

LIES OF THE  
*Underworld*

FRACTURED  
*Secrets*

HALEY JENNER

# FRACTURED SECRETS

LIES OF THE UNDERWORLD

BOOK TWO

# HALEY JENNER



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*Content Warnings*

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*To everyone who has dipped their toes into a real-life version  
of the brother's best friend trope.*

*And regretted every minute of it.*

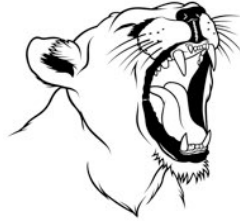
*Trust us, it was him, not you.*

*Let's all live vicariously through these pages and know that it  
didn't work out because he wasn't Lorenzo.*



# CHAPTER ONE

## LORENZO



The heavy wood of the door pushes open, disturbing the haunting silence I was content to suffer within. My hand, wrapped loosely around my father's gun, tightens. I move my focus to the door, my arm lifting to take aim.

Vincent smirks, stepping into the space I warned everyone away from. He pays no mind to the warning of my words or the ominous way I watch him. Closing the door behind him, he traps himself with my mood, a dangerous tangle of melancholy and rage.

"I thought I made it clear that I wanted to be left alone." I keep my aim, my free hand hugging the neck of the cognac bottle my father was saving for a special occasion. I move the bottle to my mouth. Death seems a significant enough circumstance for me to have spit on his memory by breaking the seal.

Left hand adorned with silver metal, Vincent twists at the rings, readjusting each one. Raising an eyebrow, he's unperturbed by the barrel of my gun focused on his heart.

"Feel free to shoot me," he says. "Cognac, like most spirits, doesn't have the best aim. You'd graze my shoulder at best. I've had better."

*Motherfucker.*

I snort, dropping the gun and letting it fall to the desk I'm nestled behind with a heavy bang.

My father's office remains thick with his scent. The dwindling touch of tobacco and the cloudy remnants of the aftershave he always wore a little too much of hang in the air enough to suffocate me with loss. It's not enough and too much all at once.

A half-smoked cigar sits discarded in an ashtray on his desk. I stare at it, visions of him sitting where I am now, stogie caught between his lips, smoke dancing around him like a halo of the devil. I strain my eyes, working as hard as I fucking can to keep the image as I see it now, afraid the moment I blink, it will be lost forever.

People speak of death in its finality. The end. Game fucking over. I wish that were true. I wish these fucking reminders of a man I thought invincible disappeared the moment he did. The knowledge that I can still fucking *smell* him when his heart hasn't beaten for over a week is a kind of torture those left behind shouldn't have to endure. His home and belongings should have been engulfed in flames the moment he was carried out on a stretcher, the harsh reality of his mortality lodging itself in my chest like a nightmare come to life. I don't want to cipher through his personal possessions. The memories he kept for himself are now up for grabs, a decision between two brothers as to whether it means enough to us to keep or to discard like trash, unbeknownst to its meaning.

"Has everyone left?" I blink long and hard.

"No." Vincent settles into the seat across from me, flicking his jacket open as he sits. "They won't until they can say

goodbye to you, but you know that. Everyone made a decent dent in the food filling up the fridge, though.”

A bark of laughter puffs from my chest. “Good. I’m fucking sick of lasagna.”

Vincent smiles when he speaks. “I’d watch your mouth. One of the *zie* would kill you if they heard you say that, and then Leo would be sitting where you are. We both know I would have to strangle his miserable ass. Running the family isn’t high on his priority list when he has willing pussy lining up.”

Dropping my elbows to the desk, I palm my eyes with the heel of my hands.

“Leo said you’re freezing him out,” Vincent speaks again after a loaded beat.

I shake my head. My younger brother is too fucking sensitive. “Why is he talking to you about menial shit?”

Vincent shrugs. “Maybe because you won’t.”

I rip at my hair. Leonardo has lived an easy life. As much as one can as the second son of the boss of the New York family. He does what he wants and fucks who he wants. He’s played around the edges of the underbelly of our world, but I’m not sure he realizes what our father’s death means for him.

Giorgio Caruso had been molding me in his image since I hit puberty. The moment I could wrap a tight enough fist around my dick to jerk off, I was man enough to wrap it around the grip of a gun in my father’s eyes. He paid less attention to my younger brother. Leonardo was my responsibility, and I decided to give him the freedom to live his life in a way I was never allowed.

