, like the fucking warrior you are.”

She throws her head back against my chest.

“You can keep saying nice things like that,” she moans softly. “But you have no idea how good that feels.”

I chuckle softly against her skin, continuing to hold her under the warm water. After a few minutes, I gently release her and turn her around to face me.

“But moreover,” I say, locking eyes with her as I intentionally kiss down her breasts, and drop slowly onto one knee in front of her. “I need you to understand that I love your body now, as much as I loved it when I met you.”

I trail both my hands down her stomach, leaving kisses all the way to the scar from the gunshot.

“Lift your leg,” I say, gently pulling her calf and setting it on my bent knee before grabbing the shaving cream from the shelf to my left. “And I’ll take that razor too.”

“Jaxon,” Natalie breathes nervously. “What are you doing?”

“What I also promised you on our wedding day,” I say, taking her pink razor from her shaking fingers. “I promised to worship you, did I not?”

“What?!”

“Are you comfortable standing like this? Or would you rather I pull the chair in here for you?”

Natalie’s eyes widen and her jaw drops.

“I...I can’t ask you to actually help me...*shave*,” Natalie cringes.

“You’re not asking,” I say, spraying some of the shaving cream into my palm. “And I’m not going to *help* you shave, my darling wife. I’m just going to *do* it for you.”

“Oh my god,” she groans sheepishly.

She has no way of knowing, but I think she’s adorable whenever she gets a little vulnerable.

...And she also gets incredibly wet.

Though I can’t think about that right this second. She needs my help, which is something that is incredibly hard for her to admit to me.

“Mrs. Pace,” I say calmly, laying a gentle kiss on the inside of her thigh while rubbing the cream up her calf. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What was the question?” she trembles.

“Do you need to sit down, or are you comfortable standing?” I ask, massaging her calf with my thumbs.

Natalie bites her bottom lip.

“I won’t be asking a third time,” I grin. “I’ll just be getting you a chair.”

“I...I’m fine standing,” she whispers, closing her eyes.

“Okay, well if that changes, I expect you to let me know,” I say, fighting the smirk on my face watching her cheeks redden. “But for now, there’s a built-in handle on either wall. I want you to hold on to those, so you don’t slip, do you understand?”

She throws her head back, covering her face.

“Natalie,” I say a bit more firmly. “Do you understand?”

“Ye...yes...” she mumbles, reluctantly gripping them both.

“Good girl,” I whisper, picking up the razor. “Now hold still for me.”

And right there on the yacht bathroom floor, I run her pink razor up her calf, slowly and carefully so as not to cut her.

Natalie watches me, breathing heavily.

And when I move my way up her thigh, all the way to her bikini line, she lets out a little gasp. I take my time, massaging the cream into every inch of her skin before gently running the razor over the area.

Then I have her switch legs and repeat the entire process.

“Thank you,” Natalie whispers, her cheeks a rosy pink, and her voice shaking. “I really appreciate you—”

She tries to remove her leg from mine, but I grip her ankle.

“Where do you think you’re going, Mrs. Pace?” I say with a wicked smile, this time intentionally running my fingers over her soft pussy. “I’m not finished.”

“Oh my God,” Natalie breathes, her eyes wide as she understands what I’m suggesting. “No, that’s okay, I don’t need you to—”

“Would you like me to do this too?” I ask, licking my bottom lip, and running my fingers over her soft pubic hair. “Although, I don’t mind it, you know. I’m happy to keep it.”

“Jaxon, I can’t ask you to do that,” she panics, seizing slightly as I tenderly tease her sensitive little slit. “This is already embarrassing enough as it is.”

“Again, you didn’t ask,” I say, slipping my finger between her pussy lips and brushing her clit. “I’m *volunteering*.”

“I know, but—”

“Natalie, I love every inch of your body,” I say softly, scooting closer to her. “And believe me, Αγαπημένη, I’m more than happy to take care of what is *mine*.”

She tries to mutter something in protest, but I refuse to listen, once again

spreading more shaving cream on my hand before gently pressing it to the outside of her bikini line.

“Oh my God,” Natalie whimpers, gripping the handles tightly as I carefully begin to shave her most sensitive parts.

I’ve never done something like this for anyone, and had you told me a year ago that I would be on my knees, helping my very pregnant wife shave her pussy, I might’ve laughed in your face.

But now I find that it’s...*hot*. Strangely hot.

Watching her arms tremble and listening to her whimper and moan has my dick throbbing as I carefully touch and stroke the razor over her skin. Especially when I spread her lips and carefully work it just inside, and she throws her head back, struggling with the oversensitivity.

When I’m finally finished, I run my hand over it, rinsing the area down with water and watching her squirm. Without warning, I slip my other fingers inside of her.

“Baby Girl,” I whisper darkly. “You are so fucking wet for me right now.”

She whimpers softly, as I push deeper inside of her.

“Do you need me to take care of this, too?” I ask.

Locking eyes with her, I pull my fingers out and suck her delicious arousal off them.

“Ye...Yes,” she moans, her arms shaking. “But, Jax, I don’t think I can stand anymore.”

I smile.

“That’s not a problem.”

Gently I set her foot back on the ground and turn the water off. Then I grab a towel from the warming shelf above us, and begin to dry her off, taking my time to once again run my hands all over her body.

After wrapping it around her, I open the door, and scoop her into my arms.

“Jaxon!” she gasps.

“Baby Girl, I don’t spend all the time in the gym working out *just* so I can fight bad guys, you know,” I wink. “It’s also so I can pick up my wife, and throw her around whenever the hell I feel like it. And today, I fucking feel like it.”

I carry her into the bedroom and set her down on the bed, kissing her softly, standing next to her and slipping my hand between her legs.

“Now, Mrs. Pace,” I growl in her ear, as my finger runs along her dripping slit. “I’m going to go lock the door, and you are going to spread those legs and let me taste you.”

Pressing inside of her, Natalie moans, tossing her head back and causing the towel to slip just past her perfect swollen tits.

Unable to resist, I bend down and take her breast in my other hand, wrapping my lips around her nipple and sucking hard.

“Holy fuckkkk,” she groans as I continue to swirl my fingers around inside of her.

However, realizing that I still have not locked the door I tear myself away from her, and quickly go flick the lock.

When I turn back around, however, my wife is still laying where I left her, her feet on the bed, and her knees pressed tightly together.

No. That will not fucking do.

“Spread. Your. Legs.”

My voice is firm, but my command is warm, and I watch as a trembling Natalie shakily obeys.

“Wider, Mrs. Pace,” I whisper huskily. “Show me your beautiful pussy.”

As I hear her inhale, I waste no time and immediately bury my face between her legs.

“Oh God!”

“That’s my good girl,” I whisper, swirling my tongue around her clit.

“You’re so very wet for me.”

“J...Jaxon,” Natalie breathes.

“Are you ready for me, Natalie?”

“Yes!”

Grabbing my erection, I position myself and push inside of her, taking my time to appreciate the sensation of her tight pussy squeezing the head of my cock.

“Fuckkkk, Nat,” I grunt. “You feel so good.”

Slowly, I work into my rhythm, pulling all the way in and out of her, and listening to her slutty little moans.

And then, very carefully I wrap my arms around her hips and roll across the bed onto my back, putting her on top of me.

“Jaxon,” Natalie blushes sheepishly. “I...I don’t know how I feel about this...position.”

Thrusting inside of her from underneath, I sit up, threading my fingers

into her hair and kissing her exposed neck.

“Oh, but I do,” I growl darkly, my primal need for this woman eclipsing every other thought. “It’s fucking perfection. Because I get to see all of you. Now, be a good girl, and ride this cock like I taught you.”

I crush my lips to hers once more, before leaning back and gripping her hips.

Natalie starts to grind herself against me, running her clit against my pelvis. I pull my feet up on the edge of the bed, pushing myself deeper inside of her.

“There you go, Baby Girl,” I whisper, trying to fight my rising climax. “F...fuck that’s so good. Keep going, take it all.”

Slowly I watch as her confidence blossoms, and I snake my hands up her hips, placing them on her belly.

“I love you, Mrs. Pace,” I whisper, my breathing ragged. “I love every single inch of your beautiful pregnant body.”

As she places her hand on my chest, increasing her rhythm as I snake my hands up to her breasts.

“And these tits,” I say, sitting up to kiss them. “God damn, baby, they are perfect.”

“Jax...” Natalie breathes, closing her eyes. “I’m going to cum.”

I kiss her deeply, feeling my own orgasm beginning.

“I love you, Natalie,” I breathe as the two of us climax together. “All of you. And I will love all of you, with all of me, until the end of time.”



Chapter Twenty-One

NATALIE

I don't think I've ever seen my husband *nervous* before.

To be honest, it's not an emotion I thought he was even capable of.

However, nearly every other time we've faced an adversary we've been on Jaxon's turf, operating in the sandbox that he and the Pace Family Mafia control.

But this time we're not.

And *all* of us are nervous tonight.

After getting dressed with Rachel, I make my way down the hall to the room that's been doubling as our makeshift command center.

Despite the gravity of the evening's events, and the anxious pit that's been lingering in my stomach since last night, I'm still excited for Jaxon to see the \$30,000 ball gown he paid to have made for me.

Perhaps it's because he's been so strong, and so valiant in his defense of me and juggling all of our family's interests that I know his stress level is high, and I hope to see his face light up with the tiniest glimmer of happiness. If only for a moment.

But just as my hand touches the door, I hear him beginning his mission brief with the men and decide to wait.

He stands with his back to the door, facing his Alpha Squad, who are lined up in front of him with their hands behind their backs.

"You've all been given your instructions from Leo," he says calmly, pacing the room in his Tuxedo. "Each guest is allowed up to two security staff so Charlie and Josiah, you will be coming with Mrs. Pace and I. Miss Valentine will also be accompanying us as well."

"Yes, Sir," Charlie nods, Josiah echoing silently.

"Sir," Wesley says, sounding almost wounded. "I would like the opportunity to continue my sworn duty to Mrs. Pace."

But Jaxon shakes his head.

"You were directly seen by Polina Antonov," Jaxon says. "And we have reason to suspect that she has been heavily involved with La Fratellanza for the last year. Therefore, it's too much of a risk that she could pull her weight

and ask you to leave.”

“Yes, Sir,” Wesley says, hanging his head.

“But that’s not the only reason,” Jaxon continues. “I have something more important for you to do.”

“Sir?” He looks up expectantly.

Jaxon picks up five small boxes and hands them to Charlie to pass out.

“These are earpieces from Levi,” he explains. “They are incredibly small and clear to help them blend in and be less noticeable. They are also waterproof, and if you put it inside your cheek until you’re on the other side of the machine, you won’t risk setting it off.”

Next, he picks up a manilla folder, pulling out a few pages and passing them to the group as well.

“There will be no weapons allowed on the premises,” he continues.

“Not even for us?” Josiah asks.

Jaxon shakes his head.

“No weapons will be allowed to guests, or their security staff,” he continues. “Which is why we will need you three to rectify that situation for us or we will be unarmed for the entire evening.”

He clicks a button on a remote in his hand, and the lights dim, illuminating a projected screen on the wall.

“Wesley, Deylan, and Travis will enter the compound through the service gate, in a catering truck you will find parked and waiting for you at this address,” he says pointing to a portion of the paper. “Memorize this map, gentlemen, because you cannot bring it with you.”

“Over the last several weeks, Leo, with the help of both Roman Antonov and the Viper’s international teams, have been secretly helping to provide hidden caches of weapons stored at various parts of the facility. They are marked with the x’s on this map. Your first job is to find one of those caches, and arm yourselves.”

Jaxon takes a deep breath, and then crosses his arms across his back.

“Deylan and Travis will assist with the cocktail hour, and it is your job to connect with and discreetly pass off weapons to Charlie and Josiah. Nothing fancy, just simple pistols they can conceal on their person, so they aren’t empty-handed,” he says with a nod. “After that you will mingle with the crowd and provide status updates for the rest of us. While you’re there, I want you to listen to the conversations around you, picking up whatever little tidbits of information you can. You never know what might be helpful.”

He takes a deep breath before turning to Wesley.

“But Wesley, you will have the most important job,” he says, walking over to him. “Because you are going to go find the *girls*.”

He hands Wesley the last paper in his hands.

“This is the most accurate map, drawn by one of Roman Antonov’s staff that worked very closely with Polina. They have visited this compound in past years, and seen where the girls are held, and how to circumvent the security systems,” Jaxon says, taking a deep breath. “If possible, work to secure the Black Lotus Girls first, as they will be of assistance to you in finding additional weapons caches and getting the other girls out as well.”

“Sir...” Wesley says, his chest rising. “I...I’m honored.”

Jaxon smiles, putting his hand on Wesley’s shoulder.

“As am I, Commander. I know you won’t let us down,” he says, before leaning in. “Just save the rocket launchers for the third act, eh?”

“Yes, Sir,” Wesley chuckles.

I have to cover my mouth, watching the undeniable look of pride wash over Wesley’s face.

While yes, Wesley might be young and sometimes a little unpredictable, I know how good Wesley is, and how fearless he can be when he needs to be.

And I also know that my husband would not give him a job of this magnitude if he didn’t think that Wesley could handle getting it done.

“Once Wesley frees the Black Lotus girls, they will join us in taking over the rest of the crowd. Before Glow left the girls in the care of Leo, she made sure they were all well aware of the finale we have planned for The Brotherhood,” Jaxon says, his face darkening. “And I’m sure they will have no problem in carrying out their mission.”

The men murmur, nodding slowly.

“If, by some miracle, all of this goes according to plan,” Jaxon says, clicking a button on the remote in his hand. “The girls are to be brought back to the Calliope to receive medical attention and await Interpol and FBI assistance, that will be called-in, courtesy of our *friend* at the Bureau.”

Josiah growls.

He’s still clearly not a fan of Adam Westwood.

“Which brings me to my last order of business,” he says, his tone changing.

He puts his hands in his pockets, and takes a deep breath.

“For the last decade, your primary goal has been to protect *me*,” he says,

slowly glancing around at each of them. “But tonight, your main goal is to protect Mrs. Pace and Miss Valentine, as well as get the countless women in this compound. And it is my desire that you do that, no matter the cost...even if that cost is *me*.”

My stomach drops, as I immediately understand what he’s trying to say, and what he is *about* to say to them.

No.

I scoop up the skirt of the ballgown and burst into the room.

“Jaxon,” I snap angrily, feeling my cheeks heating. “That is not what we agreed upon, so don’t you dare even finish that sentence. Under no circumstances is anyone taking me anywhere without you.”

Although I’m about to rip my husband a new ass, I am partially taken off guard by the reaction of the Alpha Squad the moment they see me.

“Whoa,” Deylan whispers.

“Holy shit!” Wesley gasps, before getting hit in the arm by Josiah.

But when my husband turns around to look at me and sees me standing here in this beautiful green ball gown, embroidered with flecks of gold thread and black diamonds decorating the bodice and slit, his jaw nearly detaches itself.

The man looks truly stunned.

“Natalie...” his eyes canvassing me slowly. “You look beautiful. Like a...”

“Regina,” Charlie says softly, smiling at me. “*The Regina*.”

And then, to my complete surprise each of the men beat their chest twice in response.

“Yes,” Jaxon replies with a smile, gently placing his hand on my waist and kissing me gently. “Like *my Regina*.”

Wow. Mission accomplished. I take it he likes the dress.

I feel myself blush. and for a moment, I almost forget everything I came in here to say.

Almost.

“Look, Jaxon,” I whisper quietly, taking a breath and trying to find the right words. “I know that you love me. And I know that you will always try to protect me.”

I take his hand and move it to my belly.

“...And our *legacy*.”

“Always,” he whispers reverently.

“But right after we got married, you also promised me that we were a

package deal. That we were equals. Do you remember that?”

“Yes, of course I do. But, Natalie you are—”

“*Yours*, Jaxon. I am yours,” I interrupt. “But you, Sir, are mine too. Which means come hell or high water, or crazy mafia men with bad intentions, we are in this together. And so that is why I don’t want you making any contingency plans that involve me leaving this country without you.”

He closes his eyes, sighing heavily.

“I know how you feel about me, Jaxon. I know you love me completely and deeply, and you would happily give your life for mine. And that kind of love is powerful,” I say, pressing my hand to his chest.

Pausing, I wait for his eyes to find mine.

“But I also need you to understand that I feel the exact same way about you. And I might not be a billionaire mafia lord, but my love for you is just as powerful.”

His face softens, and he inhales sharply, swallowing hard.

“And if you truly meant all those vows you said to me, and all the promises you made to me about us being equals, then it means my love for you is just as valid as your love for me,” I whisper. “So please, don’t devalue it with Alpha Commands.”

He blinks, before sighing heavily.

“Alright, Αγαπημένη,” he whispers. “You’re right.”

But then all of a sudden, something comes over me, and a fire erupts within my chest.

I turn to all the men in the room, stepping around Jaxon and toward them, watching as they immediately straighten their shoulders.

“You are my husband’s men, but you’re all sworn to me too. Which means you are all *my* men too, are you not?”

“Until death!” Charlie shouts back, beating his chest twice.

All five of the other men in the room beat their chest twice in response.

“Then hear me now: failure is *not* an option tonight. We have to succeed,” I say firmly. “La Fratellanza is a disease. They have butchered men, women, and children without mercy. They have stripped entire families of their heritage and legacy, but most horrifically, they have stolen and mutilated hundreds of young women—for profit!”

I take a breath, walking down the row.

“For almost a century the Pace Family Mafia has stood against tyranny like this. There are women in that compound tonight that have risked their

life in the hope that we will be there to rescue them,” I continue. “There are also women in that compound that have already suffered unspeakable atrocities, and had their lives and identities stolen. And more will certainly follow. Unless we step in and stop them. Why? Because we are the only ones who can actually do something about this.”

I pause, trying to calm my racing heart.

“It means we have a responsibility to act,” I say, my voice low and dangerous. “And it means we have a responsibility to *win*.”

“Yes, Regina!” Wesley shouts.

Just like Charlie, he beats his chest twice and once again the men echo his sentiments.

It’s then that I turn back to my husband, who is watching me intently, a mixture of love, admiration, anxiety, and fiery determination swirling simultaneously within his icy blue eyes.

However, the emotion I didn’t expect to see reflected there, is that of *pride*.

My husband looks at me now as if he almost...admires me.

I step toward him, taking his hand.

“But *we*,” I say firmly, trying to fight the tears that burn behind my eyes. “Are a fucking package deal, Jaxon Pace. So, the only Alpha Command that will be given tonight, is that you and I are leaving this place together. No matter the cost.”

Time stands still, and for a moment I am lost in Jaxon’s eyes, feeling as if my heart has stopped beating.

He looks down and pulls my hand to his lips, closing his eyes as he kisses it gently.

“Until death then, gentlemen,” he says softly with a nod. “In honor of your Regina Vestra.”

“Until death!” The men echo.

“...And *my* Queen of Hearts.”



“Welcome to Shangri La, Mr. and Mrs. Pace,” A masked man in a tuxedo says. “Welcome, Miss Valentine. Please make sure that your masks stay

securely fastened at all times.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rachel says, rolling her eyes. “Happy to be here, where’s the booze?”

A well-built man, wearing only a small loin cloth silently steps forward pointing towards a table with a giant punch bowl.

“Excellent,” she says, pulling me with her.

With all three men following behind us we make our way over to the table where Rachel promptly grabs a sparkling crystal glass, and begins to fill it from one of the serving spoons.

“I wouldn’t drink that,” a deep, commanding voice says from behind us just as she goes to put it to her lips.

All three of us turn to see none other than Roman Antonov standing there, with his certifiably insane, but stunningly beautiful wife Abigail on his arm.

Beside them, a pretty brunette stands in a simple knee-length black dress.

“And...why not?” Rachel scoffs, raising a brow and glancing into her glass. “Pretty sure alcohol is the only way to survive a night like this.”

“Oh, I don’t disagree,” Abby smiles wickedly, toasting us with the bottle of sparkling water in her hand. “But I may have poisoned the punch.”

“You did what?” Rachel says, blinking at her.

“Well, I had this new recipe I wanted to try,” Abby says, as Rachel gingerly sets the glass down on the table. “But human test subjects are few and far between. Fucking morality and all that jazz.”

She rolls her eyes, waving her hand around.

“But thankfully, no one will miss these pricks if they die,” she winks.

“Are they going to die?” Rachel says, looking around at all of the guests, drinking glasses filled the pink bubbly liquid. “Because if so, we could’ve saved ourselves a lot of planning.”

Abby sighs disappointedly.