I'm not one for regret, but I wonder whether my insistence on keeping him on the outskirts will only harm him further now that he'll be thrown into the deep end. I don't know if he'll know how to swim or whether I've set him up to sink from the get-go.

"You know the thing that cuts me the most is that he died peacefully in his sleep," I murmur, knowing I could trust the man in front of me with my life. "I know that's how you're supposed to want the people you love to go, but it seems a waste. He was a fucking boss, Vin. A don," I spit. "*Capo Crimini.*"

Vincent sits quietly, and I take a second to appreciate the lack of expectation or pity on his face. But then, emotion isn't high on my best friend's list of distinguishing traits. He grew up similarly to me. Only where my father was the boss, his was an enforcer. A ruthless soldier who had more kills at the touch of his hands before his demise than any other. He created both his sons in his image—men thirsty for the need to kill, seek revenge, and avenge any wrongdoing against the family. He succeeded with Vincent, but the jury is still out on his weasel of a younger brother.

"It should've been big." I clear my throat. "A fucking rain of bullets. A death we could've avenged. A river of red filling the streets of New York with my fucking vengeance." I bang my fists against the desk, a rough growl of frustration vibrating in my throat.

"You think fighting for vengeance would've given you clout in this world?" Vincent surmises. "That it would have justified your place upon that throne."

My throat tightens, and I want to shoot him for having what I want. Carlo Ferrari died at the hands of the cartel.

Payback for the way he gutted one of their soldiers who found himself on our turf.

“You don’t need to earn it.”

I look away.

“You’re also fucking human. You just lost your father. Stop pretending to Leo and me that you’re not hurting.”

I shake my head. “I’m a fucking boss now, Vin. I ain’t allowed to be sad. I’ve gotta step up. I’ve gotta slide into his shoes and pretend they fucking fit.”

Vincent leans forward. “They don’t need to fucking fit. You’re Lorenzo Caruso. The feared fucking *Whip*. You don’t need to be Giorgio. You’re no boss if you’re working to fill someone else’s shoes. Wear your own. Be your own.”

My nostrils flare. “You’ll be by my side.”

Vincent rejects me with a single shake of his head.

“Leonardo isn’t ready,” I argue, knowing what he’ll say before the words leave his mouth.

“Leo doesn’t have a choice. Lorenzo, it’s about strength. Unity. He chases a bit of tail, but he’ll be feared in the underworld. You’ve got to give him a chance.”

My hands tremble, and I swallow audibly.

“You’ve kept him on the sidelines for too long now. He’s been ready and willing for years, but he’s stayed back out of respect for you. Bring him in, Lorenzo. He’s your second-in-command.”

I nod.

“You won’t regret it,” he tells me. “Listen, there is something else I’ve wanted to talk to you about. Business—”

I sit up straight, cutting him off. “Anything for you.”

“Roberto,” he starts. “Make him consigliere.”

My body stills, and I blink slowly. “Absolutely fucking not.”

“*Enzo.*” He sighs.

“No,” I bite back. “What the fuck is wrong with your head?”

His fists clench. “He respected the older generation out of fear. Now that you’re in power, I don’t trust him.”

Roberto is a fucking snake. With the way he flirts along the lines of hierarchy, I don’t know how my father didn’t have him killed years ago. “If you don’t trust him, put him out to pasture.”

“With what fucking motive? I can’t kill him and expect the older guard to respect my feeling of distrust. You’ll look weak for supporting me. They’ll expect you to kill me.” Dragging a hand through his hair, Vincent frowns. “We need to keep him close. Make him think he’s important. It’s how we can control him.”

“You’ll be consigliere. He’ll remain an enforcer.”

“Fuck,” Vincent spits. “He’ll undo us from the inside out.” He shifts forward in his seat. “You know I’ll be whatever you need me to be, whether it’s official or not. To the rest of the family, he’s your advisor. *When* he fucks up, you have my word that I’ll put us all in better stead with him six feet under.”

“Vin.” I sigh.

“You know I’m right, and you know I wouldn’t ask this of you if I thought there was an easier way.”

“Kill him. Make it look like an accident.”

He raises an eyebrow. “So soon after Giorgio? We need numbers to keep strength.”

I stand, adjusting my jacket. “He fucks up, just a hiccup of trouble,” I say.

“You won’t even need to give me the instruction.”

I nod once.

The office door opens, and Leonardo’s knuckles tap against the wood as he pokes his head into the room. “You need to get out here.”

I move around the desk as Vincent stands.

“Sal is talking fucking shit,” Leonardo spits. “Just give me the go-ahead to gut the old fuck.”

Vincent smirks at me, but I ignore him.

“Elaborate.”

Leonardo’s voice drops as Vincent and I step from my father’s office. “He’s telling everyone you’re not ready to take over. He’s trying to get numbers—”

“Got it.” I cut him off, not needing to hear anymore.

People strike when they perceive weakness. I had hoped it wouldn’t come to this so soon, if at all. I’ve never backed down from a fight. I’ve always been ruthless as second-in-command when my father was alive. I shouldn’t have to fucking prove myself worthy. I’ve been doing that since I was thirteen. I might only be twenty-six, but I’ve never relied on my father’s name to instill fear in my enemies. I curated a path of dread on my own. Lorenzo Caruso was never a fucking errand boy. He was born to be a leader, one who opened even



the most formidable men up to cowardice, and Sal Greco is about to learn that the fucking hard way.

As I move into one of the many living rooms in my father's home, Sal has the audience of my men. Their heads are tipped forward in attention, listening to whatever he's spewing. I'm tempted to fuck with every single one of them for opening their ears to his bullshit.

I run my thumb over my bottom lip, slowly approaching the cluster of men. A few of them notice me before the others, their heads dropping in a mixture of respect, regret, and fear. Their unease makes me want to smile.

"Leonardo," I murmur, pulling the final threads of attention I was seeking. "It's time for the women and children to head home now. Make sure they're all out of the house and return when only the men remain."

The house falls quiet, the women heeding my warning without Leonardo's interference, grabbing their children and leaving without a single word.

"You ain't fit for this, Caruso," Sal speaks. "You ain't ready."

I feel Vin behind me, but I lift a hand, stopping him from moving closer. Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply. "You gonna challenge me for the title, Sal?" I whisper. "You? A fucking soldier."

Sal shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "Not me." His head shakes so fast that the sagging skin of his cheeks wobble. "But there are more experienced leaders. Armando, Cosimo, Bruno, Federico."

Leonardo walks back into the room, a single dip of his chin the only confirmation I need that only the men in the

family remain. Vincent is right. Giorgio's shoes were never going to fit me. I was built to fucking lead. My father showed too much empathy. He cared too much about what the family thought. Empathy is not a word in my vocabulary. The thoughts of others mean little to nothing to me. I don't need friends. Holding a softness or unhealthy attachment to another person is a weakness I'll never tie to myself. I learned the hard way at nine years old with blood-stained hands and a broken heart.

"Rossi?" I look at the monster of a man sitting calmly in my father's living room. "You think you could lead better than me?"

He shakes his head. "No, boss."

My bottom lip tips out. "Colombo? Ricci? Mancini?"

My other capos shake their heads, a chorus of *no boss* ringing across the room in an easy melody.

"Huh." I turn back to Sal Greco, a man who has dedicated his life to the family. One who only ever showered my father with respect.

My ears ring with fury, the pounding beat of my heart demanding I fight for my place, to make them all see. Everyone within this room may reluctantly agree with my rise to leadership, but their agreement means nothing to me. I want their respect, if for no other reason than it will force their loyalty. I need them to see that *no one* will lead this family more ruthlessly than I will. They can rip the command from my cold, dead fingers.

"Stand up," I menace.

"Enzo." Sal trips over the syllables.

"I said *stand up*."

Greco stands, pushing his shoulders back in a faux show of strength.

I scratch at the corner of my nose. “Remove your belt.”

His eyes widen, and he shakes his head.

“You’ve disrespected my authority at my father’s wake. I should fucking kill you. Take. Off. Your. Belt.”

The air around me stills. I watch on quietly as Sal fiddles with his belt buckle, his thick fingers struggling with the way they shake. Sliding the worn leather through the loops of his dark dress pants, he swallows audibly.

I extend my hand, and he passes me the belt without further complaint. I wrap the leather around my fist, pulling it hard enough to feel its resistance.