“Well, we’ll see. But sadly, I don’t think so. I was working on something that was a bit more fast-acting, as mine usually takes several hours to take effect. But I don’t think I had enough for a punch bowl of that size. So, unfortunately, I don’t think anyone will be keeling over tonight,” she says with a giggle. “At least from the punch anyway!”

Rachel looks Abby up and down, appraising her voluptuous curves which are coated in a skin-tight, silver sequined gown that only further accentuates her own little baby bump.

Rachel shoots me a look that seems to say, ‘this chick is actually nuts.’

“Uhhh...thanks for the heads-up,” she says awkwardly. “Is the champagne at least safe?”

Roman says nothing, but raises the glass in his hand.

Looking around she snaps her fingers at one of the loin-clothed waiters, waving him over.

“Two glasses of Dom Perignon,” she barks, sticking up her nose. “And while you’re at it, a sparkling water for her.”

The man says nothing, but nods, before quickly disappearing.

“Damn, Rach,” I whisper to her. “That was a little cold.”

“I have to be tonight,” she says, glancing around. “And frankly, so do you.”

What?

“This is a mansion filled with some of the most powerful people in the world, Natalie,” Rachel says, taking my arm. “They are ruthless, heartless, and cold-blooded. And I’m telling you right now that they are expecting you to be the same.”

“I...I...don’t know if I can...do that,” I say, glancing rapidly between the four of them.

“I hate to say it,” Jaxon says quietly. “But she’s right. Tonight, you can show no weakness or fear, or they will eat us alive.”

“Greatttt,” I sigh sarcastically, feeling my heart start pounding. “No pressure. I’ve just got to act like a bitch.”

“Exactly,” Rachel smiles, shooting me a wink. “Just take a page outta my book.”

The man in the loin cloth returns with the drinks, and I have to physically fight my urge to thank him.

“Natalie,” Abigail says, her eyes going wide as she looks me up and down. “As a collector of formal wear, I have to tell you that this dress is absolutely stunning.”

“You like it?” I smile back. “I was having a horrible time trying to find anything in the shops here that would be able to accommodate my bump.”

I snake my arm inside Jaxon’s and look up at him.

“But then Jaxon flew Fratzi Delatoro out to make it for me.”

Jaxon smiles down at me, taking my hand and rubbing circles with his thumb on the inside of my palm.

“*The Fratzi Delatoro?*” Abigail says, her eyes going wide. “As in Delatoro Couture?”

I nod.

She walks over to me, running her fingers down the beautiful soft green satin.

“Well, I guess if you can’t be *mean*,” she says with a wink. “Just tell people *that* story. Having one of the hottest designers in the world personally make you a dress, is perhaps the most elitist thing I’ve ever heard. These fuckers will eat that up.”

And for the next hour, that is what I do.

A handful of guests make their way over to Jaxon and I, and women gush shamelessly over the intricate design work of Fratzi’s craftsmanship.

If this had been *any* other event, that wasn’t dedicated to the abduction, brainwashing, mutilation, and rape of innocent young girls, I might have enjoyed being a bit of a spectacle, as the dress truly is beautiful.

Tonight, however, I can’t revel in their compliments, and the sickly-sweet tone with which they say them makes my stomach churn. Perhaps the most disgusting part of all, is that not one person who makes their way over to introduce themselves seems to see anything wrong with this event.

In fact, one lady openly said that she lived for this event every year, for the opportunity to “*socialize with her kind*.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can do this,” I say to Abby and Rachel, after faking yet another polite smile as another aristocratic nepo-baby finally stepped away from Jaxon and I.

“With every second that passes I’m getting more and more disgusted and pissed. Like I feel like my skin is crawling,” I whisper. “And I desperately want to take off this damn mask.”

“Then I’d say it’s time for a bathroom break,” Abby says, slipping her arm inside mine.

She turns to the woman beside her in the short black dress.

“You come too, Leigh.”

“Charlie,” Jaxon says. “Go with them.”

“Yes, Sir,” he nods.

Tonight, both he and Josiah are dressed in formal tuxes, just like my husband and Roman.

In fact, the only thing differentiating the security staff from the guests, is that all the guests are required to wear hand-spun ornate black masquerade masks.

Our masks were waiting in the limo that picked us up from the marina,

along with a note stating that the masks must be worn for the duration of the evening, and that taking off one's mask, would result in your immediate expulsion...or worse.

So, when the four of us walk into the restroom to find several girls have removed their masks to fix their makeup, I'm a little shocked.

"It's the only place it's allowed," Leigh whispers as we make our way down to the end of the long counter.

"How do you know that?" I ask.

"I used to work for Roman's sister," Leigh says quietly. "I've been to more than one of these Balls. I'm the one who provided the maps."

Several fans have been set up in the gigantic bathroom, and so after taking turns to relieve ourselves, we spend a few minutes standing in front of one before tying our masks back on and heading back to find the men.

However, just as I reach the door, a blonde woman in a tight red dress bumps into me.

"Oh, my apologies—"

"Why don't you watch where you're going bitch," she snaps, glaring at me.

"Excuse me?" Rachel snaps back at her.

Oh no.

"It's alright," I say, grabbing Rachel by the arm and turning her around. "It was probably my fault."

"No, it was—"

"Rachel," I say, shaking my head. "No."

She stares at me, before glaring once more at the blonde woman now slipping into a stall.

"Fucking bitches," she mutters under her breath. "You can't let them get away with this shit, Nat. Or they will walk all over you."

"I understand," I say, as Abigail opens the door. "But we also don't need to draw any more attention to ourselves tonight, *remember.*"

I shoot her a pointed glance and she rolls her eyes with a sigh.

As we step outside though, Charlie motions Leigh over to him and whispers something in her ear.

I'm half-expecting her to tell us what he said, but instead she nods and sets back down the hall with us.

But when we reach the corner where we should turn left to rejoin the cocktail hour in the courtyard, Leigh suddenly turns *left* quickly disappearing

down a different hallway.

“Leig—” I start to say.

“Don’t worry,” Abigail says quietly, shaking her head. “If she’s leaving, it’s for good reason. Trust me.”

I wonder what she means by that?

We make our way across the courtyard and rejoin our husbands.

“If I didn’t say it already, I’m very glad you could make it, brother,” Jaxon says quietly to Roman. “Though I am curious how *did* you manage to get in? I assume your name wasn’t on the guest list?”

“My name is still my name,” Roman shrugs smugly. “No one turns away an Antonov.”

“Fair enough,” Jaxon smirks.

“Foxy, before the show gets started,” Roman says, extending his hand to his wife. “Care to dance?”

“Oh, I suppose,” she replies playfully.

The two of them make their way out onto the little dance floor set up in the middle of the courtyard, leaving Jaxon, Rachel and I standing with Charlie and Josiah.

He turns, his blue eyes scan the courtyard like a hawk as he walks over to Charlie.

“Are they inside yet?” he asks, taking a sip of his champagne and wrapping his arm around my waist.

“They’ve just passed through security,” Charlie says under his breath. “Leigh is on her way to assist.”

“Good,” Jaxon says, before turning to Josiah. “Has there been any word from Leo?”

Josiah sighs, shaking his head.

Jaxon takes a deep breath, and I can see his jaw clenching.

“What is it?” I ask, looking up at him and placing my hand on his chest. “Is there—”

“Well, if it isn’t Jaxon Pace. In the flesh.”

A sultry woman’s voice says from behind us.

I turn and it’s then that I realize that it’s the same woman in the red dress from the bathroom who knocked into me.

“Polina,” Jaxon says, his body stiffening.

My stomach twists, and I glance over at Rachel, who is glaring at Polina.

“God, you haven’t aged a day,” she says, looking him up and down. “Bet

you taste just as good too...I know *I* do.”

“What do you want, Polina?”

“Same thing I’ve always wanted,” She says, biting her bottom lip. “You and me, conquering the world together.”

Is this bitch for real?! I’m standing right here.

This time it’s me that stiffens, as I feel Jaxon wrapping his arm around my waist.

“I’d introduce you to my wife, Natalie,” he says. “But from what I understand, you’ve already met.”

“Mmm, we have,” she says, clicking her tongue inside her mouth.

“Though I’m not sure why you keep slumming it with the working class. Though I do suppose you always did have a soft spot for charity.”

“Excuse me?”

“But of course, Sweetie,” she smiles at me, batting her lashes and waving her hand dismissively. “You do know your way out, right?”

“And you know your place, *right?*” I fire back, unable to stop myself. “Considering I’m his wife.”

“Are you looking for an award?” Polina glares at me nastily. “Tell you what, why don’t you and Chicago’s famous slum-slut over there take a walk. I’m sure Jaxon would appreciate some grown-up conversation with people of better breeding.”

And that’s when it happens.

I snap.

Without thinking I haul off and slap the shit out the bitchy blonde in the red dress.

“Don’t you ever talk about her like that!” I shout at Polina, who grabs her cheek. “That woman is the mother of his child! And I’m his fucking wife, Bitch. And you? Honey, you were unremarkable then and you’re irrelevant now.”

“How dare you!” Polina snaps, lunging toward me.

Jaxon puts me behind him just as Polina raises her arm to slap me back.

But she doesn’t get the opportunity.

Because Roman catches her arm midair.

“Hello, sister of mine,” he growls darkly.

Polina’s face instantly goes white, especially when Abigail steps from behind him.

“Roman...” she breaches quietly, trying desperately to break away from

him.

“You look nervous, Pol,” Roman says, still refusing to let go of her arm. “Is that because you didn’t expect to see me here?”

“Now, do me a favor and don’t cause a scene,” Abby says, glaring at her. “We wouldn’t want to ruin the fun for later now, would we?”

But just as I think we’ve finally got everything figured out, a loud alarm echoes through the courtyard and out of the crowd, four large muscular men appear surrounding us completely.

I back up closer to Jaxon, my heart pounding in my ears.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The crowd parts and a small thin man, wearing a mask steps forward.

“Bravo,” comes a voice, masked and distorted. “I do love the spectacle. And make no mistake, this was good entertainment.”

“Mr. Katz,” Polina says, finally wriggling away from Roman as the crowd around us gasps. “I know it seems like I—”

“Miss Antonov,” the man known as Katz says, turning to her. “Tonight isn’t about you. Don’t make it so.”

“Yes, Mr. Katz.”

He waves her off dismissively with her hand, and one of the men surrounding us steps aside to let Polina pass.

“It is, however, about Mr. Pace.”

Katz says turning to Jaxon.

“The famous holdout. For years Jaxon has resisted joining our organization, sometimes violently,” he says, the crowd murmuring behind him. “So, imagine my surprise when I learn that someone from your own syndicate was reaching out to us, like a lost lamb bleating for his flock.”

While I am terrified, I also have to fight the urge not to roll my eyes at the over-the-top cheesy metaphor.

This guy has narcissist written all over him.

But as much as I’d love to call him out, or at least allow my real emotions to shine through, I can already feel the weight of every single eye in the courtyard falling down on us.

“...And like the good shepherd I am, I will always welcome new lambs into our fold,” Katz continues, as the crowd begins to clap. “For I know that the larger the flock, the harder we are to stop!”

Screaming and cheering erupts around us. It continues, building in intensity until Katz spreads out his arms, and suddenly it stops as quickly as it

began.

The courtyard grows quiet, except for the sound of someone coughing.

“But first, ladies and gentlemen, we know what has to come first,” Katz continues. “A *sacrifice*.”

Oh no.

Once again, the crowd parts, and a man in what appears to be a dirty white linen shirt and a black silk bag over his head, is led forward, the shackles around his bare feet forcing him to take slow small steps

I study my husband’s face, seeing a forced ambiguity.

Katz steps toward Jaxon pulling a gun from his pocket.

“Now, normally this is the part where I’d just tell you to handle this little bit of ugly business, pay your dues, and we can get back to the party,” Katz says with a shrug. “But I hope you understand that over the last year, we spent a lot of time and resources courting you, Mr. Pace, and Michael Valentine. Only to be rejected every time. You made sure it hurt. And so now I have to return the favor.”

Grabbing the edge of the mask he yanks it off revealing Leo.

Shocked gasps, laughs and coughing go up around us, as my stomach drops through the floor.

Oh my God...No!

“Seemed a bit fitting when I thought about it,” Katz says, stepping behind Jaxon and putting the gun in his hand. “Mr. Andiamo here tried to resist us too. And the senile old man also tried to stop us from collecting our tribute yesterday, nearly killing one of my men in the process. And while old age comes for us all, I can’t have people I can’t rely on to get the job done, can I, Mr. Pace?”

Katz hands the gun to Jaxon.

“But I can rely on *you*, right?”

I swallow hard, wishing to wake up from this horrible dream.

Jaxon steps toward Leo, and suddenly I feel Rachel’s arm on my arm, holding me back and preventing me from stopping him.

The guard behind Leo clears his throat and then forces Leo down onto his knees before Jaxon.

This cannot be happening, Right?

No. It is. It is absolutely happening, right here in front of all these people.

A trembling Leo looks up at Jaxon, smiling softly.

Leo told Jaxon what could be required.

And he told him that he needed to do whatever it took to secure his place if he was to have any hope of bringing them down.

But I know my husband never imagined it coming to *this*.

“It’s okay,” Leo whispers up at my husband. “As soon as you pull that trigger, I’ll be in the arms of my family.”

Jaxon looks up at me, before placing the barrel against Leo’s temple.

“Goodbye, my friend.”

However, just as he tightens his grip on the gun, the guard behind Leo clears his throat again.

And then again.

And again.

In fact, the large man starts coughing so uncontrollably he collapses to the ground clutching his neck, as if something has become lodged in his throat.

It’s then that I notice more coughs slowly going up from all around the room, growing louder.

One of the four bodyguards around us doubles over and within seconds, the most depraved and sadistic members of Europe’s aristocracy begin collapsing on the floor, writhing in pain.

I forgot about Abby’s poisonous punch.

“Eeeeeek!” She squeals, clapping her hands together, evidently thrilled with the effect of her latest concoction. “It worked!”

“Wesley,” Jaxon says, glancing up toward the second-floor walkway. “Are they ready? Good. Let’s get the party started.”

As agonizing moans explode from the throngs of partygoers now disabled and convulsing on the ground, I turn to look and see women appearing on the open-air walkway that encircles the entire courtyard.

Dozens of women.

...And they are all *armed*.

“What the...” Katz says, looking around. “What have you...”

Jaxon turns and walks over to him, grabs the handle on the gun, and whips him hard against the face, sending him crashing to the ground.

“Go flock yourself, *shepherd*,” he says sarcastically.

However, just as he turns back to help Leo to his feet, I see a furious Katz yank another gun from his belt.

“Jaxon!” I shout. “Lookout!”

But as the bullet is fired directly at my husband, Leo Andiamo steps in front of it...taking it directly to the head.

Before I even have time to react, another gunshot rings out from the second floor, and suddenly within seconds the entire courtyard is completely engulfed in a barrage of bullets.

Jaxon, Rachel, Roman, Abigail, Charlie and Josiah and I barely have time to find cover from the ricocheting storm of lead, as the freed captives of Shangri La pepper the entire crowd.

“No!” I sob, rushing toward them.

“Natalie,” Jaxon says, catching me in his arms. “I know you’re upset, but we have to leave. Right now.”

“Wesley,” Jaxon says, clearly talking into his earpiece. “Good. Let’s get this party started, ladies.”



Chapter Twenty-Two

JAXON

In the near decade I have served as Don Supreme, I can count on one hand how many times our carefully thought-out mission strategies have actually gone according to plan.

But the Buyer's Ball mission did.

Not only were we successful in ripping out the heart of La Fratellanza, but we were also successful in rescuing the girls trapped within the compound.

With the help of paramedics and Adam's contacts with Interpol, over a hundred terrified, abused, and traumatized girls were extracted from the La Fratellanza compound. And with the information they provided in the weeks that followed, over a dozen various holding facilities around Europe were raided, and dozens more girls were rescued and returned home to their families.

However, even while I planned for and believed in the possibility that we could be successful, the fact that we returned home with all of our men, as well as Glow's girls, was nothing short of a fucking miracle.

We'd survived with no casualties.

Well...not *exactly*.

Leo Andiamo had done his best to stand up for what he thought was right and had suffered dearly for it. And it could be said that the *only* reason the girls had been rescued, and my team had survived, was because Leo had paid the ultimate sacrifice for all of us.

And so, we made sure to pay our respects.

As he had no remaining family to speak of, the last thing my Alpha Squad and I did before leaving Italy, was to bury Leo Andiamo, next to the graves of his wife and son.

I knew that I owed my life to this man, and that for as long as I lived, I would remember just how close we came to not returning home at all.

But the work wasn't done.

And even as my team and I settled back into our regular routines and schedules, there were still a few lingering questions that had gone unanswered.

Despite the radio silence regarding Michael Valentine, I still couldn't shake the feeling that he could resurface at any point. The idea that he could still be out there, somewhere, was the recurring nightmare I started to have on a semi-regular basis.

Was he still alive?

And there was the account of Zoey Pruett, the drug-addicted young woman at St. Stephens that my wife had developed an affection for. She'd been doing well, and on track to complete her detox program at the Shelter, only to wake up in the middle of the night, shoved in a sack, and shipped overseas to the La Fratellanza compound. But sadly, given the horrific torture she endured as their captive, her memory of the night of her kidnapping was murky and unclear, providing little information to go off.

Who had facilitated her abduction?

And lastly there was one remaining loose thread that I still hadn't been able to nail down: Celeste Donahue.

Where had she disappeared to?

But as we approach the ninth month of Natalie's pregnancy, and the seventh month of Celeste's disappearance, I find we're no closer to finding an answer.

"Where are we at with Celeste?" I ask Ethan as he, Travis and I make our way back from the gun range one morning. "It's been nearly two months since we got back from Italy, and I thought with the La Fratellanza situation handled we'd have located this bitch by now. Or at least heard some sort of chatter."

"Not a peep," Ethan sighs, unstrapping the fingerless gloves he likes to use at the range. "Her ex-husband was spotted down in Mexico, drinking himself to death with his new bride while running from a federal indictment."

"For?"

"Tax evasion," Travis says, behind us.

"I'm surprised Adam hasn't jumped at that opportunity," I snort sarcastically. "I'm sure he'd love kicking around some weak little rich man who'd been cheating the system."

"Maybe someone should tell him," Ethan shrugs. "At the very least it might get him out of your hair for a while. He was busy for the last couple months but now that the Interpol case is wrapping up, I think he's getting bored again."

"If I could stand talking to him for more than thirty seconds I might," I

say, pushing open the pantry door. “It’s just that every fucking time he opens his mouth I just want to punch him in the—”

But I have to instantly stop myself, as I find that standing in my kitchen is none other than Adam Westwood himself.

What the fuck is he doing here?

“Punch who?” He asks, without looking up from a golf magazine he’s currently perusing.

“Wesley,” I lie, smiling disingenuously.

“Yes, Sir?” Wesley says, appearing from around one of the pillars. “Did you need something, Sir?”

“Mr. Pace said he wants to punch you in the face,” Adam says, tilting his head toward me.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Sir,” Wesley gulps. “I’m not sure what I did, but do you, um, want to do it...right now?”

“No, Wesley, I’m not going to punch you in the face,” I sigh, rolling my eyes. “It was just a figure of speech.”

“...One that apparently involves bodily harm,” Adam says, smiling at me smugly. “Nice guy, your boss.”

“Dearest Agent Westwood,” I sneer, rolling my eyes. “How nice of you to drop by. Are you missing me already?”

“Not quite,” Adam says, flipping the page. “I’m just here for the party.”

“Party?” I ask. “What party?”

“What do you mean what party?” My beautiful, and very pregnant wife says, walking into the room carrying a large bright pink, glitter-covered sheet cake topped with a rainbow-colored unicorn candle. “Jessica’s birthday party, obviously.”

Wait...what did she just say?

“Here, let me take that,” Adam says, standing and taking the cake from her arms.

“Oh, thank you, Adam,” she sighs, wiping her forehead. “Who would’ve thought a cake could be so dang heavy?”

Wesley pulls out a chair for Natalie, who carefully lowers herself down onto it, resting her hand on her stomach.

“I’ll tell you what, Jaxon Pace,” she sighs. “I’m ready to meet our sons. Or at least for them to quit playing Riverdance on my bladder.”

How the hell did I forget that today is Jessica’s birthday?!

“Oh! Wes, could you do me a favor?” Natalie asks.

“Of course, Mrs. Pace.”

“Upstairs in the nursery fridge are my cooling socks, would you mind running upstairs and grabbing those for me?”

“Not at all!” Wesley nods. “Hang tight, I’ll be right back.”

“Anyway, I still can’t believe I dropped the first cake this morning,” she breathes, rolling her eyes. “I was shifting some things around in the fridge and it slipped out of my hands. Luckily, Sally has a cousin who owns a little bakery downtown, and she was able to rush an order for us.”

She looks up at Ethan, who looks completely unfazed by the news that today is Jessica’s birthday, and is just casually pouring two glasses from a pitcher of iced lime-water.

Did he know this was today?

“Thank you for recommending I reach out to her, Ethan,” Natalie says. “She saved the day.”

“No problem,” Ethan smiles, walking the glass over to her.

“And yeah, Ellen’s shop is right next to my dentist, and I almost had to find a new one because her cheese Danishes are too damn good. I kept getting cavities!”

I cannot believe I forgot today is my daughter’s birthday.

“Hey, Nat!” Steph says, quickly walking into the room. “I just wanted to let you know the bounce-house guys are here. Alexei and I showed them to the gym, and they said everything should be set up and ready to go in like an hour or so.”

“Wait,” I say, momentarily jolted from my guilt-spiral. “Bounce house? What the hell is a bounce house?”

“Seriously?” Adam snorts. “You’re joking, right?”

I glare at him.

“Jax, I told you about it last week,” Nat says, setting her glass down on the table. “Rachel and I thought it would be a fun idea to get Jess a bounce house for—”

“Oh my God!” Wesley says excitedly, bounding back into the room like a golden retriever. “Did someone say bounce-house?!”

“Shhh! Keep your voice down,” Steph says, rolling her eyes. “The kid doesn’t know yet. It’s a surprise.”

“Oops! My bad!” Wesley says, covering his mouth. “But I love those things!”

“Oh, don’t go ovulating just yet, *Winona*,” Steph says, yanking the socks

from Wesley's hand. "Remember, it's for the kids, and technically it's a bouncy-princess-castle."

"So?" Wesley snorts. "Your point is?"

"Well, I just assumed the idea of bouncing around in a giant Pepto-Bismol-colored blowup princess castle would make your little testicles shrivel up like raisins," Steph teases, pointing to Wesley's crotch.

"Ew, Steph," Marta cringes, walking into the room. "Can we maybe not mention testicles and raisins in the same breath? Especially in the kitchen."

"What?" Steph shrugs, walking over to Natalie and kneeling down in front of her to help her with her socks. "They seemed reasonably comparable."

"They are definitely bigger than raisins!" Wesley says defensively.

"What the fuck are we even talking about anymore?" I ask, shaking my head. "Wesley shut the fuck up about your genitals."

"Yes, Sir," he nods.

"Oh shoot! Marta," Natalie says, snapping her fingers. "I just remembered I told the zookeeper that we'd have about fifteen kids today, but I think we're actually going to be closer to thirty now."

"*Thirty?* Did you just say thirty kids?" I snort, looking over at Ethan.

"And what was that about a zookeeper?"

"Dude," Adam scoffs, rolling his eyes. "Did you pay attention at all?"

"Probably not," Steph snorts.

"It's my fault, the guy said he needed an accurate number for the llama rides to make sure he didn't overwork the animals, but then we added Jess's Sunday School class, and a few others," Natalie continues, evidently not hearing me. "Maybe ask him if he could just do shorter rides with each kid? Or if it's still going to be too much for the llamas, please let him know that I'm sure they will be just as excited to pet and interact with the animals too. I just don't want some kids to get a turn and others to be left out."

"Yes, Mrs. Pace," Marta smiles. "I'll let him know."

"Oh, and the new cake is here, and I invited Ellen and her girls to join us today, so please let Trinity know we will need to prepare two more goodie bags."

"Of course, Mrs. Pace."

"Ethan, I hope Sally is planning on coming too?"

"Yes," he smiles. "I do believe she took the afternoon off so that she could attend."

"Huh?" I say, still trying to wrap my head around all of the conversations

taking place at once, when Rachel appears with a small plate of food.

“Okay, so going with the kid-friendly finger food was definitely the right choice,” she says, setting the plate down next to Natalie. “I don’t know where you found these guys, but they have so many options! There’s little pizza quiche bites, nachos, warm pretzel dippers, sliders and pigs-n-blankets. I grabbed a few things to taste-test.”

“Oooh!” Wesley says.

He reaches for the pretzel, but Rachel slaps his hand away.

“I meant for *Natalie* to taste test,” she says sarcastically. “She’s the only one here eating for three.”

“I mean Wesley is basically eating for three,” Steph snorts, under her breath. “I’ve seen the poundage that man can put away. It’s remarkable...and kinda gross.”

It occurs to me that I’m standing here, in my own kitchen, being the only one who has absolutely no fucking idea what the hell is going on, and no one is even acknowledging me.

But then again, I’ve been so preoccupied with everything else, that I didn’t even remember it was Jessica’s birthday for crying out loud.

Thank God, Natalie did though.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say that the petting zoo wasn’t your idea?” Adam says, stepping up beside me.

“No,” I sigh, shaking my head. “I’ve had my hands full with... other stuff.”

Silently I watch as the women of my household flit around the room like a hive of active honeybees, functioning in an impossible tandem.

“Well,” he sighs, also looking around the room. “If you want to continue standing here, being irrelevant that’s your prerogative. But if not, I’ve got something you should see.”

I turn to him and can instantly tell by the look on his face that whatever he’s about to tell me, is far darker than pink glitter-covered unicorn cakes or bouncy princess castles.

But somehow that’s more my element anyway.



“A fisherman found her in the bay a few days ago. Her name is Susana Knight,” Adam says, taking a seat across the desk from me and pulling a photo from a file he retrieved from his car. “Well, he found the *top* half of her anyway. Poor fucker is still in shock.”

“Jesus Christ, I can’t blame him,” I say, cringing at the bloated and blackened picture of the top half of a woman he sets on my desk. “What the hell happened to her?”

“The coroner is still working on the cause of death,” he says. “So, we don’t know yet.”

“Do they have any theories?” Ethan asks, picking up the photo. “I mean, depending how long she was in the water, there’s plenty of fish out there that could’ve...aided in her decomposition. Sometimes when people dispose of bodies in the bay, they weigh them down. Everything from cement barrels to cinder blocks. After a certain amount of time of being floating fish food, the bodies can separate, and the top half can float to the surface.”

“That was my first thought too,” Adam says.

He pauses, his eyes finding mine.

“But?” Ethan asks. “What did the police report say?”

“I have no idea, actually,” Adam sighs.

“There wasn’t one filed?”

“Oh no, there was,” Adam snorts. “And as a federal agent, even on a field suspension, I should technically have access to all of that. But when I finally got it back, everything had been removed. I ended up having to go about finding it through a search through the Bureau’s archives.”

“And what did they say?”

Adam stares at me for a long moment before licking his bottom lip and shifting uncomfortably.

“Well, the witness is a seventy-year-old widowed grandfather who also claims to have been a carpenter before he retired,” Adam explains. “And he said it looked as though she’d been sawed in half.”

“*What?*” Ethan whispers.

“...And the responding detective, who was a veteran with nearly thirty years on the force, said that based on the amount of blood stains evident on the shirt she was wearing,” he continues, pressing his hands together. “He was confident that she was *alive* when it happened.”

I stare at him, my stomach feeling as though it’s crashing straight through the floor.

“Back up a second,” Ethan says, leaning back against the bookcase and crossing his arms across his body. “What did you mean when you said that parts of the report were *removed*?”

From his file he produces a three-page report and hands it to me. However, one look at it and it’s obvious why Agent Westwood was forced to find another way of retrieving any information. Because aside from the date, district, and the filing record stamp, every single line of text has been completely redacted.

“What the hell?” Ethan whispers as I hand it to him.

“That’s exactly what I said,” Adam says, raising his brows. “Even the signature at the bottom, authorizing the sealing of the records, has been redacted, even though it’s illegible. Someone clearly took the time to redact every single piece of identifiable information. And I’ve never seen anything like that before. Not unless it involved an undercover operative, or a government official with top-secret clearance.”

“How is this even possible?”

“No idea,” Adam shrugs. “That and the fact that there’s been no chatter about it anywhere. Not even a juicy tabloid whisper, and those can almost always be counted upon for a good breadcrumb once in a while.”

“Depends on the tabloid,” I say sarcastically.

“But this is where it gets really interesting,” Adam says darkly. “Once I realized that a high-level redaction is the common denominator, I decided to flip the script.”

“What do you mean?” Ethan asks.

“Instead of searching the Bureau’s archives for homicides or suspicious deaths, and looking for redactions, which would’ve likely taken me years to sort through, I decided to search the Bureau’s redacted files, and then narrow by homicides and suspicious deaths, cross-referencing the city of Chicago.”

“And did you find any?” Ethan asks.

“Just *one*,” Adam says, turning back to me. “Happened just two weeks after you all returned from Italy.”

He opens his file and pulls out another photo, setting it down on the desk and sliding it across to me.

The moment I see it, however, my heart sinks.

“Zoey Pruett,” I whisper softly.

“You know her?” Adam asks.

“I didn’t,” I sigh. “But Natalie did. Apparently, she was one of Natalie’s

patients who was doing a drug detox. She was nearly at the end of her detox when she just up and disappeared. Then, randomly, when we raided the La Fratellanza compound, she was one of the girls who was there, and Natalie immediately recognized her.”

I sigh, looking at the photo of the girl in the picture. She looks so young, her pale face is bruised and dirty and there is dried blood trickling down her nose, pooling just above her lip.

“She’s going to be devastated,” I sigh. “Especially since I’m assuming there’s no viable leads as to who did this.”

Adam smiles.

“There might be,” he says darkly. “Because this time, there was one piece of information in this file that Susana’s file didn’t have.”

“Which was?” I ask.

“The redaction authorization was on *letterhead*,” Adam says, pulling another piece of paper out of his folder and sliding it across the table to me.

“James Fry,” I read aloud. “Mayor of Chicago, Illinois.”



After Jessica blew out her candles, and the party guests started to go head home, I told Natalie that Adam, and I had some business to take care of and that we would be back in a few hours.

It only took one phone call to Glow, for me to learn that our newest civil servant liked to spend six days a week playing family man, but his Friday nights frequenting a shady little motel nicknamed “The Box.”

Apparently, The Box wasn’t really a motel, but rather an old square-shaped apartment building with just twelve flats, four on each side. The reason people referred to it as a motel, however, was because here you didn’t rent an empty room, you rented a body.

All twelve of the rooms at The Box were occupied by permanent residents, who spent each working night with a different stranger, providing unlimited services from sundown to sunrise.

It didn’t matter if you wanted an evening filled with sex or intimate companionship, if you paid for the night, then you received unlimited

services from sundown to sunrise.

The word on the street was that for the better part of the last year, our new Mr. Mayor liked to visit the woman in the top left apartment of the westward facing side.

And when I see the license plate number belonging to Mr. Fry, parked outside the west side, I know we've found the very man we're looking for.

However, we haven't even made it halfway up the squeaky metal staircase before we can hear the yelling.

"I told you this was a horrible idea!" A woman shouts from inside the apartment. "I told you we couldn't trust them, either of them, now we're fucked."

"I promise we're not my dear. You just have to be patient," a man says reassuringly. "These things take time, and she told you from the beginning that this was going to involve us playing the long game. I still have faith in her. She won't let us down."

"She's already let us down!" The woman shouts. "And what you don't seem to be getting is that everyone else who has aligned their cart with her horse, has been run off the track! They are dropping like flies! I think we both should be very, very, worried right now!"

"What are you so afraid of?"

"What am I afraid of?!" The woman shouts. "I'm the only one who is going to end up taking the rap for this mess that we've all created equally!"

"No one is taking the rap, *Celeste*."

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

My eyes find Adam's and I motion for him not to move.

"What you don't seem to be understanding here, is that you and I owe her," Celeste continues. "And we've both failed to deliver what we promised. We were supposed to bring down Jaxon Pace, and we failed. We took the fight to the doorstep of La Fratellanza, hoping they would just get the job done, and we failed there too."

"Cel, you need to calm down!"

"Calm? How the fuck can I be calm?" She laughs incredulously "Remember those two local girls that were rescued in Italy? Yeah, they're both *dead* now. Why? Because they could be connected to her."

"I sealed the police reports, remember?" James sighs. "Which means no one will ever know how they were connected to her. Or us."

"But we know, James!" Celeste shouts back. "That's the part you're

missing here. *We* know everything! Which is what makes *us* a liability, and right now it seems like she's wrapping up all her liabilities! Things have been different ever since Shangri La. And call me crazy if you want, but I just have this feeling that she's coming for us next!"

Suddenly, in the distance, the headlights of a car come into view. Knowing that it's too late for it to be a granary employee, I turn to Adam.

"We need to get out of sight," I say quickly.

Adam hops over the railing, quickly making his way downstairs and taking cover behind a set of rolling trash cans lined up in a row. Meanwhile, I manage to move a tattered old porch couch on the shared second-floor balcony out of the way enough that I can fit in behind it.

Eventually the car comes to a stop in a parking space, and the driver gets out of the car, and silently climbs the steps.

Unfortunately, in the darkness, there is no way for me to make out any defining features aside from the person's frame is short and thin.

They knock twice, and within seconds James opens the door and the visitor slips inside.

But that's the moment I hear the gun go off.



Chapter Twenty-Three

NATALIE

Hours later, after bouncing in her bounce house, petting some llamas, watching her favorite movie in her theater, and blowing out her candles, an elated eight-year-old has passed out for the evening.

When she finally crashed, she just so happened to fall asleep next to Rechel, comfortably resting her head on Rachel's thigh.

Rachel refused to move for nearly two hours, simply staring down at her beautiful sleeping daughter and running her fingers through her hair.

And I wasn't going to disturb them.

But, when Ethan stopped by to say goodnight, he volunteered to take the sleeping princess upstairs and tuck her into bed.

Adam and Jaxon had still not returned from their little impromptu mission, and admittedly we were both a little peeved that the men left just after Jess had blown out her candles.

But those were conversations we planned to have when the men were safely back in our arms. And so instead, we settle into the living room in front of the fireplace.

We talked about a lot of things, Rachel captivated me with stories of crazy stuff she'd seen working in the Chicago club scene for nearly a decade.

In turn I told her about the crazy things I'd seen working in hospitals.

Eventually, our own exhaustion from the day takes over, and a calm silence settles over the room, the only sound being the soft crackling of the fireplace.

"Natalie," Rachel says quietly. "There's something I need to say to you."

"What is it?"

She pauses a moment, as if she's truly considering whether or not she really wants to say whatever it is she planned to say.

Instinctively, I feel my stomach clenching, bracing for the unknown impact that can sometimes be Rachel Valentine.

"Okay, yeah," she says quickly. "I'm going to do this."

She pours herself another glass of wine, takes a long deep breath, and finally looks up at me.

“All I wanted for so long was just to know that Jessica was alright. I told myself I would just keep my distance, as long as I knew she was happy and healthy,” she shifts in her seat, brushing off her pants. “But I need you to know that the kidnapping attempt in Jaxon’s parking garage was not my idea. I never wanted to traumatize my daughter like that. Michael and Black thought that if they got a hold of Jess, they would be able to control Jaxon.”

“Oh I see...” I breathe, nodding slowly. “I mean, knowing what I know of the mafia now, I’d have to agree. I think Jaxon would’ve torn the city apart to get that little girl back.”

“He would’ve,” Rachel nods, her eyes falling from her lap. “There’s no question.”

It’s then that I recognize the sadness in her eyes, and understand that for her, even just having this conversation with me, must be hard.

“For the record,” I say delicately. “I never really thought that was you, even if I may have thought you were a mean vicious bitch at times.”

Rachel laughs.

“Well, that’s fair. I kind of was. Still am, sometimes actually.”

“But I never thought you were behind that kidnapping attempt,” I say softly, waiting for her eyes to find mine. “Sending a violent, angry assassin to snatch a little girl, just didn’t feel like something even a desperate mother would do.”

Rachel shakes her head.

“It wasn’t. I was fine for so long, just watching her grow up. And yeah, I’ll be honest, I didn’t mind the fact that Jaxon wasn’t bringing random hoes around her every other weekend,” she glances up at me briefly. “But then all that happened, and you were there, risking your life to put yourself between that man and my daughter.”

She scoffs to herself, chuckling softly.

“I mean hell, it’s no surprise that Jaxon fell in love with you. Because if I’m honest, I was kind of blown away by you too on some level.”

I look up at her, totally stunned.

“You...liked me?”

Rachel bites her lip but nods.

“I mean don’t get me wrong it wasn’t long before I hated you for being everything you are, but mostly I hated you for making me like you. Unfortunately, that’s just who I am,” she shrugs. “But yeah, I knew you were different, and I knew you were going to make a difference in her life. And

then just sitting in the shadows, watching her grow wasn't enough. When I saw that Jess was happy and healthy, and that part of that happiness was because of you..." she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Well, let's just say something shifted for me and I got really jealous. That's when I went a bit off the rails."

I say nothing, as I'm not entirely sure how to respond to all this, especially since I've already felt the brunt of her jealousy from the other side.

But this is the first time she's actually admitting it to me.

"Then I told myself I just wanted to see her, just once," Rachel continues taking a sip of her wine. "My masochistic brain thought that at the very least, if she didn't recognize me or want anything to do with me, that I could finally let her go and it would curb my longing for her."

"Yeah, that's not really how that works," I say delicately. "Especially not with a phenomenal kid like Jessica."

It's in this moment I see Rachel wipe her eyes.

"But after all of that, I never thought we'd be here," she whispers, painfully. "I never thought I'd be helping to plan her birthday parties or have her fall asleep in my arms. I thought that I'd lost those privileges forever the moment I left her."

Her voice cracks and she tilts her head back, wiping her eyes as tears begin to steam down her face.

Holy shit.

"You did this, Natalie," she whispers. "None of this would be possible if you hadn't fought so hard for me, even when I was being horrible to you."

"Rachel, I knew the reason for you being horrible wasn't—"

"But I still didn't deserve it!" She snaps tearfully, making me jump ever so slightly. "I never deserved the kindness you showed me. But you were kind anyway. You defended me to Jaxon. The same way you stood up to Polina in Italy."

I pull myself up off of the couch I'm sitting on and grab the metallic tissue box container off the end table. Slowly, I waddle my way over to Rachel's couch and take a seat beside her.

"Well, first of all, I knew that wasn't who you truly were," I say, setting it down in front of her. "Yeah, you did some horrible things to me, sure. But you also saved Jaxon and Ethan, and the Alpha Squad. So, despite what you wanted me to think about you, I knew there was some good in you."

Rachel says nothing, grabbing a tissue and blotting her eyes.

“And Polina? Well...that woman was just a bitch,” I say, waving my hand and shooting her a wink. “And you know, if I got the chance, I’d happily slap that snotty bitch again.”

This makes Rachel laugh, even in her tears. Which in turn makes me laugh too.

Slowly, the room grows quiet again.

“This...isn’t easy for me,” she whispers quietly. “I’ve had such a hard time accepting your friendship because the one person I called a friend... betrayed me in the worst way. And, if I’m being honest, I’ve never truly gotten over it.”

Suddenly, she reaches over, and places her hand on my leg.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is thank you, Natalie,” she says, her eyes finding mine. “None of this would’ve happened without you, being exactly who you are. And I’m very grateful that you gave me a chance to be here and be a part of this.”

I smile back at her, feeling the burn behind my eyes building.

“You’re very welcome. But now I need *you* to understand something, Rachel,” I say softly. “And that is that none of this would’ve been possible, without you being who you are, and being as strong as you are.”

She blinks at me, stunned by my words.

“Do you realize how incredible you are? After everything you’ve suffered, and how communally isolated you’ve lived most of your life, it would’ve been really easy for you to just continue holding on to your hate,” I say, swallowing hard. “But you didn’t. You chose a different path. You chose to build something new, with us, and right now we’re standing in that something new.”

I waved my finger around the living room, still filled with dozens of bright pink balloons.

“None of this, or our beautiful, blended family, would’ve been possible without *you*, Rachel,” I say, trying to stop my voice from cracking. “You should be proud. Because a weaker woman wouldn’t have been able to do what you’ve done. They would’ve cracked. But you didn’t. And it’s incredible to see, and it’s a hell of an example for Jessica.”

Rachel’s lip trembles and then, without warning, she throws her arms around me, wrapping me in a tight hug.

She sobs into my shoulder and fueled by the beauty of this moment and my raging third trimester hormones I cry along with her.

But then it happens.

A sharp cramping pain, followed by the sensation of feeling something shift, echoes deep inside my body and I suddenly feel very wet between my legs.

Holy. Shit.

I pull away, feeling my heart starting to hammer away within my chest.

“Nat?” Rachel asks, looking up at me.

“I...I think my water may have just broke.”