“Kneel.”

Roberto moves into my peripheral, a fiendish smile crawling onto his lips.

“*Lorenzo*,” Sal breathes, the plea in his voice as pathetic as his fear.

“I won’t repeat myself.”

He drops to his knees unceremoniously, a small whimper escaping his mouth, and my lip curls in disgust. Energy, unlike anything I’ve ever felt before, courses through my veins.

Letting Sal’s belt unravel in my hand, I keep hold of the buckle, holding the object loosely at my side.

“If you disrespect me again, I’ll fuck your wife in front of you. Then when you know the woman you idolize thinks only of me when your limp dick is inside her, I’ll marry your daughter. I’ll make sure every woman sporting the Greco

name moans only my name when they come. After that, I'll kill you for forcing me to put my cock somewhere I didn't want it to be *and* for forcing me to enter into a commitment I refuse to entertain. Am I understood?"

Sal barely has the time to nod before I whip his belt out, lashing it across his face in a kiss he'll forever remember.

He screams out in pain, holding his eye. I throw the blood-stained leather at his knees.

Leaning down, I grab his hair, pulling it back. "You have a choice. One of *my* men can take you to our doctor and have you stitched up. You'll likely lose your eye, but consider it payment for insubordination and making a shitty day even shittier. You spit on the memory of my father with your disrespect. Or you can fucking die. Necktie'll slice into your neck and have you fed to the fish. You have a single second to decide."

"*Doctor,*" he cries out.

I turn my back on him, his sobs echoing around the room. "Anyone else want to question my ability to lead?"

"No, boss," they all answer unanimously.

"Someone get this piece of shit outta my father's house before I reconsider his need to live."

Feet scatter, and bodies move.

"Leonardo, Vin, and Roberto," I call. "Stay. We have business to discuss."



IN THE YEARS following my father's death, I did what was required to succeed. And I *did* succeed. I was ruthless when the situation called for it, if not slightly unhinged. I forced my footprint across New York City with the flick of my wrist and the bleeding wound of the weapon that gifted me my nickname. I was a fucking whip, and the slums and elite of the underworld all knew it. Lorenzo Caruso was beholden to no one, and if I wanted to retain the power that fed my demons, I needed to fucking keep it that way.

## CHAPTER TWO

GABRIELLA

TWO YEARS LATER



“*A* gain.”

Tipping my head back, I groan aloud. “*Mom,*” I complain. “This story isn’t new. You’ve told it to me *that* many times.”

I ignore the high-pitched beep of the machine attached to the myriad of tubes fixed into my mother’s body. I pretend that the potent scent of death hasn’t tattooed itself on the inside of my nose, reminding me it will remain long after I leave the prison of these walls. It’s always cold, prolonging the touch of eternal rest for the reluctant souls forced to live out the last of their days in this callous and clinical hell on earth.

My mother coughs, and I right my head, concern pulling my brows together.

“Again,” she wheezes.

I take a deep breath, fighting everything within me to ask if she’s okay. “My sperm donor, Carlo Ferrari, is deceased. It’s a shame, really. He sounds like a stand-up guy. His assholery is only to be outdone by your scumbag ex-husband—*if* we can call him that, considering you were never officially divorced—Joseph Romano. He goes by the inventive nickname Big Joey. Mean man, do not approach.”

My mother ignores my ad-libs, dipping her chin slightly in a silent encouragement to keep going.

“Big Joey assumes you’re dead.” My voice cracks on the last word, and I clench my teeth to stop the tremble in my jaw. Give or take a few days, and he’ll be right.

Mom slides her hand over mine, and I swallow the emotion threatening to close my throat. “You have two other children.” I cough. “Their names are Dante and Luna. Luna is six years older than me, and Dante, four. You can’t be certain what poison their father, your ex-husband” —I clarify, for her, not me— “has filled their heads with. So it’s best to avoid contact with these half-siblings until I know I can trust them.”

My mother attempts to cough into a tissue quietly. I stop talking, watching her suffer through the pain. When she pulls the tissue from her mouth, we both refuse to acknowledge the splatter of blood staining the white paper.

“Carlo had two sons with his late wife before you began your affair. So scandalous, Mother.” I wink. “Vincent is the older brother, Roberto is the younger. Roberto, in your opinion, is a psychopath and likely prone to violence. But if I can just add in, they’re in the fucking mob, Mom. Aren’t they all violent psychopaths?”

She shakes her head, and I roll my eyes.

“You received word from that bitch in the FBI you couldn’t shake that Giorgio Caruso, the don, died a few years back. His firstborn son, Lorenzo, took power. Lorenzo’s younger brother, Leonardo, is his second-in-command.”

She reaches for the small cup of water in front of her, and her bony fingers shake.



Her fall into an illness that deemed her terminal was quick. She had a lifetime in front of her, yet in a blink, that future dissipated like a puff of smoke.

I prayed a lot following her diagnosis. I pleaded for her time to continue. I just wanted a *little* longer with her. Now, I've moved into a phase of grief I never wanted to become acquainted with: *acceptance*. I hate that every minute I now have with my mother, I accept as a gift when it should be my reality.

My mother was beautiful. Thick dark hair that fell halfway down her back. Even darker eyes that kissed you with warmth and attention. Her body was the envy of women everywhere; heavy curves over the length of her short frame. Rita Romano was sexy without even trying.

I used to convince myself that she'd be okay. Sure, she had cancer, but she'd fought harder against bigger devils and won. My mother was a fucking fighter and the cancerous cells taking up residence in her body didn't have a chance in hell at robbing her of the life she fought tooth and nail to have.

A week ago, I knew it was over. Her body was slowly being eaten away, but her eyes always kept their endless optimism. And when that was lost, I knew she'd lost this war. She'd given up, though not with weakness. It was with acceptance. Even on the precipice of death, she looked at life with grace.

Helping her take small sips of water, she pushes the cup away, and I put it down.

“Vincent is your safest option, Gabriella. But *only* if you need it.” She sounds tired, and I want nothing more than to curl up on her bed, hold her against me, and pretend, if only for a moment longer, that we have forever.

I close my eyes. “I don’t know, Mom.”

“He’s your brother.”

“Half,” I correct. “Like Roberto, Dante, and Luna. Why are you convinced he’ll be my savior in a swarm of enemies?”

“I’m not. But if push comes to shove, he’s the only option you’ll have.”

“What does this kind soul, Vincent, do in the family?” I sigh.

Mom squeezes my hand. “Don’t be fooled by my assumption that he’s safe. Vincent is *ruthless*, Gabbi. It’s the way he was raised. He’s an enforcer.”

“An enforcer?”

“The muscle.”

My eyes widen. “He’s a killer. A murderer. You’re asking me to walk into a lion’s den like a helpless lamb, look a homicidal maniac in the eyes, and ask for help? *Jesus*.”

She struggles to catch her breath, and guilt buries heavily in my gut.

“Okay, okay,” I placate.

“I’m not asking you to walk into the lion’s den. I’m asking you to avoid these men at *all* costs. *Unless* you have no other option. They’re only your fail-safe if all else is lost.”

I nod.

“What I’m about to say next is important, so please listen. It’s the last bit of wisdom I’ll bestow on you, and then you’re going to buy yourself something to eat and let me rest.”

I raise an eyebrow, and she mirrors the gesture.

“Fine.”

“Don’t be afraid of love.”

“Oh my god,” I groan.

“Gabriella,” she snaps. “Listen. I’ve messed up in my life. I was forced into a relationship with a man I didn’t love and who cared very little for my feelings. I then fell into the bed of one I believed to be better, and he threw me away when his safety was threatened. On the romantic side of love, I lucked out. But that doesn’t mean true love doesn’t exist. Don’t reject it because of my baggage, and don’t settle for a man who won’t destroy the world to protect you.”

“I can protect myself.”

“You’re right,” she agrees readily. “Don’t settle for a man who won’t fight to the death to stand by your side. Destroy the world together if you need to, but make sure you don’t live lonely, Gabriella. *Please*. I’ve forced loneliness and solitude down your throat your whole life. Fight for more, my sweet girl.”

I scratch at the back of my neck, tears stinging my eyes. “Mom, stop.”

“Second thing.” She ignores me. “When I’ve moved on, *leave*. Immediately. The moment that line falls flat, disappear.”

I frown.