“Oh my God!” I groan, as another wave of pain hits me hard across my back and stomach. “Rachel, we need Dr. Townsend. Where is...argh!... she?!”

“I just talked to her and she’s on her way!”

“Arrrrgh!” I cry, bracing against the foot of the guest bedroom as the contraction hits again.

The pain is strong, and pulsing, my entire body wincing as the wave dissipates ever so slightly.

These aren’t false contractions. This is labor.

I’m in labor. And Jaxon isn’t here. Dr. Townsend isn’t here.

Even breathing feels difficult right now, and it takes everything I have to suck in a deep breath.

“Ethan,” I whisper, my chest heaving. “Where the heck is Jaxon? I need him.”

“I know, Sweetheart,” Ethan says reassuringly, taking my hand. “I’m sure he’s on his way. The same with Doctor Townsend. I promise!”

I’m suddenly distracted as another contraction rips through my body and I cry out in pain.

My fear and pain engulfing me, I sink down to my knees.

“Jaxon...I need him...I...don’t think I can do this...without him,” I sob. “I...can’t.”

“Yes, you fucking can,” Rachel says firmly. “How far apart are your contractions?”

“Three minutes,” I gasp.

“Shit,” Rachel breathes, before turning to Wesley. “I need clean towels and a bowl of warm water! Now!”

She grabs one of the metal cushioned chairs in the room and pulls me toward it.

Gently she helps me up so that I’m kneeling on the floor forward with my forearms on the chair.

“Deep slow breaths,” she instructs, moving my hips. “And roll your hips, it will help.”

Her hands guide my pelvis in slow circles, while she helps me take a few deep breaths.

“Jaxon will be here, and so will Dr. Townsend,” she says, gently rubbing my back. “You need to breathe. Come on now, deep breaths. Breathe in, and out.”

She walks me through a deep inhale, and a full exhale.

“Sit back on your heels,” she says, moving me into a different position, her voice calm. “Find whatever position that alleviates the pain for you.”

“Nothing is alleviating the pain!” I gasp, a scream escaping as the sharp throbbing pain rips through me once more. “These contractions...are getting closer!”

“That’s what they’re supposed to do,” she says calmly. “Your body knows what to do, Natalie. Remember, women have given birth to babies for centuries.”

“Yeah, except that I have *two* of them to give birth to here, Rachel!” I snap angrily before, wincing once again. “I’m sorry...I’m just afraid...I don’t think...I just can’t do this without Jaxon.”

“Yes, you can, Natalie,” Rachel says firmly. “You know why? Because you’re the strongest woman I know.”

“I’m not!” I whimper, sweat dripping down my face.

“Yes, you fucking are!” Rachel snaps back, pressing against my back and pushing me back up on my knees. “And I promise that if for some reason they don’t get here in time, and you have to deliver these babies on your own, you *can* do it.”

“Mrs. Pace,” Wesley says nervously, clearing his throat. “Is there anything *I* can for—”

“No!” Rachel and I say at the exact same time as another wave of pain hits me.

“Arrrrrrggh!” I yell. “Oh my fucking God!”

Ethan's phone rings.

"Jaxon?!" He asks, causing me to look up. "Where the hell are you!?"

"Jaxon!" I shout before screaming and gripping Rachel's hand, riding out another contraction.

"Did you pick her up? Do you have her with you?"

Ethan listens for a second, before rushing over to the window.

"Open the gate," Ethan barks.

"Arrrrgh!" I scream. "Tell him to hurry up!"

"Natalie, you're doing great, keep going!" Rachel soothes, rubbing her hand along my back. "Deep breaths. You've got this!"

The world around me starts to blur, the pain radiating from my body as I lean forward on my elbows gripping the metal back of the chair.

I watch as Ethan tells me Dr. Townsend is here. I hear Rachel commanding me to breathe, and I hear her say that the baby is coming and we're nearly there.

But what finally pulls me from the blinding haze is the sight of my husband bursting into the room.

"Natalie!" He shouts, rushing to my side, followed quickly by Dr. Townsend. Who immediately steps behind me.

"Jaxon!" I cry, as I feel his arms wrapping around me, as another quick burst of pain floods my body.

"Arrrrgghh!" I scream, my body shaking. "What took so fucking long?!"

"Should we move her?!" Rachel asks.

"No, she's too far along for that now," Dr. Townsend replies, her voice panicked. "But the baby is in a good position. Mrs. Pace, on your next contraction I'm going to need you to push."

Rachel quickly wipes my forehead with a damp cool cloth.

"I...I..." I cry shaking my head, my body physically exhausted.

"Come on, Baby," Jaxon says, taking my hand and squeezing gently.

"You can do this! And I'm right here with you!"

I breathe in just before another contraction wracks my body.

"Push!"

"Arrrrrgh!" I cry out.

"Keep going Natalie!" Rachel shouts. "You're almost there!"

"You've got this!" Jaxon says.

The world spinning around me, I feel hands touching me, I feel the bones and muscles in my body shifting the pressure in my core building to

crescendo of pain.

And then I hear it.

The sound of my son's cries echoing loudly in the room.



Chapter Twenty-Four

JAXON

Happiness is a funny thing.

My whole life I'd been in pursuit of something that is far more nebulous than I understood, and over the years, my definition of happiness has shifted a lot.

Within the syndicate, happiness felt like knowing my men were safe, that our position was strong, the ecosystem was balanced. It felt good knowing that the city feared and obeyed us, and that my enemies were dead. But at the same time, I knew that the threat would always linger, and could harm the ones I loved.

When I was a younger man, with an extensive list of vices, happiness temporarily became another high that waited for me at the end of another drug or sex fueled bender. But this thrill and ecstasy was fleeting and shallow, disappearing far too quickly, and leaving me craving more.

After I started my various businesses, I thought happiness was seeing my risky investments pay off, and feeling a financial security outside of my criminal enterprises. But while building something legitimate gave me joy and filled me with pride, somehow I still felt empty.

The closest I've ever known to true happiness was Jessica.

By just existing my daughter redefined it once again. It became bedtime stories, incessant giggles, tiny hugs, talking teddy bears, funny nicknames, and princess dresses that covered my dress pants in sparkles.

And then came Natalie.

I never saw her coming, and there was no way for me to know how intimately she would change who I am as a person.

But she *did*.

This woman has given me strength when I was weary, peace when I had none, and vision when I was blind. By her own example, she's taught me how to forgive, and that even though families can be complicated, they can also be beautiful too.

But the greatest lesson Natalie has taught me was in how she loved me.

Completely. Fearlessly. Unapologetically.

My wife didn't just *give* me her love because I demanded it, she's made me earn her respect every single day. And in doing so, she's made me a better father, husband, and leader.

And as I hold one of my two sleeping newborn boys against my chest, with Natalie snuggled beside me holding his older brother, it occurs to me that this right here is the happiest I've ever been.

Because at the end of the day, happiness is love.

It's family.

And I have both of those things.

There is a knock at the door of our master bedroom.

"Enter," I say softly.

Ethan appears, stepping in and shutting the door quietly behind him.

Natalie looks up at me a moment longer before relenting, instead turning her attention back to Ethan.

"Ethan, I need to stretch my legs a little bit," she says, offering him the sleeping infant in her arms. "Would you mind taking him?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you," Natalie smiles softly. "He's your grandson after all."

Ethan's expression softens immediately, his eyes glistening as he steps forward to help Natalie get off the bed, and take the baby.

Following Dr. Townsend's advice Natalie uses the wheelchair handles to slowly take a few steps around the room.

"He's perfect," Ethan says slowly. "Now, which one am I holding?"

Natalie looks up at me, biting her lip, a small smile forming on her lips.

I guess we're doing this now.

"Well, this one here is the younger by a minute," I say, my eyes still lingering on Natalie a moment longer. "And his name is Tyler Dimitris Pace."

"That's a good strong name," Ethan smiles, looking up at me from across the room.

"...But you're holding his older brother," I continue. "And his name is *Ethan* Walter Pace."

Ethan stares at me, his jaw slowly dropping.

"What did you just say?"

I smile.

I don't need to say anything, as I know that Ethan heard me just fine.

"Jaxon, I can't be—"

"You are," Natalie says, stepping up to him and squeezing his arm.

"You've always been. And none of us would be standing here without you."

Even from here I can see his lip trembling, tears filling his eyes, he looks down at the tiny newborn infant in his arms.

Natalie leans forward and kisses him softly on the cheek before walking back over to me.

"I don't know what to say," he finally chokes out, the emotion in his voice nearly making me cry as well.

"Well, that's a first," I say as Natalie slowly lowers herself back down on the bed next to me. "But I'm going to apologize in advance for how noisy your retirement is going to be with three kids running around Pace Manor."

Ethan laughs quietly to himself.

"After *you*," he says, winking up at me. "I'm sure it will be a walk in the park."



"He was right, you know," I say softly, putting Tyler back in his bassinet. "They really *are* perfect."

Natalie smiles beside me, shrugging playfully.

"Thank you. I made them myself."

I chuckle quietly.

"And here I thought it was a bit of a *combined* effort," I say, pulling her close and rubbing her arm.

"Your contributions were necessary," she says, wrapping her arms around my waist and batting her lashes. "But I'm happy to let *you* birth the next one if you're feeling insecure."

The glow from the crackling fireplace casts a soft shadow on her face.

God she's fucking beautiful.

"Next to you, Αγαπημένη, it's hard not to be," I say, cupping her face in my hands and kissing her lips. "Because of *you*, I have not one, but two,

beautiful, healthy boys. I have *sons*, Natalie. I don't even know how to thank you for this. You're amazing. And I love the shit out of you."

"As I love you, *Αγάπη μου*," she replies, gently sucking on my bottom lip. "Right, wrong, or insane."

Pressing her forehead to mine she inhales deeply before pulling back to look at me.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Always."

"What happened tonight?"

"Nothing good," I say softly.

Smiling softly, I kiss the top of her head before turning and walking toward the bed.

"Adam and I tracked down Celeste Donahue and James Fry," I sigh. "And then all hell broke loose."

"Did someone...die?" Natalie says quietly, adjusting wrappings around Tyler before turning back to face me.

I say nothing, but when her eyes find mine, I know I don't have to.

She swallows, and takes a deep breath, walking slowly back to the bed with the wheelchair.

Silently I make my way over to her side and help her into it.

"As I've always said, you don't have to tell me anything about what you do when you leave here," she says softly. "However, just know I gave birth to twins today, Jaxon. *Naturally*."

"I know, Natalie, you're incredible—"

"...And combined with everything else I've seen and experienced this year, I'm pretty sure there's nothing you can tell me that's going to shock me anymore," she says, as I tuck her in.

Gently she catches my hand.

"I never want to nag you for information, but I am your wife, and I'm more than capable of just listening."

Her words stun me.

I don't have much reference when it comes to this sort of thing, and what I do have is contradictory.

My father never shared anything regarding his mafia life with my mother, wanting desperately to preserve her peace and tranquility.

Rachel, on the other hand, would get upset when I didn't tell her things,

and often accused me of lying or deliberately not telling her because I was off screwing whores.

Which was oftentimes true.

However, Natalie's motivation in asking isn't to cross-check my whereabouts. It's simply to provide me with an outlet.

Which is something I love about her.

"Nat, I'm happy to walk you through this but I have to give you some unfortunate news first."

She inhales sharply.

"Susana Knight is dead," I say softly.

"Oh..." Natalie sighs, with a nod.

"...And so is Zoey Pruett."

She blinks, and her brow furrows as she looks down at her finger, biting her bottom lip.

"I see," she whispers. "Do we know how they...died?"

"No, actually," I sigh. "All we know is that it wasn't drugs, and it was a homicide. And that's what set this whole thing off tonight, actually."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, these two girls get abducted, survive La Fratellanza, only to return back here to Chicago and get...murdered? By whom?" I say, shaking my head. "I mean, as far as we knew we'd taken out all of La Fratellanza's key people that night at the mansion. But for someone to target both kidnapped girls, tells me that those girls knew something they shouldn't have known about someone who is still here in Chicago."

"Okay," Natalie nods. "But...who?"

"I don't know," I sigh. "Maybe a secret cell of La Fratellanza?"

"Or another organization."

I stare at her, my blood running cold.

"You know, I hadn't actually thought about that," I blink. "We've been so obsessed with La Fratellanza, but they aren't the only traffickers in the world."

"Maybe this person works independently," Natalie shrugs. "They could sell to La Fratellanza—"

"Or whomever offers the better price," I finish for her. "That's a really good point."

"You're welcome," Natalie smiles at me proudly. "So anyway. Continue"

with your story.”

“Well, Adam and I worked out that somehow the missing girls from St. Stephens were connected to both La Fratellanza and the new Mayor, James Fry. Adam had been the one to learn about their deaths, and he thought it was odd that the death of two girls just months after being rescued from a sex trafficking would’ve made the news?”

“Right...”

“But it didn’t,” I say, narrowing my eyes at her. “And the police reports regarding the homicides were almost completely redacted, which can only be done by someone in a high-level government position.”

“Like the mayor,” Natalie nods.

“So, there’s both a suppression of the case evidence but also a suppression of press happening,” I continue. “Well, Adam works out that James Fry was the one who signed off on the police report redaction, and we ended up tracking him down to this shady little motel outside the city. We’re about to go knock on the door when we realize that Celeste Donahue is in there with him, and the two of them are panicking about someone gunning for them, and, well...someone did.”

“What?”

“As we’re sitting outside, listening in on this conversation a car pulls up, and a man goes up to their apartment, and kills them both,” I continue.

“What did he look like?”

“We don’t know, it was too dark to see.”

“So...are you even sure it was a man?”

Holy shit.

“No...actually,” I say, stunned by the truth in Natalie’s words. “I’m not. And come to think of it, Celeste kept saying ‘her’ when talking about the person who might be gunning for them.”

I scoff, kicking myself for not registering that sooner.

“You know,” I say, raising a brow at her. “You’ve made some good points tonight, Mrs. Pace. Maybe I should add *you* to the Alpha Squad.”

“Be careful,” she winks at me. “I might steal your thunder.”

I chuckle.

“We tried to stop the guy—er, *person*, from leaving by shooting out their tires, but they just fled on foot into the factory next door, and we lost them in the chase.”

Natalie stares at me for a minute before nodding.

“That’s everything that happened tonight.”

She smiles, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Well, I suppose I can forgive you for not answering your phone then when I was in labor,” she winks up at me playfully. “Considering you were chasing people on foot.”

I snort, taking her hand and bringing it to my lips.

“For the record, I’m so sorry about that,” I say quietly. “You know I wanted to be by your side. I hate that I made you worry I wouldn’t be there.”

She places her hand on top of mine.

“It’s alright, Jax,” she says with a soft smile. “You made it here in time. That’s all that matters.”

I reach up and touch her face.

“What on earth did I do to deserve you?”

My whispered question lingers in the air between us, but all I can do is stare at her, appreciating every facet and fiber of this incredible woman that I get to call my wife.

She leans in and kisses me softly on the lips.

“You deserve me because you are a good man, Jaxon Pace,” Natalie whispers. “You take care of all of us, and you’re a phenomenal leader. I’m honored to be your wife, and I’m grateful that Ethan and Tyler have such an amazing father.”

Her words warm my soul.

However, a thought pops into my brain that makes my stomach twist, making my eyes fall from hers.

“What is it, Jaxon?”

“I just…” I whisper, unsure if I should even confess such a thought out loud. “I hope that never changes. I hope I’m always a man you can be proud of.”

Her eyes scan mine, before falling to her hand that she places on top of mine.

“I believe you will be, Jaxon,” she says softly. “Because you want to be.”

“But that’s just it, Nat,” I sigh. “I’m sure *he* did too.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes. I don’t need to explain to Natalie who I’m referring to, because she already knows.

When we had been deciding names for the boys, Natalie had selflessly

offered up Ethan and Dimitris. But I'd been hesitant to give my "father" that honor.

Accepting that Dimitris, the man who had raised me from birth, taught me how to walk, and fight, and who had been the man who called me "son," every single day wasn't *actually* my father, has been a bit of a struggle for me.

But accepting that at the end of his life he'd actually planned to *kill* me and end the family dynasty, just because I wanted to leave the mafia has been even harder.

"He loved you, Jaxon," Natalie whispers softly, staring down at our hands intertwined, and somehow reading my mind. "Never doubt that."

Nodding I pull our hands to my lips and kiss them softly.

"Let's go to bed, eh?" I say. "You need some rest."

She opens her mouth to say something, but then changes her mind.

"Alright," she says with a smile.

After checking on our sleeping twins, I climb into bed and settle in beside her, wrapping my arm around her and feeling her nestle her head into my shoulder.

But while the soft rising and falling of her chest does wonders to relax my body, it unfortunately does nothing to calm my racing thoughts.

And after laying there in the darkness for nearly an hour, I decide there's really only one person who can possibly help me sort through the murky waters of my mind.

I gently slip out from beneath Natalie.

Taking the baby monitor with me, I step into the hallway, finding Wesley stationed just outside our door but asleep in his chair with his head back against the wall.

"Wes," I say, shaking him gently.

"Oh, shit!" He gulps, scrambling to his feet. "I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't mean to be sleeping on the job."

I have to fight my smile.

"Wesley, you've pulled a double shift," I say softly. "I think you've earned some rest."

"No, I'm good, Sir, I promise," he says, shaking his head. "I just heard someone say you should sleep when the babies are sleeping so I thought it was okay."

I smirk, shaking my head.

Adorably, Wesley has been hovering since the babies came into the world. As if, on some level, he feels that *their* protection is also his singular responsibility, just like Natalie's.

"Look kid," I say, gripping his shoulder. "It's alright. Everyone is safe here. Why don't you go tap in Deylan, and go get some sleep."

"I promise, I'm good til the morning, Sir," he says, standing to his feet and straightening his shoulders. "I'll just do some stretches or something. You know, get the blood flowing,"

I sigh, realizing there is no talking him out of this.

Instead, I hand him the baby monitor.

"Alright, a compromise then," I say. "Mrs. Pace is a first-time mom, and as you know she just had a very difficult labor, and needs to take it easy. The twins have been fed and changed, and should sleep for the next few hours. But if they do happen to wake up, I don't want my wife hurting herself because she hears them and thinks she needs to jump out of bed, do you understand?"

Wesley nods.

"I need to go talk to Ethan about something, so while I'm gone, how about you go sit with the twins? There's a semi-comfy lounge chair by the fireplace. And if you happen to fall asleep in that comfy lounge chair, I promise I won't hold it against you. As long as you wake up if the babies start to stir, or if my wife needs your help. Fair enough?"

Wesley contemplates, before smiling with a nod.

"Good lad," I say, tapping his shoulder.

I take a step down the hall before turning back around to face him.

"You know, you've done good, Kid," I say, seeing him stop with his hand on the door.

"Sir?"

"You might drive me crazy sometimes, but I want you to know there hasn't been a day that's gone by that I've doubted your commitment to my wife and my family," I say sincerely. "Promoting you to Alpha was one of the best decisions I've made."

Even in the dark hallway, I can see Wesley's eyes light up.

"Thank you, Sir," he says quietly.

I nod, and without another word, make my way down the hallway.

The house is dark, the clear night sky allowing the moonlight to filter in through the windows, casting shadows on the walls.

Ethan, however, is awake in the living room, reading near the fire, sitting near the front of the plane, reading a book.

“You should be sleeping,” Ethan says, pulling off his glasses. “Remember what I told you when you first had Jess? You should try and sleep whenever the babies are sleeping.”

I snort, thinking about the conversation I just had with Wesley.

“Yep, I remember,” I sigh, sitting down across from him. “I just...can’t.”

Ethan stares at me, setting his book down on the seat next to him.

“I can’t unsee what I’ve seen, Ethan,” I say quietly, leaning forward on my knees. “And I...well, I can’t make sense of some things. About my childhood.”

My voice trails off and I run my hand through my hair, unable to even finish the sentence.

“You mean...with Dimitris.” Ethan says, sitting back against the seat and tapping his glasses on his knee.

I nod.

Ethan takes a deep breath, rubbing the uncharacteristic five o’clock shadow on his chin.

“How am I supposed to reconcile the man he was to me for twenty-seven years, with the man who was ready to kill me for choosing a different path?” I say, shaking my head.

“Dimitris wasn’t always that way though, Jaxon,”

“That’s the point!” I scoff, trying to keep my voice down. “Because I have a daughter, and two beautiful perfect boys, and I can’t imagine harming either of them. But with what you’ve told me about Dimitris, what if I end up just like him?”

“Then you would be very fortunate.”

“What?”

Ethan sighs.

“Jaxon, your father was a good man for more than half your life, and he was a good man before you were born.”

“But then he changed,” I say. “Just like you said, Stefanos changed with you.”

“Right, but that shift wasn’t because he suddenly woke up one morning

and succumbed to some predetermined fate,” Ethan continues stressing his words. “Both Stefanos and Dimitris changed because of their choices. They made good wise choices for many, many years. And then one day they stopped making those choices.”

“But how do I ensure that I don’t make those same mistakes that they made or fall into the same trap? Or be too stubborn to know when it’s my time to step down?” I say, feeling my own fear rising in my chest “Because I...”

My voice cracks, and I impulsively look down at my hands at the thought of disappointing Natalie or harming either of my sons literally causing bile to rise in my throat.

Ethan’s face softens and he nods slowly to himself, sitting back in his chair rubbing his beard. His eyes fall from mine as he taps his glasses against his hand.

He thinks a moment before leaning forward once more.

“You know,” he snorts. “I actually asked myself that once upon a time, you know.”

His eyes fall from mine, and he continues.

“I too had to try and reconcile the father I loved, with the father who disinherited and ruined my life in ways you can’t begin to imagine.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “In ways I can’t imagine?”

“Eliza’s car accident,” Ethan says, closing his eyes. “Was no *accident*, Jaxon.”

My blood ices in my veins immediately.

“*What?*”

He swallows hard, pausing for a long moment as if physically willing himself to continue.

“Your grandfather was so angry at me for turning my back on this life, that he disowned me. However, years later, when Dimitris allowed me back into the family, Stefanos felt that he had been robbed of the punishment he so desperately wanted to inflict upon me,” Ethan sighs, closing his eyes. “...So he deliberately had my wife and children murdered.”

I’m aware my jaw is hanging open, but I’m also aware that I’m not breathing.

“Alvin Winters,” Ethan says in a low voice. “He was a low-level criminal, who’d been charged with capital murder. After anonymously posting his bail,

my father made a deal with him: he would pay Alvin's family money if Alvin were to deliberately crash into my wife and kids on I-94. He promised to pay him a hundred grand for every life he took."

My body recoils before I can even form words.

"Why?" I ask. "Why the fuck would Stefanos do that? Those were his grandchildren? His flesh and blood!"

"He didn't see them that way. After all, I'd been disowned, remember? And above all the things he wanted in his later years, he wanted to teach me a lesson. He wanted to make me feel as hurt and angry as he felt," Ethan says, clicking his tongue inside his mouth and hanging his head. "I should've said no to coming back. I knew my father, and I should've known there was no way he was going to let me get away with defying him and living my life with Eliza in peace. I should've known that."

"That's just...evil." I whisper, shame and disgust twisting in my gut. "I'm so sorry."

Ethan takes a deep breath.

"It was evil. And so was he, but...he was still my *father*, Jaxon," he continues. "And he hadn't always been that way."

He sits back in his seat, wiping his chin.

"When I was young Stefanos was the epitome of what a father should be. I have many happy memories with him and Dimitris. It was only after a few tumultuous years of war, combined with the pressures of leadership, and compounded by the loss of my mother, that he started to become a different person. So, you can imagine when his eldest son, and heir, comes to him and tells him he doesn't want to follow in his footsteps—it was like throwing gasoline on glowing embers. It just reignited every stress and anxiety Stefanos had, and he took it personally."

"Still, that's no reason for him to do what he did to your family," I growl.

"No, it wasn't," Ethan replies. "And the worst part was, I didn't even get to confront the bastard."

"What?"

"He'd already been dead a year when the enforcer in charge of setting up the arrangement with Winters got drunk and ran his mouth."

"How the hell did you cope?"

"I didn't for a time," Ethan shakes his head, folding his hands. "But then I finally talked about it with the one person I knew I could talk about it with."

“Who?”

“Dimitris.”

I say nothing, studying his face.

“I didn’t know how to process the evolution of the man I once loved, into the man who *murdered* my family,” Ethan sighs. “Sometimes I still don’t.”

“It seems like this is a common problem,” I say quietly. “Good men who evolve into stubborn, power-hungry monsters.”

“It is,” Ethan nods. “Easy enough to do after decades of being in power. Can be hard to let go.”

He shifts in his seat and sighs heavily.

“But here’s the thing, Stefanos did better than his father,” Ethan says softly. “And Dimitris did better than his father.”

“That’s not saying much, they both didn’t do it well,” I say darkly. “I don’t want to follow either of their examples.”

“As you shouldn’t,” Ethan says firmly. “But you should also learn from their mistakes.”

“But that’s my point, Ethan. *How?*” I sigh, rubbing my chin. “How do I make sure that I’m a better man than him?”

“By *forgiving* him.”

His words shock me to my core.

“You want to be better than your father?”

“But he wasn’t my father—”

“He was, Jaxon,” Ethan suddenly snaps, pointing at me. “That man loved you, and raised you as his son, and you need to remember that.”

“Careful,” I growl, my jaw clenching. “I’m not looking for a reprimand here.”

“Well, you need one,” Ethan fires back. “I understand you’re upset with him for what he did at the end, but it doesn’t negate the father he was to you for all those years, and you would be a fool to think so because you’d be throwing away a good example.”

I swallow hard.

“It wasn’t easy for Dimitris to take on the role of Don Supreme. He wasn’t born for it, and he hadn’t been trained the same way I was. But when the job fell upon his shoulders, he stepped up to protect our family and our men. And he did it well. So well, in fact, that the other dons had been the ones to request Stefanos step down.”

“And it wasn’t easy for him to admit that he couldn’t give Ismena a child. Not just because of the family dynasty, but because he was also a young man, deeply in love with his wife. He wanted more than anything to soothe her aching heart and build a family of his own, on his own,” Ethan continues furiously. “Which is something I know that you understand.”

My eyes fall from his.

“...And the only way he could see to give Ismena her heart’s desire, and secure the family dynasty, was to come to me. That takes balls, Jaxon. It takes strength, and a sacrifice of pride, especially with Stefanos in the background voicing his own strong opinions about it. But nevertheless, he did it. For her, for us, and for *you*.”

Ethan pauses, staring at me a moment before sighing heavily.

“That’s what I meant by you being the best of us,” he says quietly. “That man loved you from the day you were born, Jaxon. You were his son as much as you are mine.”

His words hit me like a slap across the face, my heart grappling with his words.

“You want to know how to avoid the wrong he did? Start by being grateful for what he did *right*. Because the only way to do better and be better than he was, is to look at the entire picture of his life and learn from his triumphs the same way you learn from his failures.”

Holy shit.

“Who we become is based on the choices we make every single day,” Ethan says softly. “You want to know why you are the best of us? It’s because you adapt, grow, and make better choices than we did. But you have to be diligent and steadfast in that growth. You have to see the lessons he taught you in both his love and hate, and you have to choose to be every single day.”

He places his hand on my leg, and slowly my eyes find his.

“Forgive him, Jaxon,” he whispers. “Because if you choose to carry around this chip on your shoulder, you will inevitably manifest your *own*. And I want better than that for you. Because you *are* better. Than all of us.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting Ethan to say to me, but it certainly wasn’t this.

It’s clear to me now that Ethan has suffered more than anyone in my family, and yet here he is, defending his brother, and begging me to forgive

him.

“Damn you,” I sigh under my breath. “Do you have to be so fucking perfect all the time?”

Ethan snorts.

“I’m not perfect,” he says, shaking his head. “Trust me, I’ve just learned a lot of ways *not* to do something.”

Silence settles over the living room.

“Well, I think we both should try and get some sleep, don’t you?”

“You go ahead,” I say with a sigh. “I’m going to just sit for a moment.”

He nods, before packing up his stuff and standing to his feet. However, he stops in the doorway, turning around to face me.

“I want you to know that I’m really proud of the man you’ve become, Jaxon,” he says quietly. “And if I had a choice to do it all over again, knowing there would be pain, but knowing there would be *you*? I’d do it. Every. Single. Time.”



Chapter Twenty-Five

NATALIE

“Hello Beautiful.”

Jaxon’s sultry voice echoes behind me.

Glancing at him in the mirror, and finding him looking devilishly handsome in a long sleeve black turtleneck, and his charcoal gray dress pants.

“Hello you,” I blush, smiling up at him as I put on his favorite red lipstick. “I’m sorry, I know, I’m running a bit late for our date.”

“Sweetheart, you are never running late. You’re a Pace, remember?” He says with a smug little grin. “That means that whatever time *you* arrive is exactly the time the event should start.”

With his hands in his pockets, he walks up behind me, and gently pushes my long blonde hair out of the way.

“And as I always say,” he says, leaning down and planting a sensual kiss on my neck. “Fuck ‘em.”

I giggle, looking up at him as his hands stroke down my cheek and neck.

“How do you manage to be adorable and arrogant at the same time, Mr. Pace.”

“Oh, Baby, you have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“You haven’t even told me where we are going tonight.”

“But I did tell you that it’s a surprise,” he says. “So, I guess you’ll just have to be patient.” I swallow hard, biting my lip, trying to fight the emotions rising in my stomach.

It’s been three months since our twins were born, and tonight is the first time I will be away from them. I’d been so excited at the idea of going out for a real date with my husband, but now that the moment is here...

Evidently sensing my apprehension, Jaxon kneels down beside me taking my hands.

“Look at me, Αγαπημένη,” he whispers, pulling my eyes to his.

I obey, feeling the burn building behind my eyes.

“I know this is hard. But everything you’re feeling right now is natural. This is a big step, and I promise we won’t go far. We will be right around the

corner,” he whispers. “And if you truly don’t feel up to it, we don’t have to go at all. I’m just as content to stay in and watch sappy old movies with my wife.”

I smile, feeling the tears streaking down my cheeks.

How does he do that?

It’s almost as if Jaxon is giving me the option and power to say no to something I fear, somehow makes me feel brave enough to say yes and face it.

I cup his beautiful face in my hands and kiss him softly.

“No, I want to go on a date with my husband tonight,” I say with a smile. “Just let me get dressed real quick, okay?”

After throwing on a simple wrap dress, I walk out into the bedroom, twirling slowly for him.

“How’s this?”

“Perfect,” Jaxon grins. “As always.”

Suddenly, a baby starts crying on the other side of the door leading from our bedroom to the adjoining nursery.

Jaxon and I are walking toward it when I hear another door open, and Wesley comes barreling into the room.

I smile, pausing and deciding just to listen.

“What is it?” He demands anxiously. “What happened?! Is everyone okay?”

“Shhhh!” Trinity scolds quietly with a forceful whisper. “Chill out, Wesley. He’s a *baby*. He cries. You don’t need to come barging in here ready to shoot someone because he’s crying.”

“Oh...so everything is fine?”

“Yes,” she says, “I think Tyler is just hungry and needs to eat. Since you’re standing there will you grab me one of those bottles from that little fridge? The blue bottles are breast milk.”

“Sure...wait...*what?*” Wesley says. “What did you say the blue ones are?”

“Breast milk.”

“...Oh...my...God...” He whispers.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“I...I didn’t know that...” Wesley stammers, before gagging. “And I...oh God, I think I might be sick.”

I immediately cover my mouth, looking up at Jaxon, who is staring back at me with his eyes wide.

“You don’t think Wesley actually...?” I start to say.

“No,” Jaxon says, listening harder.

“Wait...you didn’t *drink* it,” Trinity gasps. “Did you?”

“I was really thirsty!” Wesley stammers, impulsively retching. “I didn’t know what it was!”

“Oh my God!” I snort, stifling a giggle. “He actually did.”

Jaxon snorts, burying his face in his hands.

“This kid,” he says, shaking his head.

“What is wrong with you?!” Trinity scoffs. “You drank breast milk!”

“You don’t have to keep reminding me,” he says, gagging loudly again. “I thought it was just formula!”

“The formula is still just for the *babies*, you idiot!” Trinity scolds.

“Right, but I thought it’s kinda like the same thing as a protein shake!” Wesley says. “You know, like a smoothie but for babies.”

“Baby smoothies, Wesley?! Are you for real? You are dumber than a box of rocks, I swear to God.”

Jaxon and I look at each other, and burst into a hushed quiet laughter, trying desperately to stifle our giggles.

“Oh my God...so you’re saying that I drank,” Wesley groans, gagging once more. “...Mrs. Pace’s breast milk.”

Admittedly, I am laughing so hard my sides hurt, but poor baby Tyler is still crying and so I nod, pointing to the door.

Jaxon winks at me and then turns the handle.

When we do, we find a wide-eyed Trinity trying to get Tyler to take the bottle...and an immediately mortified Wesley.

He takes one look at me before going white as a sheet.

“Mr. Pace, Mrs. Pace, would you please excuse me,” he says, choking back his gag reflex. “I’m not feeling so hot.”

And without another word, he turns and bolts from the room, gagging all the way down the hall.

I bite my lip, to try and keep from laughing,

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Pace,” Trinity says anxiously, rocking a screaming Tyler. “I’m not sure why, but he just doesn’t seem interested in the bottle.”

“Let me take him,” I say gently scooping him from her arms. “He seems

to prefer the real experience as opposed to the bottle lately.”

Pulling down the front of my dress, Tyler latches on my nipple, suckling softly and instantly calming down.

“You may go, Trinity,” Jaxon says politely. “And would you please go attend to Mr. Lee?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The moment the door closes, and we are alone, Jaxon and I instantly burst into laughter.

“How is that kid so smart,” Jaxon says, shaking his head. “And so stupid at the same time?”

I continue laughing, taking a seat on the little couch in the room and rocking a now peaceful Tyler in my arms, sucking gently on my breast. It isn’t long before he falls back to sleep.

However, after carefully laying him back down in his crib, I turn to see that my husband is staring at me with a smoldering intensity.

Oh my...

I know *that* look.

“Now, Mrs. Pace,” he says, stalking toward me in such a way that I impulsively find myself backing up into our bedroom. “How is it there are three humans in this house that have tasted your milk, and your husband is not one of them?”

Every thought in my brain evaporates in an instant.

Did he really just say...that?!

“Wh...what?” I stutter nervously.

“Oh, did you not hear me?” He whispers, biting his lip “I said I want to taste your *milk*.”

“Jaxon...” I mumble, but he’s already untying the wrap on my dress.

“Is that alright with you?”

“Um...I...I...” I say sheepishly, feeling my cheeks heat. “Yes. I suppose it’s okay.”

“Mmm, I’m afraid I’m going to need a clear answer from you, my darling wife,” Jaxon says, pulling my dress down from my shoulders. “May I taste you?”

Oh fuck.

My heart is pounding in my chest, and my cheeks feel like they have to be the color of ripe pomegranates every time I contemplate this man wanting

to...taste me.

My insides clench as he walks around in front of me and unhooks my bra. It falls to the floor, leaving me standing here, trembling in just my panties.

“What’s your answer, Mrs. Pace?” He whispers with a smile as he sits down on the edge of the bed. “And remember, I won’t be asking a *third* time.”

“Yes,” I breathe, feeling my inside clench. “I’m yours, Jaxon. Enjoy me as you wish.”

“Oh, my dear, those are dangerous words.” He growls softly. “Because there are just so many ways, I can enjoy you.”

He takes my hand and pulls me to sit on his left knee. The moment I sit, I feel his hand snaking up my stomach.

“Now, hold still, and don’t move.”

Pressing his other hand to the small of my back he takes his time, fondling and squeezing both of my tits, rubbing his thumb over my sensitive nipples while I squirm and whimper.

Occasionally, his hand drifts south, and he rubs his index finger along my clothed pussy.

By comparison to some of the sex we’ve had, this is mild, and we aren’t even *technically* having sex right now. But the vulnerable feeling of just sitting here on his knee, while he massages me intimately, and knowing his ultimate intention...is driving me crazy.

So when he squeezes my right breast, and a droplet of milk appears on my nipple, I blush.

“Good girl,” he whispers, locking eyes with me.

And then, without warning, he wraps his mouth around my sensitive nipple and starts sucking. Hard.

“Oh my God!” I gasp, the sensation feeling like nothing I’ve ever experienced before.

When his hand slips underneath my panties and I feel his fingers push inside me, finding his tantalizing rhythm.

“You taste so good, Natalie,” he whispers, finally unlatching from my nipple, and causing milk to drip down my breast.

Holy. Shit. He really was...tasting me.

The thought feels almost naughty and makes my entire body shiver.

But when he lays me back against the bed and presses his throbbing cock

inside me my body practically convulses.

“You’re so wet, Natalie,” he grunts. “I think you like it.”

“What?!” I gasp.

“Let’s see, shall we?”

And before I know what’s happening, he wraps his mouth around my other nipple and begins to fuck me...while sucking me hard.

“Messy girl, you’re dripping down my leg,” he whispers in my ear, thrusting deeper and harder inside me. “Go on then, make your mess for *Daddy*.”

I’m done for.

With my husband’s lips around my nipple, my pussy spasms around him and he empties himself inside me.



“Wait,” Jaxon breathes. “Rach, you got Jessica a...*dog*?”

“Eeek!” Jessica squeals loudly. “A puppppppy!”

The elated eight-year-old cradles the incredibly excited bundle of pure white fluff that sits wiggling on her lap.

“Yes, I did.”

“Oh my goodness! She’s so cute!” Jessica gushes. “Auntie Rachel, I love her!”

“I think she likes you too, Jess,” I say, finding it impossible not to laugh along with her contagious little giggles as the happy little puppy incessantly tries to lick her face.

A dog,” Jaxon repeats, the shock apparent on his face. “You got her a dog.”

“Yep,” Rachel says proudly.

“But...she already has a dog,” Jaxon says.

“No, she doesn’t.”

“She has Apollo and Athena. And technically she has Natalie’s dog Cyclops,” he says rolling his eyes. “Even if that thing is more of a potato than a dog.”

“Your point?”

“My point is that if I do my math correctly, that means Jessica has *three* dogs.”

“No,” Rachel argues, crossing her arms across her body. “Apollo and Athena are your dogs, Jaxon. And Cyclops belongs to Natalie.”

“But that’s still three dogs!”

“None of whom belong to just her,” Rachel says, gesturing to the still-giggling Jessica. “Now Jessica has her *own* dog.”

“Who cares about who owns the dog?”

“An eight-year-old little girl, that’s who,” Rachel says stubbornly. “It’s different when it’s yours.”

“Hate to say it, Jax,” I sigh, turning to him. “But Rachel has a point. And besides, what’s the harm in just one more dog around here.?”

“But, I—”

However, before Jaxon can say anything at all, Jessica scoops up the hyper little cotton ball, walks over to her father and puts the wiggling puppy in his lap.

“Awww, look, Daddy, my new puppy likes you too!”

“Is it even a puppy?” Jaxon snorts sarcastically, trying to avoid letting the happy little dog lick his face. “You sure it isn’t a marshmallow?”

Jessica starts giggling.

“What kind of dog is she, Auntie Rachel?”

“She’s a Samoyed,” she replies with a smile.

“Sam-Oy-ed,” Jessica articulates out loud.

Jaxon’s eyes find mine and I silently tell him just to give in and let the little girl have the damn puppy.

“Now, Jess,” I say, turning to her. “I know you take such good care of Cyclops, but now you’re going to have to do the same with this dog as well. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Mama!” She nods excitedly. “I’ll take the very best care of her, I promise!”

“It’s so...happy,” Jaxon says, staring down at the pup with cautious apprehension. “It’s going to be a big dog too.”

“She’ll be the same size as Apollo and Athena,” Rachel nods. “But Samoyeds are easily trained and great with children. I always wanted one as a kid.”

Adam walks up behind her, wrapping his arm around her waist.

“Well, I love her!” Jessica says, standing next to her father, petting the little dog. “I can keep her, right, Daddy?”

She bats her lashes up at her father, with a face so sweet it nearly gives me a toothache.

Jess is definitely a smart little girl and a skilled negotiator.

Jaxon sighs, rolling his eyes and chuckling to himself.

But slowly but surely, he is won over by this hyperactive ten-pound bundle of fluff, even despite its white hair shedding all over his entirely black outfit.

“Oh, I suppose.”

“Yayyyyyyyyy!” She squeals excitedly, throwing herself at her father. “Thank you, Daddy!”

“You’re welcome!”

Then she turns and dashes over to Rachel, wrapping her tiny arms around her legs.

“Thank you so much Auntie Rachel!” she says, squeezing tighter. “I love her so much!”

Bending down to her level, she wraps Jessica in a hug before gently taking both her hands.

“You’re very welcome kiddo,” she smiles warmly, scrunching up her face. “Now, I think all you have to do is decide what you’re going to call her?”

“What about Elsa?” I suggest.

Jessica shakes her head, gripping her chin and thinking hard.