“Please, Gabriella, do not fight me on this,” she begs. “I don’t know who you can trust. You’re an adult, and I don’t know what that means following my death. I don’t know how accessible information about my whereabouts all these years will be. Death tends to sever agreements like that. Being away from here is your safest option.”

I shake my head. “No. I need to say goodbye—” I pull my hand from hers.

“Gabbi, sweetheart. Look into my eyes. I *know* you love me. I have never doubted that. You don’t need to tell the empty vessel of my body how you feel. You’ve told me when it matters... *in life.*”

My heart tightens. I rub at my chest. “You deserve to be laid to rest, to—”

“No. Where my body rests in death is of no consequence to us. The important parts of me will remain with you.”

I shake my head.

“My love...” She smiles a watery smile. “It will be with you always.”

My chin quivers.

“You know I love you, kid.”

“I know,” I murmur. “You gave your whole life away for me.”

She waves off my remark with a quick flick of her wrist, but I see the pain in her eyes.

“Dante,” I whisper. “Luna. I know leaving them has haunted you.”

She ducks her head, and I want to tell her that she doesn’t need to shield her eyes from me. I’ve seen her shame manifest over the years. I’ve seen her cry over photos of my siblings, the little boy and girl who made her a mother. She gave up her presence in their life for my safety, and I know it weighs heavily on her conscience.

From the moment my mother told me about them, I've let my mind wander to the siblings I may never know. If Dante and Luna ever found out who I was, I've decided that I would welcome their hate. I deserve it. I would hate me too. My mother is the most remarkable person I know, and they lost out on that simply because I existed.

"I knew they were safe. You were not. I made a difficult decision but have never regretted it."

"I love you."

"Promise me," she pleads.

I stare at her, considering lying, but after everything she's sacrificed for me, I owe it to her to respect her dying wish.

"I promise."

Her body deflates with relief. "Gabriella, this next thing is crucial."

"More important than abandoning you in death?"

She rolls her eyes.

I smile.

"*If* you have to seek out Vincent. *If*," she stresses. "Lie about your age."

My lips tip down. "What?"

"You are beyond beautiful, and I'm not saying that to inflate your ego. I'm telling you that so you are aware that your good looks are dangerous."

"I'm confused."

"I was forced to marry Joseph the moment I turned eighteen. He was thirty-five at the time."

“Ew.” I grimace.

“It’s the family way.” She shrugs like women being forced to marry men old enough to have fathered them is not a big deal. “Women are possessions, Gabriella. They’re bargaining chips in the underworld. Your beauty will turn heads, and you will become Lorenzo’s greatest asset if they know you are of age.”

“That is revolting.”

“It’s the reality in the family. *Lie*, sweetheart. Don’t be ridiculous with it,” she warns. “You’re nineteen, and your body is that of a *woman*, not a child, so there is no way you’d pass for fifteen but seventeen, *maybe* sixteen at a push.”

I stare at her blankly, mouth open and eyes unblinking. “I’ll refuse.”

“Are you not listening to me?” she snaps, and my chin pushes against my neck in shock. “I’m sorry.” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “Gabriella—”

“Lie.” I cut her off. “I got it.”

“Thank you,” she whispers. “I’m tired, sweetheart.”

I lean forward, pushing my lip against her forehead in a soft kiss. “Get some rest. I’ll find something to eat. Do you want anything?”

She nods absently. “Absolutely. Lobster and only the finest champagne.” Her eyes close, and I smile.

“You got it, Mama.”

I watch her for a beat, praying silently to anyone who will listen for a miracle. I would give anything in return. I’d wrap my soul in a blood-red bow for the devil if it meant my mom had more time. I’d devote my life to good deeds if God were

to step in and offer her even a month longer. But even I know, deep down, that would never be enough. My month would end, and I'd beg for longer. I'd plead with my life. I'd make a deal with the devil and give myself to God. In the end, though, I'd feel as empty as I do now. I'd remain lost, and until this point, no one had ever answered my prayers, so why would they start now?

Turning, I move toward the exit of her room.

"Gabriella," she calls, and I pause at the door's threshold, glancing over my shoulder. "If you find yourself in the presence of Luna and Dante in this life..." Her voice cracks, but we both ignore it. "Tell them I loved them until the very end and that I'm sorry."

I would swear that the sound of my heart breaking can be heard through the hospital walls, the shake of an earthquake as it splits in two. But like the break in her voice, I ignore it, choosing to nod instead.

*"Luce della mia vita,"* she whispers.

I smile even though I have no idea what she just said. "You ever gonna tell me what that means?"

"You'll figure it out one day."

"Be back," I call, walking from the room in search of coffee and chocolate.



THE HOSPITAL COFFEE tastes how I imagine dirt in water would taste. Still, I drink it down all the same, needing the hit of

energy. Sleep can wait. My time with my mother is limited, and I won't waste it being unconscious.

The soles of my sneakers squeak over the freshly cleaned vinyl. I drag my feet more forcefully, ignoring the annoyed looks aimed my way.

I step into my mother's room, and my hand releases the paper cup automatically. It falls to the floor without a sound, and with the world turning fuzzy around me, I don't register the burn of hot water that splashes against my legs.

"Miss Smith," one of the many nurses in my mother's room calls, and I turn toward her slowly. "Gabriella," she repeats when I turn back to the scene before me.

The machine's alarm forcing me to register my mother's lack of heartbeat taunts me. I stare at it, watching the straight line moving across the screen continuously until a nurse switches it off.

I swallow. "I was just here," I tell no one and everyone. "Gone five minutes, maybe ten, that's all. I left to get coffee." I glance down at the brown spill of water at my feet.

"Why don't you wait outside?" An older nurse pushes me toward the exit of the room. "We'll do what we need to, and then you can have some time to say your goodbyes."

I nod but remain stationary. "She told me to leave," I say absently. "It's like she knew it was time, and she didn't want me here. I was just here," I repeat, pointing at the floor.

"Come on, honey," the nurse urges.

"My bag." I gesture to my backpack beside my mother's bed. "I just need my bag."



“Of course,” she says. “Let me grab that for you, and you call your family.”

She hands me the backpack, and I grab a single strap, letting it fall to my side. I want to tell her I have no one else. My mother and I were a pair of loners in a world where we were living on borrowed time.

The nurse nudges me again, and I step backward at her insistence. “Just sit here.” She pushes me toward a chair *just* outside the door.

Confident I’m no longer at risk of falling, she leaves. I wait for only a breath before standing. I stand for a full minute.

Was death really that quick? Was it so brutal that you could be conversing with someone who was very much alive one minute to hearing the finite sound of a life blanking out the next? I’m sure it takes longer. Human life is too significant to extinguish so quickly.

*When I’ve moved on, leave. Immediately.*

A spark jolts through my body, a push to find the nightmare of reality when I would prefer to remain lost in the fantasy of numbness.

*The moment that line falls flat, disappear.*

Glancing left and right, I begin walking, a thick sob breaking from my lips. I cover my mouth with my hand, swallowing the broken sound. Another one escapes, and my legs shake. If anyone notices my anguish, they don’t let on, but mourning would be commonplace between these walls. I’m not the first person overcome with heartache today, and I won’t be the last.

I push into the first empty room I see and shut the door behind me. My knees buckle, and I slide against the door roughly, landing violently on the floor. My entire body trembles with affliction, and the first of my tears fall. Hands cupping my mouth, I can no longer hold in the wretched sound of my grief. It claims me completely, and I howl into my palms, the pain in my chest so extreme I'm scared to breathe. I curl further into myself until I'm cowering on the floor. My thighs pull into my stomach and chest, and my arms wrap around my trembling legs. Mouth pushed into the damp denim of my jeans, I weep, whimper, and choke on my saliva. The floor is hard and cold, and I want it to split beneath me. What is the finality of death but the closing of a final curtain when your whole world has been stripped away from you one painful minute at a time? I sob into my knees, the sound of my grief muted in the darkened room, afraid if I let it free, the pain will multiply at a rate that I will never again be able to contain.

My temples begin to pound, and I've been curled up on the vinyl floor long enough that my head aches with the pressure from crying. It's only then do I notice that I've stopped. My sobs have subsided, and while my body still quakes with intermittent spasms, my face is no longer damp with tears. Tentatively, I pull my face from my knees. Using the sleeve of my sweater, I wipe it over my nose, then push myself upright. Rested against the door I've trapped myself behind, I brush at my face, first one cheek and then the other, trying to rid the salt from my dry skin.