“Or how about Snowflake,” Jaxon chuckles, setting the little pup down on the floor and brushing off the fur from his pants. “Because she’s getting her *snowflakes* all over me.”

“No, I know what I’m gonna call her!” Jessica giggles.

“What’s that?” Jaxon asks.

“*Marshmallow!*”



Having two babies and a new dog in the house was certainly an adjustment, but in time, life at Pace Manor finally started to settle, and the terrifying and heartbreaking experiences of the first two years of our relationship started to fade into memory.

Well, most of them.

Jaxon's memory of catching "Marshmallow the Dog" snacking on his favorite pair of expensive Italian leather loafers took some time to heal. But eventually it healed.

As did we.

And for the first time since our meeting, things actually started to feel a little...normal.

Jaxon was such a help to my navigation as a first-time mom.

He changed the diapers, carried the car seats, wiped the faces, and dutifully assisted with the late-night feedings so I could get some much-needed sleep.

And on top of being a supportive father, he was also an incredible husband, caring for me fully, completely, and passionately, and never missing an opportunity to tell me how much he loved and desired me.

The man also seized every opportunity he could find to take me downtown to our little "penthouse playroom," where my dominant mafia don husband took his time, and immeasurable pride, in helping me explore new avenues of pleasure.

On a daily basis, my gorgeous, sexy, and terrifyingly powerful husband reminded me that his vows to love and cherish me until his dying breath were promises that he intended to keep.

And as an unconventionally blended family, our lives were full and busy, but they were happy.

Rachel and Adam saw Jessica and the babies several days a week, and although they couldn't be more different, it seemed as if Adam and *Jaxon* were even starting to tolerate each other.

Levi was even allowed to return to active duty, after *Jaxon* revealed that he was still very much alive and kicking to our friendly neighborhood FBI Agent.

Days turned to weeks, and weeks to months.

Before we knew it, we were coming up on the twin's first birthday.

Perhaps that's why we all started to think we were safe. That all monsters

had been defeated.

...But we were wrong.



Chapter Twenty-Six

JAXON

“Transport to base,” Charlie says in my earpiece, riding in the car behind us. “We’re enroute.”

“Did you enjoy yourself, my love?” I ask, placing my hand on the inside of her thigh, delightfully exposed in her short little black dress.

“Yes, I did,” she says as she wraps her hands around my arm. “But I still can’t believe you were able to negotiate a private candlelight dinner with the entire symphony orchestra!”

I smile.

“Well, as a contributing benefactor, it was actually quite simple. And I figured that after our last opera date, I probably owed you a redo.”

“Jaxon, I love you,” she blushes. “And I love that you work so hard to give me these incredible experiences, but I just...” She sighs and bites her lip.

“What? What is it?”

Did I do something wrong?

“I just hope you know that you don’t have to make these grand gestures to keep me happy.”

She threads her fingers in mine and stares down at our hands intertwined. Her tender touch is all it takes to set my bones ablaze.

I pull her hand to my lips.

“Αγαπημένη, any night with you is an incredible experience,” I say gently kissing the inside of her wrist.

“But I hope that you remember what I promised you in Greenland,” I say, bringing the car to an abrupt stop at a red light, I immediately cup her face in my hand, kissing her passionately.

“I promised you that I would never stop chasing you.”

She blushes, her green eyes nearly paralyzing me.

Reaching up, I stroke her cheek.

“I know I’m new to the whole ‘date night’ concept, but that’s my department now. I want to give you the world. What is wrong with that?”

“Nothing!” She says, with a smile, kissing me again. “As

long as you understand that you and our little family are my world. And that while I love being spoiled with an entire symphony orchestra, I was just as happy on our taco date atop the Jefferson.”

I laugh as the light turns green and I turn the corner.

“That wasn’t a date, my love, that was damage control.”

“No, it was our third date,” she says, turning up her nose to me and crossing her arms. “And I will not allow you to downplay it because it is sincerely one of my favorite memories with you.”

“Really?” I snort. “Why would a bag of tacos after a night of nearly getting cornered in alleys be one of your favorite memories?”

“Because that’s when you really let me in,” she says softly, taking my hand again and placing it back on her leg. “That was the first time that you chose to trust me enough to open your world to me.”

“Huh...I never thought of it that way,” I say, rubbing her thigh with my thumb. “I just remember thinking how good your tits looked in that tiny excuse of a dress you had on.”

It takes her a minute, but eventually I break and can fight my smirk no longer.

“Ass,” she giggles playfully.

“Oh yeah,” I say, biting my lip. “Your ass looked good too.”

She lets go of my hand and hits me on the shoulder.

“Here I am being real and vulnerable with you and you’re being a skeeze,” she says, pouting adorably.

“A skeeze,” I chuckle. “Well, that’s a new one.”

She tries to avoid me taking her hand again, but I catch it, and hold it tightly.

“Alright, you want real and vulnerable Mrs. Pace?”

“I mean, it is date night,” she shrugs. “And we do have babysitters for the next half hour.”

“I think classifying Rachel and Adam as babysitters is a gross injustice, but alright,” I say, taking a deep breath. “My favorite date with you was the night at the museum.”

“Really?”

I nod.

“You had so much passion for every single painting,” I say. “And at that point in my life I was trapped between stumbling around in darkness or

surviving on life support. I was just hoping I'd survive another day. And then here you are, with this insatiable light and zest for life. I remember wanting to just be anywhere with you, because you brought out a side of me, I'd never felt before."

I snort to myself.

"Hell, maybe I loved you even then," I say quietly. "Because by the time we got around to the 'taco date,' night as you called it, I was terrified to divulge my entire world to you. Not because I thought you couldn't handle it, but because I was worried that *I* wouldn't be able to handle it if you left. I was afraid that without your light, my world would go back to darkness and life support."

The car goes quiet, but I feel her squeeze my hand tightly.

When I look over at her, I see the faint stains of tears on her cheeks.

"Damn it," I sigh, pulling her wrist to my lips. "I wasn't trying to make you cry."

"How am I not supposed to cry after that!" Natalie sniffles. "That's like the sweetest thing!"

I clear my throat, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

"Yeah, well, this is why I don't do real and vulnerable conversations," I mutter. "Because I never know what I'm supposed to say."

"Passion and panic," Natalie says, softly, smiling to herself. "Fireworks and magnetism."

"Mmm, fireworks," I grin. "Now *that's* a date idea."

Natalie throws her head back and laughs.

"Sir," Charlie says in my ear.

I put my finger up, signaling to Natalie to wait just a second.

"Go ahead."

"We can't seem to reach base at the moment, I think there might be something wrong with their coms. I know Levi was running a few tests with the firewall, so perhaps they are just down."

"Understood."

"Alright, tell me this, Jaxon Pace," Natalie says when I end my call with Charlie. "Have you ever been on a normal date?"

"Define normal?" I say as I bring the car to a stop at another red light. "I'm not entirely sure what that means. But I didn't really date before you, and I think you know I'm not particularly fond of the word 'normal.'"

Trailing my hand up and down her leg, I wait for her eyes to find mine.

“As I already told you, Mrs. Pace, you deserve the best of everything, my dear. And that’s what I intend to give you.”

“Well, I have a request,” she says, leaning over the armrest and placing her hand on my leg, sending my heartrate through the roof.

“Name it, and it’s yours,” I say, kissing her neck.

She moves her hand up my thigh towards my cock, now pressing hard against my pants.

“Whatever I want?” She asks, her mossy green eyes holding mine as she unzips my pants and slips her hand inside.

Holy shit, she’s really doing this right now!

“Anything.” I breathe as she grips my now hard erection and tugs at me slowly, working her thumb around the head of my cock at just the right rhythm. “Anything that is within my power to give you, is yours.”

The light turns green, and I have to will myself to press my foot down on the accelerator.

“Let me plan our next date night,” Natalie says, squeezing and stroking me harder. “But the catch is, that no matter what it is, you’ll promise to just go with the flow.”

“Well, Nat, there are certain security protocols that—” I start to object but I am immediately silenced when she suddenly leans over and wraps her mouth around my erection.

“Jesus Christ,” I breathe, gripping the steering wheel hard. “Fuuuuuck Nat. That feels amazing.”

“Alright, I’ll concede a promise to include security,” she says, stopping momentarily, to work me with her hand. “Do you concede?”

“Woman, I’ll concede any fucking thing you want if you keep doing exactly what you’re doing.” I growl.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Pace,” Natalie chuckles, before wrapping her lips around me, working her hand in tandem as my leg begins to shake.

A few minutes later, I bring the car to a stop at the last light before the manor.

“Nat...I’m going to bust unless you stop now,” I breathe, closing my eyes and pressing my head back against the seat.

But instead of stopping, she only increases her rhythm.

“Holy shit...Nat,” I breathe before I give in completely. “Oh, fuckkkkk!”

I am alerted to the fact that the light has turned green, when the car behind me lays on their horn, just as my climax reaches a crescendo.

But the icing on the experience for me is when the angry driver decides to go around me, just as my wife lifts herself from my lap.

The look on the crusty old man’s face when he recognizes who he was honking at, and why we were stopped is priceless. I wave at him, and he speeds off down the street, causing Natalie and I chuckle shamelessly as we approach our house.

“Just another normal experience this side of suburbia,” I laugh as we pull onto our street.

“Who are you kidding, baby,” Natalie winks at me. “You don’t like that word, remember?”

However, as we approach the house something moving on the lawn catches my eye.

“Oh my God, is that...*Marshmallow*?”

Bounding up the driveway toward us, barking incessantly, is Jessica’s adorably faithful, and sweet-natured Samoyed.

“What the heck is she doing out here?” Natalie asks as we quickly bring the car to a stop. “They never just let her roam the front yard?”

But it isn’t the sight of the unattended all-white dog that makes my heart stop.

...It’s the gigantic streak of *blood* that stains her fur.

“Sweet girl, what did you do? Did you cut yourself?” Natalie gasps, immediately rushing to her side and looking her over.

However, as she runs her fingers through her thick fluffy fur, the happy dog is wagging her tail and kicking her arms.

“No...I’m not seeing any cuts or injuries.”

“Must’ve brushed up against something,” Charlie says cautiously. “Maybe a dead animal.”

“...Or *someone*.”

The words escape my lips before I can stop them as my eyes make contact with Alexei sitting on the front porch steps.

“Alexei?” I say, racing over to him, with Natalie hot on my heels. “Do you know why Jessica’s dog is covered in—”

But before I can finish the sentence, Marshmallow bounds over to us. She

immediately starts whining, rubbing up against Alexei and trying to lick his face.

It's then that I realize the blood on her fur is from *him*...and the massive chest wound on his side, and she is trying to comfort him.

"Alexei? Alexei?!" I say frantically, breathing a momentary sigh of relief as his eyes flutter back.

"Hello, Sir."

"Holy shit!" Natalie gasps racing over to us.

"What the fuck happened?!"

"I think there was a bomb, Sir," he says, his eyes listlessly staring off down the driveway. "We were all in the command center when it just went off."

"Oh my God..." Natalie whispers, her eyes finding mine. "The *kids*!"

"Nat, wait!

But it's too late.

She races up the front porch steps and into the house.

"Get him to the car!" I shout at Wesley, already charging after my wife. "Spread out and check the grounds for wounded—"

Natalie screams.

And as I race into the foyer, I see why.

Bodies are everywhere.

All that's left of the command center is a large, simmering hole in the wall, with men cooked into their computer chairs.

However, my floor isn't lined with *just* Betas.

Laying halfway inside my kitchen, and halfway in the hallway is my cook, holding a gigantic cooking knife.

And in our rush upstairs to the children's bedrooms Natalie and I step over Trinity, who lies strewn across the marble staircase, blood pouring from visible wounds on her neck and torso. In the hallway upstairs lies another member of our housekeeping staff with a knife still sticking from her abdomen.

But what shatters my heart inside my body, is what I see inside Jessica's bedroom.

Old Nan, in a puddle of her own blood, is crumpled on the floor, with a single gunshot wound to the head.

It's then that I understand:

Our house had been attacked, and our staff had put themselves in between the intruder and our children.

My entire world is spinning as the nightmare just keeps spinning.

Jesus fucking Christ how did this happen?!

“Jaxon! Jaxon! They aren’t here!” Natalie weeps hysterically, frantically checking Tyler and Ethan’s cribs before rushing to Jessica’s room, momentarily screaming when she sees Old Nan’s corpse. “Oh my God! Jaxon, they aren’t here! Where are our children, Jaxon?!”

Natalie spins looking around the room before collapsing, her fists tightly clenching Jessica’s favorite teddy bear and letting out a blood-curdling scream.

“Arrrrrrgh!” She wails. “My babies!”

“Nat, we have to—” I say, bending down to comfort her.

“Sir, I found something,” Charlie radios into my earpiece.

“What?! What did you find?” I ask as Natalie jumps up off the floor.

“What is it,” she asks, desperately as we quickly make our way downstairs. “Did they find the children?!”

Charlie, Wesley and Josiah are waiting for us in the foyer.

“Sir, Deylan and Travis are transporting wounded men to the hospital, including Alexei,” Josiah says, his eyes falling from mine. “But it doesn’t look good.”

“Fuck,” I mutter. “What did you find?”

Charlie hands me a small piece of paper, with words scribbled on it:

Library.

But come alone.

For every Alpha you bring, I will execute one of them.

-MV

No. Dear God. No.

My stomach clenches, and my blood ices within my veins as I realize that the monster, I’d hoped we’d put away forever, is still alive...and inside my house.

Michael Valentine is *inside* my fucking house.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

NATALIE

“Sir,” Charlie says, with his brow furrowed. “I cannot let you go alone.”

“He’s not going alone,” I say, my breath trembling. “I’m going with him.”

“Nat...” Jaxon whispers.

“That *psychopath*,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “Has my daughter and my sons. He has my *children*, Jaxon. Don’t even think for one second that you’re leaving me behind.”

My husband stares at me, and I hold his gaze. He knows what I’m saying is true.

Eventually, he nods.

“Keep your earpieces in,” Jaxon says, taking my hand. “That way if there is an opening or another way in then—”

“Another way in!” I say excitedly. “Jaxon, what about the tunnel?! With the boat and the cave?”

Jaxon considers it for a second before shaking his head.

“Nat, that’s nearly impossible to enter from the water entrance. It’s never even been attempted.”

“But *is* there a way to do it?” I ask. “Can it be done?”

“There’s a manual release switch for the cave door, but it’s underwater, and I don’t think the path to the bottom has been maintained in years so it’s likely unsafe. And if that’s not enough the currents and tides are so strong there that I don’t know if anyone can swim there and not drown.”

“I’m game,” Wesley grins. “Besides those are my niece and nephews in there.”

“What?” Jaxon asks, confused. “Your what?”

“Mrs. Pace, made me an honorary uncle,” he smiles proudly.

Jaxon looks up at me.

“Yeah, I did. He is,” I say exasperated. “I can fill you in after we beat the bad guy, okay? But right now, I want my babies back, Jaxon or I might go insane.”

He nods, before pointing to Josiah and Wesley.

“Alright, fine. You’re allowed to try, but you’re not allowed to drown, got it?” He says firmly. “I don’t want you killing yourself over something like this. Because if Natalie and I don’t survive, the men will need good men to lead them...and that’s all of *you*.”

His men are obviously touched by his words, beating their chest twice in response.

“Yes, Sir!” Wesley says before looking up at Josiah with a mischievous grin. “Hey, Josie, wanna go throw me off a cliff?”



The Library at Pace Manor has been my favorite room of the entire house. It has been the only room that’s brought me comfort and been my retreat away from the craziness of life in the mafia.

But today it is my *hell*.

We can hear the babies crying even before we open the door, and the sight before me makes my stomach churn.

At the long oak table in the middle of the room sit Rachel, Adam and Jessica, and they are blindfolded.

Adam has a busted lip, and blood drips multiple open wounds on his face, arms, neck, and torso, some of it landing on a crying Tyler, whom Adam holds tight against his chest.

Rachel has cuts and bruises on her face as well, her pale body trembles as she cradles a sobbing, Ethan.

Jessica sits between them, thankfully without any visible injuries but even under the blindfold her cheeks are stained with tears.

And at the head of the table, sits the monster responsible for all of this in a black ski mask.

But tonight, he more than acts the part.

Tonight, he looks like a monster.

I knew he’d already lost an eye fighting with Jaxon, but now his long black hair is gone, and his skin, obviously the result of multiple restorative surgeries, is bumpy and discolored, and practically sagging off of him. Every

visible inch of his skin is covered in burn scars, evidence of being caught in a fire so hot that it literally melted his skin off.

“Jaxon! How nice of you to join us,” he sneers, “You know I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.”

“Of course, I was coming,” Jaxon fires back. “You took my children.”

“Ooh so serious,” Michael laughs. “Might I suggest you lock that door? So, we can have our little family reunion in peace? With no...interruptions?”

Reluctantly Jaxon turns and locks the library doors.

“Good, good, now Jaxon I’m going to need you to relax a little or you’re going to ruin our fun. Come on now, take a seat.”

“Michael, stop this non—” Jaxon starts to say.

“I said take a fucking seat!” Michael roars.

He suddenly yanks a gun from his pocket and aims it directly at Jessica.

Thankfully the blindfold prevents the little girl from seeing this, but she trembles, nonetheless.

“Sit down or watch her die,” Michael smiles wickedly. “Makes no difference to me.

When Jaxon hesitates, Michael cocks the pistol and fires it into the ceiling, causing all of us to flinch, the twins to start wailing, and Jessica to wince, jumping back in her chair.

“Alright, alright,” Jaxon says, throwing his hands up in the air.

He lowers himself into the chair across from Adam, and I do the same, taking the seat beside him.

“But I’m not putting on a blindfold like Rachel or Adam.”

At first, his comment seems weird to me, but then I remember that he’s wearing an earpiece and likely saying it to relay to the men outside our situation.

“Oh no,” Michael smiles. “I want you to see everything.”

“How did you get in?” I ask.

“Easy,” he shrugs. “I walked in the front door.”

What?

“And words to the wise,” he scolds Jaxon. “When someone gives your child a free teddy bear, you might want to check it out first. Otherwise, it could be blabbering away to your child while you sleep. Telling her all kinds of stories about the mafia...or even asking her to go open the door.”

What? The teddy bear that Father Tomas gave Jess?

How would Michael even know about that?

“Now, isn’t this so nice?” Michael continues, waving his hands around at us all. “A place where *everyone* gets a seat at the table. Not just the ultra-rich.”

“You had a seat at the table until you forgot whose table it was,” Jaxon growls. “After Black died, if you had wanted to reignite your mafia. I wouldn’t have opposed it. But instead, you came in all guns blazing, hiring thugs.”

“What can I say?” Michael smiles. “I’m an equal opportunity chaos-agent. Which leads me to our little game.”

He pulls out his pistol and sets it on the table in front of us.

“I call it ‘spin-the-barrel,’ he says. “I’m going to spin it and then when it lands, I just pick it up, and fire. Here I’ll demonstrate.”

He spins the barrel of the gun only for it to land on Rachel. Without hesitation he grabs the gun and pulls the trigger.

But Thank God it’s an empty chamber.

“See?” He laughs.

“Why are you doing this, Michael?” I ask tearfully.

“Because I can,” he replies bitterly. “And because I want you to feel what I felt. To know what I’ve suffered. To have everything, it all and then watch as it all comes crashing down around you. Revenge is all I’m living for anymore.”

The sounds of my babies still crying echoes in the massive library.

“Michael, please,” I beg you. “Will you at least let me try and calm them down?”

He smiles once more.

“Why would you need to calm them?” He smiles at me. “And trust me, after a few rounds of this, they won’t be making a *peep*.”

He grins at me acidly and my stomach sinks through the floor, realizing that Michael is completely serious.

He intends for us to play his game...until we lose.

Perhaps that’s why, when makes his way over to me with his sick stupid game, I decide to take my chance.

The moment he puts the gun down in front of me, I snatch it up, and pull the trigger.

But the chamber is empty.

Shit!

In an instant Michael grabs me by the hair and yanks me from the table.

“Natalie!” Jaxon shouts, pushing his chair backwards.

However, Michael still has the gun, and fires it at Jaxon, hitting him in the leg and sending him crashing to the floor.

Jessica is crying.

The babies are screaming,

As Michael drags me away from the group.

That’s when I feel the cold metal blade under my throat,

And there’s nothing I can do to fight back.

“Hey asshole!”

A new voice echoes in the library and Michael turns us both in time to see very wet Wesley standing in the secret tunnel doorway, aiming his rifle.

Thinking fast I elbow Michael hard in the stomach causing him to lose enough balance that I slip away from him, just as Wesley fires.

And then fires again.

And again.

Three bullets hit Michael Valentine who collapses to the ground. My husband immediately crosses the distance between us and jumps on top of him.

He jams his fingers into his eye sockets and proceeds to grab Michael’s head and slam it into the concrete, over and over, and over, until the back of Michael’s head has split open.

And after snatching Michael’s gun off the ground, he stands to his feet and fires the last remaining bullet straight into Michael’s head, vanquishing the monster forever.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

JAXON

“Are you ready for date night, Αγαπημένη,”

“What?” Natalie asks, looking up from her book. “What do you mean?”

“It’s Friday night,” I say furrowing my brow as I lean against the doorway of the bedroom. “That means it’s Date Night. Isn’t that how this works? Isn’t it a weekly thing?”

“Yes, but, Jax, I...I’m not ready to—” Natalie chuckles, motioning to her wet hair from her shower. “Look, I love how excited about the concept of Date Night but considering everything we’ve been through since the *last* one, a week ago, I think we’re allowed a rain check, don’t you?”

“Nah,” I say, crossing my arms. “I want a redo. In fact, I think I demand one.”

“You demand one?” Natalie scoffs, looking up at me incredulously. “Honey, where would we go? Might I remind you, Mr. Pace, that for the last week, two adults, three children, and four dogs have been living in this penthouse?”

“You might,” I nod. “In which case I would counter with the fact that Jess and the boys are in Ethan’s suite for the night, along with Marshmallow and Cyclops. Deylan has Apollo and Athena.”

“Oh my goodness? When did you do all of that?”

“When you were in the shower,” I shrug. “Which means it’s just me and you tonight, Beautiful. So, get dressed.”

I smile at her and snap my fingers.

“This might help with that, by the way.”

I walk into the room, carrying with me a black box with a bright red chiffon bow.

“Where are we going?”

“Mmmhmm,” I say, walking over to her. “Not far.”

I lean in, kissing her from above while simultaneously bringing my hand to her chest and sliding it gently up her throat.

“Remember, won’t be *asking* a third time, Mrs. Pace,” I growl. “You’ll

just be going naked.”



Ten minutes later, I’m standing in the hall when my wife opens the door in a little black dress.

“Hello you,” I whisper, my eyes canvassing her slowly.

“Hello you,” she repeats.

“I hope you don’t mind,” I say as I extend my arm to her, leading her down the hall and into the foyer. “But I thought we could just stay in for the night.”

Natalie gasps.

Because the foyer all the way to the living room is covered in white roses.

“Nine hundred white roses, just for you, Mrs. Pace.”

“Oh my God, Jaxon,” Natalie whispers. “How did you...I mean when did you—”

“Well, I may have had some help from the Alphas too.”

“They are so beautiful,” she gushes, wandering into the transformed floral gardens of what was once the living room of my penthouse.

In the background, “We Belong Together” by Ritchie Valens plays quietly.

But when she makes her way onto the patio her jaw drops.

A couch has been set up, complete with pillows and cozy blankets, and a giant projector screen that is playing *Gone with the Wind*.

“And for dinner,” I say, lifting the lid on a silver tray that sits on top of the oversized couch revealing a tray of tacos, guacamole, and chips.

She looks up at me, tears welling in her eyes.

“I know you said you wanted a normal date,” I say softly. “This was the best I could do. I was to track down that taco guy from our rooftop date, so he’s the one who made—”

But I’m unable to finish this sentence as Natalie launches herself into my arms and kisses me deeply.

“It’s perfect. You’re perfect. I love you,” she says excitedly. “Thank you,

for loving me so very well.”

“Until death, Mrs. Pace,” I say, pressing my nose to hers.

I spin her around in my arms before setting her back down on her feet.

“So are you hungry?”

“Starving,” she says, biting her lip. “Let me just go grab a sweater real quick.”

“Hurry back,” I say, kissing her cheek. “Or I might have to come find you in the bedroom and come up with something else to *eat*.”

She giggles, and scurries back into the penthouse.

Who would've thought married life could be so...fun?

I walk over to the outdoor bar and pour us both a drink, secretly planning all the delicious ways I plan to make my wife cum later this evening.

But then I look up, and I see Natalie standing in the doorway, looking down at her phone.

And then I see the tears in her eyes.

“It's Rachel.”



Chapter Twenty-Nine

NATALIE

We reach the county hospital in record time, our entire entourage bursting through the Emergency Room doors as if we owned the place, and scattering a few terrified patients.

“Rachel Valentine,” Jaxon snaps. “Where is she?”

“Sir,” the shy nurse working triage says, glancing anxiously at me and then the nine gigantic men standing around her desk. “I’m not sure I can just let you—”

But Jaxon isn’t listening, and instead takes my hand and busts through the double doors into the ER.

“Rachel!” Jaxon yells loudly. “Adam!”

“Excuse me, Sir, you can’t just come in here!”

A bold doctor steps around the nurses station, and straight into my husband’s path.

That’s when his face goes white, and I suddenly realize this isn’t just any doctor.

This is the doctor that had saved my life when I’d been shot.

...The same one that Jaxon had punched in the face.

Jaxon does seem to recognize him though, stepping closer to the middle-aged man with terrifying authority.

“What was that?” He growls.

“Erm, Mr. Pace,” the doctor chuckles nervously. “How...uh...nice to see you again.”

My husband says nothing, glaring down at the skinny doctor as if he wants to snap his neck right here in this very packed Emergency Room.

“Um,” the doctor says, quickly grabbing a chart off the counter. “Who was it you were asking about?”

“Rachel Valentine,” Jaxon replies through gritted teeth.

“Right this way!”

Perhaps wanting to put some physical distance between himself and my scary mafioso, or perhaps not wanting to be gifted another shiner, the doctor

turns and starts down the hall, waving us after him.

And as we turn a corner, we find Adam Westwood, standing in the hallway, gesturing angrily with a doctor.

“So, what are you saying?” He says, tilting his head. “You just told me a bunch of fucking words and still didn’t say a goddamn thing!”

“Your wife’s condition is very serious, Mr. Westwood,” I hear the doctor say quietly. “Perhaps if we’d known about this sooner, then perhaps we’d have been able to treat it more effectively.”

“But you haven’t actually offered her any kind of treatment!” Adam shouts.

He turns, evidently hearing the thundering sound of our footsteps approaching.

“Oh for fucks sake...” he says, throwing up his hands. “This is just what I fucking need.”

“What’s going on?” Jaxon says, ignoring Adam’s tone. “What’s going on with Rachel?”

“I have no idea because this asshole keeps beating around the bush and won’t give me a straight fucking answer!” Adam says angrily.

Without warning, Jaxon grabs the doctor by his coat and slams him up against the wall behind him, sending a nearby supply cart toppling to the floor and making me jump in the process.

“What is the status of Rachel Valentine?!”

“Westwood,” Adam says, clearing his throat.

“What?” Jaxon turns, still holding the choking man by the shirt.

“It’s Valentine-Westwood now.”

“Oh, alright,” Jaxon shrugs, turning back to look at the man the wall. “Tell me the status of Rachel Valentine-Westwood.”

“I...I...Um...well, I...”

“Answer me, damnit!”

“She’s dying!” The doctor finally chokes out.

My husband drops the squirming doctor and recoils from him as if the man is on fire. “No...”

“What?” Adam whispers. “What do you mean she’s dying?”

The doctor coughs, gasping for air, leaning up against the wall.

“What do you mean she’s dying?!” Adam shouts. “She was perfectly fine two hours ago!”

“Your wife has a brain bleed, Mr. Westwood,” the doctor gasps.

My heart stops beating, and my blood ices in my veins.

No. No, it cannot be.

“From what we can tell,” he says between labored breaths. “It looks like it might’ve been an undiagnosed aneurysm that ruptured.”

“No...” Adam says, backing away from the doctor.

“You said she’d been having headaches and dizzy spells the last few days?”

“Yes, but she’s had headaches for a while,” Adam says. “She said she gets them every time the seasons change because she’s sensitive to atmospheric temperature changes.”

“But the dizzy spells,” the doctor says, standing to his feet. “When did those start?”

“A week or so ago?” Adam gasps, holding his chest. “I asked if she wanted to come get it checked out, but she said no.”

“I saw on her intake sheet that she had suffered a head-wound some time earlier, yes?” The doctor says it as delicately as possible. “An accident of some kind? Where she was in a coma before?”

“She...she’d been shot in the head. Eight years ago,” Adams says, his voice breaking. “But she survived. And it’s been years since—”

Suddenly he turns to me, rushing over to me.

“Natalie, tell them,” he says painfully, tears streaking down his cheeks. “Tell them that she’s strong! She can handle whatever treatment they need to do for her.”

“There is no treatment we can do for her right now, Mr. Westwood,” the doctor says softly. “But these things are...complicated. If diagnosed early they are oftentimes perfectly treatable. But if not, they can rupture and when it’s as advanced as hers is, and in such an inaccessible location, then unfortunately there’s nothing we can do except make her comfortable.”

“No!” Adam snaps angrily. “There has to be something! Something you can do! You’re doctors for Christ’s sake!”

“Mr. Westwood,” the doctor says sympathetically. “I’m sorry. I truly wish I had better news for you.”

“Nat...” Adam whispers to me pleadingly. “Natalie, please, do...do something.”

My heart shatters inside my body, tears now streaming down both of my

cheeks.

Because I can't.

Because I know, as well as the terrified doctor, that he's right. If Rachel has an advanced ruptured brain-bleed on an inoperable part of her brain... then there truly is nothing they can do for her.

"Adam," I breathe, my voice breaking. "I'm...I'm so sorry."

"Fuckkkkkkkk!" Adam shouts.

His voice trails off, and the hallway, that was just full of commotion, immediately turns to silence. But his devastation echoes in my heart.

Because in this moment there is nothing anyone can do for the woman who is his wife and the mother of Jaxon's child.

For the woman who has become one of my closest friends.

Rachel Valentine-Westwood is going to die.

And none of us are ready for it.



Despite the hospital's guest limits, we refused to leave Rachel's side. As did the Alpha Squad.

After some yelling, gesticulating, and threatening to buy the entire hospital simply to fire the staff, Jaxon "negotiated" a private room for Rachel.

We were there when she woke up.

We were there when the doctors told her the news.

And we were there when she fell apart.

Because that's what families do for each other.

They hold you through the pain, and sit in the mess *with* you.

Of course there was more pleading with doctor's. More threatening. More bargaining and arguing. But in the end, there was nothing any of us could do, except to accept the impending truth.

Although nothing could've prepared us for the conversations we now found ourselves forced to have.

"Jess," Rachel says, choking back tears. "I've got to tell you something really important, okay?"

Jaxon lifts Jessica up onto Rachel's hospital bed.

"Auntie Rachel is going to have to go away for a little while, okay?"

"But...I know you're not my auntie."

Rachel blinks, confused.

Jessica, like all of us, turns to look at her father, who smiles with a nod.

"It's okay, you can tell her now."

"Tell me what?" Rachel smiles.

"Daddy told me a while ago that you're my first mommy," Jessica said.

"He...did?"

"He said that you loved me so much when I was in your belly that when I was born you decided to share with him so he could have a turn."

Rachel stares at Jessica, and then up at Jaxon trying to blink away the tears that well in her eyes. But it's no use.

All of us are crying now.

"He told me that one day you'd let me call you Mama too. When you are ready."

I wipe my eyes, looking up at Jaxon.

He really told her. Jaxon told Jessica the truth about Rachel.

"You can call me whatever you wanna call me, Monkey," Rachel says, wiping her eyes.

"I like having two mommies, it means I'm extra loved."

"Yes, yes it does," Rachel says, extending her arms to Jessica. "And I want you to know that even if I'm not here, I still love you. And I'll be watching over you and sending you all my love, okay?"

"But...will I see you again?" Jessica asks.

"One day," Rachel says, closing her eyes as the tears fall down her cheeks. "One day."



Rachel held Jess for hours, talking and reminiscing about all the fun things we'd done together in the last year.

And even as her condition deteriorated, she held her lost daughter to her

chest. Even when Jessica fell asleep, Rachel still refused to be parted, treasuring every single second she had, in memory of all the ones she had missed.

And none of us objected.

But when her breathing became more labored, the doctor's advised us that her time was nearing, and that if there were things we needed to say, we should say them now.

Surprisingly, Jaxon is the first to speak.

"Rachel..." he says, his voice soft and soaked in pain. "I...I...I'm not sure what I should say."

He swallows, inhaling shakily.

"I want to say that I'm sorry, for everything," he says, lowering his head. "Especially for this."

"This isn't your fault, Jaxon," Rachel breathes softly. "This is just one of those rare instances where shit was just out of your control."

"This was never supposed to happen," Jaxon says, biting his lower lip and closing his eyes. "I...I...Fuck. I don't know what to do for you, or what you need from me."

"Jaxon..."

Rachel looks up at Jaxon, her eyes silently pleading with him to stop blaming himself for the situation we find ourselves in.

But I know my husband, and I know that is never going to happen.

"You know, not everything revolves around you, Don Supreme," Rachel says, shooting him a polite smile.

He chuckles softly, and it's then that I see the tears forming in his eyes.

"I just don't know what to say," he says quietly. "But then again, at the same time I feel like so much of our relationship was me talking and never really saying the right thing."

Rachel scoffs, wiping her eyes.

"Yeah," she breathes heavily. "You were always shit at it."

Slowly she raises her tube covered hand and places it on top of Jaxon's.

"But you were *always* an amazing father," she whispers, her voice cracking. "You were always good at that."

Jaxon flinches, and he closes his eyes.

"So, I'm going to need you to keep doing that for me," Rachel says, her lip trembling. "And the rest of the bullshit? Well, I forgive you for all of it."

It's in the past. It doesn't matter."

She squeezes Jessica tighter, her eyes finding Jaxon's.

"She is the only thing that matters now."

Jaxon says nothing, wiping his eyes.

"She is the future. And all I need is to know she won't suffer what I suffered or endure what you endured."

Although a tear streaks down Rachel's face she holds Jaxon's gaze without breaking.

"Just promise me, Jaxon," she whispers. "That she will have a better life than we did."

Her lip trembles and she presses her hand to Jessica's back, and screws her eyes shut, trying to regain her composure.

"Promise me you won't let her go through it."

It's then that I understand what Rachel is truly saying.

She doesn't want Jessica to be alone in the world.

...Or face The Trials.

I watch in real time as the same realization dawns on Jaxon's face.

He inhales deeply before gently taking Rachel's hand.

"You have my word," he says quietly. "She will never know any of that. I promise."

Rachel smiles with a tearful nod.

My heart feels as if it's cracking in half, and I sniffle, feeling my own tears streaking down my face.

Half of me understands the gravity of what's happening in this moment, and the other half of me is refusing to accept it.

But when Rachel turns her head to look at me, I realize that I have no choice.

We stare at each other in silence for a few seconds and that's when I feel the tears falling from my eyes.

"Don't go getting soft on me, Cupcake," Rachel says tearfully. "You're the strongest woman I know, remember?"

"No," I choke. "You are."

I inhale sharply, my lip trembling.

Rachel stares back at me, before closing her eyes, sobbing quietly.

"Well, I guess I'm not going to be around to get you into trouble," She laughs between her tears. "Or drive you crazy."

“See, that’s funny,” I laugh quietly, taking her hand. “Because I’ve really come to love your kind of crazy. And now I...I don’t know what I’m going to do without you.”

She covers her eyes, sobbing quietly. And I cry along with her, my heart breaking into a thousand pieces.

“I want you to know,” Rachel says. “That I never really had a best friend. Until *you*.”

“Rachel...” I whisper tearfully.

“You always had my back, advocating for far more than I deserved, but in the process you...well, you...showed what real friendship looked like, Natalie.”

She bites her bottom lip, tipping her head back and closing her eyes.

“Thank you,” Rachel whispers. “For being exactly who you are.”

Gently she places her lips against the top of Jessica’s head, her entire body now shaking.

“This little girl,” she whispers. “Is so lucky to have you, Nat. She has the best mother a girl could ask for.”

This does it, and despite my resolve to keep it together in front of her I break. Placing my head on the side of the bed and sobbing into the sheets.

Slowly, I pull myself up and look up at her.

“No, Rachel. You’re wrong.” I shake my head, feeling my stomach clench within me. “She has *two*.”

Rachel smiles.

“Thank you for being better to me than I was to you,” she says, squeezing my hand. “You helped me see that there was a different way. And that maybe I could want better for myself.”

She turns to Adam, sitting on the other side of his bed.

With his jaw set, and his nostrils flaring, the stoic FBI Agent Westwood hasn’t said a word since we walked in here.

But he doesn’t have to.

The tear stains on his cheeks say more than words ever could.

“And you,” she whispers. “You are the best of everything.”

Letting go of Jessica, she reaches for his hand.

“You gave me peace in a time when I had none,” she says, her voice cracking. “You saw me shattered on the rocks, waded into my storm, and fixed the broken parts of me so well, and so completely, that for the first time

in my life, I finally feel like a whole person.”

He leans forward, pressing his lips to hers as his body convulses, struggling to keep his composure.

“I have never known happiness like I’ve known with you, Adam,” she cries softly. “And if I knew then, what I know now, I would still do this all over again because loving you has been the greatest honor of my life. I’m grateful for every second that I’ve had with you.”

“Rach,” Adam whispers. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Then please stay,” he chokes. “Don’t leave me here. I don’t want to do this without you, Rachel. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” Rachel says, tearfully reassuring him before taking a deep shaking breath. “You have to, Adam. There’s so much good you have left to do here. Red in your ledger.”

And that’s when it happens.

I watch as the facade of Adam Westwood finally cracks.

He buries his face in her side, his strong muscular body wracked with sobs.

“Please stay,” he pleads into the sheets. “I can’t lose you.”

“Oh my love,” Rachel says, placing her hand on top of his head. “You will never truly lose me. You are a part of me, and I am a part of you.”

She looks up, smiling softly. Slowly her eyes find each of ours as endless tears stream down her face. Wrapping her free hand around Jessica, she inhales the scent of her hair and squeezes her tightly.

“I promise I will always be with you,” she whispers weakly. “I’ll be waiting for you on the other side.”

And with one final breath, Rachel Valentine-Westwood is finally freed of her pain.



Rachel Anne Valentine-Westwood was buried at Pace Manor on an uncharacteristically warm day in early May.

When her casket arrived, the entire Pace Family Mafia stood silently along the path to the crypt, their black-on-black attire a stark contrast to the blooming spring gardens that bustle around them.

But it wasn't just the Pace Mafia that showed up for her.

It was Roman and Abigail Antonov.

It was the Viper and Sofia.

It was Glow Bourdeaux's girls.

It was Xiang's clan.

And Dahlia Nam's.

The girl who had no family to speak of, and who didn't trust anyone enough to call them a friend, invoked the largest crowd of any Pace funeral.

And as the hearse doors open, Adam, Jaxon, Ethan and Charlie step forward to carry Rachel to her final resting place.

Because, like the ashes of my unborn son, in this family...we carry our own.

Once inside, Levi, Josiah and Wesley silently assist with lifting her into the marble niche with her name carved delicately into the stone.

"Rachel," Ethan says, his voice heavy and dark. "Had no family besides those of us standing in this room."

He pauses, looking down at his hands.

"Her life was never easy. She lived forever torn between the life she longed for, and the grim reality of the one she was born into. A reality that often forced her to make choices that were sometimes difficult. But let none of us standing here cast judgment. Because in the end, Rachel Valentine-Westwood is the reason that any of us are standing here at all."

I take a shuddering breath, pulling a whimpering Jessica into my arms.

"She lived hard, but loved harder. Her entire life was a testament to the strength, and resilience that is required for survival in this life, but it is her last selfless act of sacrifice which reminds us that redemption is always within reach. Rachel Valentine-Westwood will forever be part of this family, and forever remembered in the hearts of all those she leaves behind." I feel the tears streaking down my cheeks as my husband, the Don Supreme of the most powerful Chicago mafia says his final words, before beating his fist against his chest twice, echoed solemnly by the men gathered around.

I carry Jessica to the open niche, and she places a single bright red rose inside before it is closed.

When their voices have finished echoing off the concrete walls a soft delicate voice begins to echo through the chamber.

I turn to see Rosario Bellacourt, the resident prima donna of the Metropolitan Opera, and the same woman who performed in La Boheme, standing in a simple black dress and veil.

And as she begins the beautiful words of Ave Maria, Jaxon steps up beside me, pulling Jessica on to his hip, and wrapping the other around my waist.

Her mournful song echoes through the crypt, spilling out onto the lawn, and as we finally join our guests, I see there's not a dry eye in sight, including those of Jaxon's notoriously chilly Alpha Squad.

"I invited everyone," he whispers so that only I can hear him. "But I can't believe they...came."

"I can," I reply, sniffing. "She was one of their own."

A shaking Jaxon tightens his grip on me as we stand here watching as practically all Chicago's underground participate in this moment of remembrance for Rachel.

However, perhaps the most heartbreaking sight of all, is that of Agent Westwood slipping off quietly down the driveway.

"Jaxon," I whisper. "He shouldn't be alone right now."

"I know," he says softly, sighing heavily. "I don't plan on letting that happen."



Chapter Thirty

JAXON

The first thing I hear when the elevator doors open to the guest penthouse is glass breaking.

“Fuckkkkkkkk!”

Adam’s voice echoes down the hall.

“Fuck it all!!!!” He shouts. “Argghhhh! Fucking bastards!”

Shit. Well, this isn’t going to be easy.

Slowly I make my way across the foyer each step feeling heavier than the last.

As I step into the living room it’s a disaster.

Tables are overturned, the flatscreen has been punctured, pictures with broken frames hang haphazardly on the wall, and there is a shattered lamp in the middle of the room.

Adam has destroyed the penthouse.

But I don’t even care.

Because the man I see, bent over the back of the couch, clutching a bottle of Jack Daniels is more broken than any of the items in this room.

He alternates between cursing under his breath and tearfully choking on his pain.

I’m not sure how long I’ve stood here, waiting for him to acknowledge my presence. All I know is that even without him looking up at me, he knows I’m here.

The room grows silent, the only hum is that of the ceiling fan above us, that is now missing a blade.

“You,” Adam growls venomously in a whisper. “You are the cause of this.”

Slowly he looks up at me, a vicious rage reflected in his eyes.

“All of Rachel’s pain,” he continues. “And all of the pain they inflicted on her, was because of her association with you, Jaxon Pace.”

I say nothing.

“They hated her, because of you,” he shouts. “They tortured her because

of you! And those things killed her!”

His voice echoes loudly throughout the silent room.

“I know.”

Truly I wish I had something more profound to say, but in this moment, I do not.

“I was the cause of her agony,” I whisper. “For most of her life, her association with me only ever brought her misery and pain.”

“All that power, and influence, and money,” Adam glares at me, pointing at me before taking a sip of the bottle in his hand.

He snorts loudly, stretching his arms wide.

“I mean, you had everything at your disposal, Jaxon. Everything that could’ve given her a better life.”

In an instant he throws the bottle of Jack Daniels, sending it smashing into the wall and storms across the floor to me.

“You should’ve been better to her,” he shouts in my face, grabbing me by the jacket.

However, I do not fight back.

“She was the mother of your child!” He roars, squeezing my shirt and suit coat tightly around my neck. “She gave you everything she had, and you treated her like she was fucking disposable! You let those monsters have her!”

Sweat beads have formed on his forehead and his bloodshot eyes are raw from crying.

“You were supposed to protect her and you fucking failed!”

He releases me, shoving me backwards.

“Do you realize the mental gymnastics you put her through? She had a baby—for you. She quit dancing—for you. She gave up her life—for you. And for what? You never respected or valued her opinion; you couldn’t even be faithful!” He shouts, waving angrily at the windows. “You made that woman question what she wanted all the fucking time, when *you* had no idea what you wanted!”

He laughs out loud.

“I mean, even when she was dying in the hospital, you had to go and question her decision to be a fucking organ donor?! Why?”

“I just didn’t want to see her carved up—”

“You. Carved. Her. Up. Jaxon!” He thunders, pointing at me. “You took

bits and pieces of her for years and you didn't even realize it."

He grabs a dining room chair and throws it angrily across the room.

"But I loved her!" He bellows. "I knew how incredible she was, and I valued her! I loved that woman with every fiber of my body, and I made it my mission to fix what you broke inside her! And now she's gone and once again all that's left is *you!*"

He turns toward the windows running his hand over his head.

"Fuuuuuck!"

He storms toward me, yanking off his gun belt.

"Fight me," he growls.

"I'm not going to fight you, Adam," I say solemnly. "We're past that."

"No, we're not past it!" He shouts, the veins in his neck throbbing. "So, fight me, damnit!"

"I'm not going to fight you."

Adam's foot connects with the nearest end table, sending it sliding into the wall, splintering into hundreds of pieces.

He storms over to me, getting up in my face.

"Fucking fight me you bastard!"

But I won't. Because I know that it will do no good.

Because everything he said is true.

And suddenly he cracks.

Covering his face with his hands, FBI Agent Westwood breaks into a low sob.

Without a word, I cross the distance between us, and embrace him. He fights me at first, but then relents, sobbing into my shoulder.

"I loved her," he says, his voice cracking. "My god how I loved her. And now she's...she's..."

"Gone."



I'm not sure when I ended up in the crypt.

Or how I managed to steal a minute alone, considering my men have been

on high alert for the last week.

But somehow, I find myself sitting here staring up at the name freshly carved into the cold white marble.

How the fuck did this happen? How did I let this happen?

“All this time, and all these years later,” I say softly. “I still feel like I never know what to say to you.”

I swallow hard.

“I’m...I’m just sorry, Rachel,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “God, I’m sorry for all of it.”

My eyes burn, a swell of emotions building in my chest, until I can fight it no longer.

And this time alone in this place, I don’t want to.

The dam breaks, and I find myself crying.

No, not crying.

Sobbing.

I weep for everything we were to each other.

And for everything we weren’t.

I weep for all the hurts I caused her, as a partner and father, and even as a man.

I weep for the life Rachel should’ve had.

And I weep for Jessica...and the mother she barely knew.

The sound of my pain echoes off the cold stone. Every pent-up transgression or guilt that I never wanted to confront or acknowledge in front of others pours out of me now like a busted tap.

I’m not sure how long I’ve sat here crying.

Seconds? Minutes? Hours?

Who knows.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “For all the ways I failed you.”

And I *am* sorry.

While I know that not *all* of these transgressions are solely mine, now that Rachel is gone, I’m the only one left to carry them.

“But I promise you,” I say, sniffing softly. “You will be remembered.”

Crossing my hands in front of me, I wipe my eyes.

“I know I gave your husband and doctors a hard time, but I think you should know that by donating your organs, you saved twelve lives.” I continue, nodding slowly. “And I’ve started a non-profit in your name.”

I chuckle softly.

“Though something tells me you would probably find that ridiculous.”

My eyes are drawn inexplicably to her name, etched forever into the hard stone.

“The Valentine Initiative,” I say into the silence. “Globally it will work to combat the sex trade, ensuring safe reporting and passage for victims,” I say quietly. “And here, Daliah and Glow are building safer policies and procedures for dancers, bartenders, sex workers and escorts.”

My lungs heave, as I close my eyes.

“The Valentine Estate will be rebuilt as a children’s home for orphans, where we will work to find good families to foster and adopt. Workers break ground tomorrow.”

I stare down at my hands once more.

“I promise you, Rachel. No one will suffer what you suffered,” I whisper, new tears streaking down my cheeks. “They won’t be left to do it all on their own like you did. I will make sure of it.”

I lean forward on my knees, resting my chin on my thumbs.

“And Jessica,” I choke out, my voice shaking. “She’s starting school this fall. A *real* school, where she’ll socialize, and make new friends. I know you wanted that for her. Nothing will come before her. You have my word.”

Wiping my face, I take one final breath.

“And I promise that Jessica will know what an incredible woman her mother was.”



I open the door to my study, allowing Agent Westwood inside.

Contractors and Betas in hardhats bustle around us, working to repair the damaged areas of the house.

Natalie looks up at me from the foyer, and from the terrified pale expression on her face, I know that she knows how pivotal the next few moments will be.

She knows about my conversation with Adam at the penthouse. I’d asked

him not to go back to Virginia and stay in Chicago for Jessica.

However, she also knows that the Agent didn't give me an answer. Claiming he had "lots to consider" after being submerged in our world for the last year.

Which means that there's a chance FBI Agent Adam Westwood could arrest me and my men and destroy the entire syndicate.

As the agent gets settled, I cross the distance between Natalie and I, pulling her to me and kissing her softly.

"I love you," she whispers.

"As I love you," I whisper against her lips. "Right, wrong or insane."

And before I can talk myself out of this meeting, I turn and head into my office, closing the door behind me.

Well, I attempt to close it, as the blast from the bomb in the command center has evidently cracked it straight down the middle.

"I need to thank you," I say solemnly, crossing over to my bar.

"For?"

"Not killing me the other night," I say quietly. "And for allowing me to bury her...*here*."

I stare down at the multitude of bottles before me. One of which is the poisoned bottle of scotch that had almost been used to kill me, sitting obscurely to the left.

This is the moment of truth: my contingency plan.

And I must choose.

Choosing the bottle of lethal scotch would temporarily provide me freedom, but it would not guarantee it.

Natalie, Jessica and I would forever be on the run and my men and loyal employees would come under fire.

Maybe even arrested.

On the other hand, Adam Westwood isn't an idiot.

The file he brought with him today is certainly not his only file, and I can only assume he has made contingency plans of his own as well.

We might not have seen eye-to-eye, and I know he had justifiable reasons for not liking me. Mainly Rachel. But over the last year he's spent as Jessica's stepfather, we found a way to tolerate each other, if only for her sake.

But now that his wife is dead...what remains? Do I really want to put my trust and faith with the mafia underground's secrets...in an FBI Agent?

Can I?

Taking a deep breath, I make my choice, and I pour us both a drink, carrying them both back to the desk.

"The funeral was...nice," he says softly, unbuckling his jacket. "And I suppose you were right. I suppose this is where she belongs."

I walk around the desk, taking my seat as the two of us sit in silence, listening to the fireplace crackling behind us.

"But," he sighs. "Unfortunately, I think you know why I'm really here."

"I have an idea, yes."

The agent takes a sip of his drink, clicking his tongue inside his mouth before pulling back to stare carefully into the glass.

"Mr. Pace, I never thought I'd say this, but I respect what you're doing here. Or at least what you're trying to do here."

"...But?"

"But I've seen far too much in the last few weeks to just walk away from this."

"I see."

Agent Westwood pulls a file from his jacket.

"This file contains everything I've documented in my ongoing investigation into your affairs, Mr. Pace," he says, setting it on the desk. "And I'm sure you're more than aware that there's more than enough to strip you of your assets and put you, and all your men, away for the rest of your life."

I stare at him.

"...But that's not what she would have wanted."

"What?"

"Rachel," he says, taking another drink. "The only thing she ever wanted was for her child not to be an orphan. Or a target. And made it abundantly clear to me that keeping you alive was the only way to secure Jessica's safety."

He sighs, setting his glass down on the desk.

"And it seems to me it would be really hard for you to protect your daughter from a jail cell."

"Depends on the jail," I say with a slight smirk.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I say, waving him on. “You were talking about how you need me to stay out of prison in order to protect my daughter.”

He glares at me, as if annoyed.

Whoops. I should probably dial back the cocky prick attitude a bit.

“The conundrum I face is that if I just allow you free reign, to go hog-wild, shooting up bad guys and blowing up houses, playing Don Supreme, you could very easily die. Which means Jessica would grow up an orphan anyway. So, this also doesn’t accomplish Rachel’s goals.”

He taps his fingers on the glass, his stern eyes studying mine.

“So, I am going to offer you a choice, Mr. Pace,” Agent Westwood says. “I can arrest you now, and you can take your chances with the court system, which I must say are usually salivating to devour a misbehaving socialite.”

“Or?”

He pauses for what feels like an eternity.

“Or you add me to your Alpha Squad,” he says flatly. “And I will make sure that your stupid, arrogant, and overly inflated head doesn’t take a bullet.”

Holy. Shit.

“The choice is yours, Mr. Pace.”

There were few moments in my life that I knew instantly would stick with me forever.

The day my daughter was born.

The first dance I shared with Natalie Tyler.

The day I learned who my real father was.

The day my sons came into the world.

And the day that everything changed.

Six months later



Epilogue

NATALIE

“Like the view?”

I’m sitting in a tight black mini-skirt and pinstripe tights on Jaxon’s desk at the Jefferson when he opens the door, carrying a manilla folder.

I sit here, swinging my legs, watching as his hungry eyes devour every inch of me as he slowly closes the door behind him.

...And then *locks* it.

“Do I ever,” he growls, slowly walking toward me. “I didn’t know you’d be here today. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Me and the kids stopped in to have lunch with Ethan and Sally in the restaurant,” I say, playfully playing with a pen in my mouth.

“Ethan and Sally, huh?” He says with a shrug, “That’s interesting. I wonder why they are spending so much time together?”

Oh my clueless Don Supreme.

“You’re welcome to join us,” I wink at him, “You know, if you’re hungry.”

He steps up to the desk, his smoldering gaze threatening to set the whole room on fire as the scent of his cologne fills my nostrils and makes me clench my legs.

I want him.

I shouldn’t, because I have plans, but...I want him. *Now.*

“Oh, Αγαπημένη,” he smiles, running his hand from my ankle to my thigh, gripping it firmly. “I’m always hungry for you.”

Without warning he pulls my legs apart and rips the crotch open on my tights!

“Jax!” I gasp. “My tights!”

“Oh, I’m sure you have another pair upstairs,” he says, kneeling down in front of me. “But right now, those sexy little tights were getting in the way of me tasting *my* pussy.”

I shiver as I feel him pull my panties to the side, and slip his finger inside me, working it in and out in a smooth ‘come hither’ motion.

He grips my thighs, sliding my ass across the desk, before slowly running his tongue along my slit.

“And now there’s only one thing on my mind,” he whispers against my pussy.

“And...what’s...that?” I whimper breathlessly as he begins flicking my clit with his tongue and teasing his fingers into me.

He grins wickedly.

“I want you to make a mess,” he whispers, working his fingers inside my harder. “...For *Daddy*.”



Epilogue

JAXON

After making Natalie climax repeatedly on my desk, I finish deep inside her tight little pussy,

“God, that was amazing,” she sighs, collecting the remnants of her tights and shoving them in her purse. “But you know, now I’m going to feel your cum dripping out of me all afternoon.”

“Is that a problem, Mrs. Pace?” I smirk, as I relatch my belt.

“No,” she says sheepishly, biting her lip. “I’m just going to be thinking about it...every time I feel it.”

“Good,” I say, walking over to her and kissing her neck. “And maybe if you behave, I’ll give you seconds later.”

Her face turns red, and she bites her lip.

God she’s fucking sexy.

“I might have to take you up on that,” she whispers, placing her hand on my chest and playing with my shirt. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me but I’m just...I’m just...”

She shakes her head, looking adorably embarrassed.

Truth is, the minute I saw her sitting on my desk, in that position, and wearing those tights, I knew she just wanted to get fucked today.

But Natalie didn’t just *want* my cock today. She *needed* it.

...Because she’s *ovulating*.

After all this time together, I’ve learned to clock Natalie’s cycles like a pro, and I know when my beautiful wife is in heat.

Mrs. Pace wants another baby, and I’m happy to oblige.

Hell, if not for her ‘lunch date’ with Ethan and Sally, I might’ve just taken her upstairs to the playroom and capitalized on her raging breeding hormones.

But that reminds me...

Why *would* Ethan be having lunch with Sally?

I mean...Ethan is at least fifteen years her senior, so it’s not like there could be anything going on between them...right?

I shrug, shaking my head.

Ethan is “retired” and can do whatever the fuck he wants.

Besides, today is a big day.

And I have some very big news.

Suddenly, there is a knock at the door, and I glance at the clock.

11:00am.

Which means it’s time for the first Alpha Squad Briefing with Adam Westwood.

Unfortunately, the file I brought with me to share today got a little scattered during my desk romp with Natalie, and the papers and pictures within are everywhere.

“Go answer the door,” Natalie says, picking up some pictures off the floor. “I’ll grab these.”

I open the door and in walks Charlie, Josiah, Levi, Travis. Wesley. Deylan...and Adam.”

He appraises the men, standing neatly in a row with caution.

“Jaxon,” she says quietly. “Why do you have a picture of Isabel in this folder?”

I walk toward her.

“Who is Isabel?’ I ask.

“She’s the nun who works at St. Stephens. Well, she *used* to. Apparently, she quit a couple of months ago just randomly out of the blue.”

“Nat, this is a different woman.”

“I’m telling you, Jax, that’s *Isabel*,” she says animatedly. “Why do you have a picture of her?”

I stare down at the picture and then at Natalie.

“Nat, I’m telling you that I know all of the staff at St. Stephens,” I say, furrowing my brow. “And I’ve never met this Isabel?”

“Father Tomas told me she was afraid of men,” Natalie shrugs. “So, she avoided you, and whenever you just randomly showed up at the clinic, she would run off.”

She looks again at the picture and shakes her head.

“But I know Isabel and that’s Isabel, Jaxon.”

My blood runs cold within my veins and my stomach twists.

“Natalie, I believe you. However, I *know* this woman and her name isn’t Isabel. I promise.”

“Oh good God,” Adam groans. “Just let us see the photo already.”

Technically breaking protocol, he walks over to the file on my desk and opens the file.

I’ll have to teach him that that’s not how we do things here.

“I’m telling you that’s Isabel!” Natalie says firmly.

“I’m sorry, Nat” I say sympathetically. “But it’s not. This woman is *Ayakka Tatsuko*. And she’s supposed to be dead.”

“What?” Josiah says, his jaw dropping.

“These photos were captured on a surveillance camera from the night of The Box murder,” I say handing them to the men. “They show her at a gas station, in her stolen car. But it’s her. It’s *Ayakka Tatsuko*.”

“No,” Adam says, his voice barely above a whisper. “You’re both *wrong*.”

“What?” Natalie and I say at the same time.

Adam pauses, before opening his wallet.

He sets his picture on the desk next to my picture.

“This woman isn’t Isabel, or *Ayakka Tatsuko*,” he growls. “This woman is Selena Masterson. She’s my partner’s niece, and the one that I’ve been searching for.”

Side by side the pictures are nearly identical, right down to the small mole pattern on the woman’s neck.

The insanity of this moment is mind boggling.

The woman in the photo had lived three separate lives, all at the same time, right under our noses. Now her connections to the St. Stephens murders, and the fact she’d worked so closely with Glow and the other dancers...explained why they started going missing, sold to the international sex trafficking markets.

“Who the fuck is this woman?” Charlie says.

“I’m not sure, but I do know one thing,” I say, glancing up at Josiah. “This woman isn’t a victim.”

“What? What do you—” Adam asks incredulously.

“...She’s a *predator*,” I growl, looking up at him. “And so, before anyone else gets abducted, sold, or killed, we need to hunt her down, and take her out.”

“This is insane,” Adam asks, echoing my thoughts. “How the hell is any of this possible?”

“They say the best place to hide something is in plain sight.”

Adam sighs, shaking his head.

“Is it always like this?” He asks. “Bad men, hunting down worse men?”

I pause looking up at my mini army of “bad men”.

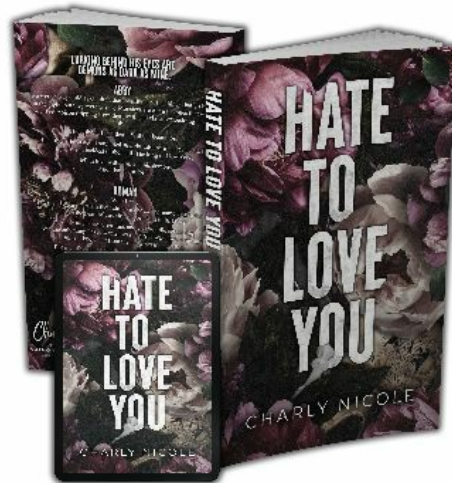
“Sometimes. But if you’re going to dedicate your life to hunting down monsters,” I grin. “Then you have to embrace the one within.”

What to read next?

Read Adam and Rachel's story [now](#).



Read Roman and Abigail's story [now](#).



Acknowledgements

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About the Author



Bestselling author Nicole Fanning lives on the east coast with her husband, three dogs and her cats. She has a background in marketing, and Human Resources. She has often found that the human element is by far the most colorful, complex, and most interesting in the world.

As a child Nicole devoured every book, she could get her hands on, and spent her free time writing fictional short stories to share with her friends. This led her to writing her debut series Heart of The Inferno.

She writes dark and sexy thriller mafia romance; Heart of the Inferno is an action-romance about a dangerous mafia lord and his girl-next-door paramour. Written from both male and female perspectives, and with a few crazy twists and turns Catalyst certainly isn't your standard mafia romance novel!

You will often find Nicole cuddled up in her writing cave, when she isn't writing you'll find her spending time with her friends and family.

Keep In Touch



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