It takes me another ten minutes before I can bring myself to stand. My legs shake, but I ignore the tremble, locking them into place. Dusting the back of my jeans, I brush my fingers through my hair, tucking it behind my ears. I take a deep breath, ignoring the hospital-grade cleaning products that taste

like poison in my mouth. Securing my bag, I leave the empty room and walk from the hospital, knowing I'll never be back.

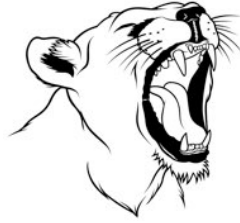
I feel less and less like myself with every step. All my life, I was bound to my mother. She wasn't just my guardian. She was my best friend, my heart, and walking away from her, even just the empty vessel of her body feels like the greatest betrayal. The hollow echo of my insides vibrates against my skin with every stride, and I clench my jaw to stop myself from being sick. It shakes, and I grind my teeth until they ache, grateful for the distraction.

My mother often told me that she never regretted her life choices. Her marriage to Joseph Romano gave her Dante and Luna. Her affair with Carlo forced her onto a different trajectory, but again, she insisted it brought her happiness. Their relationship let her claim her power back in a way others may have frowned upon. Still, she often said God was shining down on her decision because he gave her me.

But with her life now lost, I wonder whether God was punishing her through me. Did she refuse to see the bigger picture? The evidence showed that no matter how hard she loved me, I was destined to be a misplaced soul in this world.

# CHAPTER THREE

## GABRIELLA



“*Y*ou’re fired.”

Hitching my backpack higher up my right shoulder, I move quickly through the strip club, my Docs dragging across the hideous carpet in panic. “*Tim*, come on.”

He closes the till behind the bar, throws a hand towel over his shoulder, and moves around the room, wiping the tables.

The club is still closed, and they’re readying to open within the hour.

“Gabriella, you’ve been late every day this week. I’ve made enough allowances for you, kid. You’re too unreliable.”

“I *always* show up for my shift,” I argue.

Grabbing a stack of ashtrays from the bar, I place one on every table I pass, chasing my boss around the room, begging for understanding.

“Late,” Tim replies.

Head tipped back to sigh at the ceiling, I don’t bother arguing.

“My bus was late.” I try to explain.

“My bus was late. I slept in. My uniform took forever to dry. There was an injured prairie dog on the side of the road.”

“My bus *was* late,” I grate out, my frustration growing. “You need to take that up with the freaking city. I can’t control how much the bus driver likes to talk as people get off the bus.”

He rolls his eyes at me.

“Tim. *Please.*”

He stops, regret plaguing his eyes. “Gabriella, I’m sorry. You’re out.”

Usually, I’d burst into tears, but a numbness has overtaken me this last month.

It’s been almost five weeks since my mother died. A month when I’ve scrimped, saved, and eaten through the meager savings my mother left behind to get where I am.

I did as she asked, as I promised. I left that hospital and never looked back, even though it killed me. I found the nearest bus depot, googled the most transient cities in America, and bought the next ticket out of town. It landed me in Denver, Colorado.

When I arrived, I secured a job at a diner, but the tips were shit, and I could barely manage the measly motel charges to keep a roof over my head. I complained enough to the other servers that one took pity on me, gave me an address, and told me to ask for Tim.

Tim, who just fired me. Tim owns and runs a gentleman’s club in the greater metro area. He took one look at me, told me I was a dick magnet and asked if I’d be down for pole work. Considering I’m as coordinated as a newborn fucking giraffe, I told him I was flattered, but I had to decline. He reluctantly offered me a job as a cocktail server instead but asked me to keep an open mind.

*Sure thing, Tim.*

It took some arguing, but he even agreed to keep me off the books. Cash in hand, tips were shared, but it had to be better than what I was earning pouring lukewarm bean water. The uniform almost had me running for the hills, but after the first shift, I forgot that I was walking around in a high-cut pair of panties and a tank that cut low enough you could almost see my nipples.

“Please, Tim.” I follow him around the bar, but he ignores me. “I *need* this job.”

“And I need a fucking cocktail server who doesn’t let me down.”

“I work hard when I’m here.”

His frustration grows, and he cracks each knuckle on his right hand with his thumb. “No one wants to share their tips with you.”

“What?” That gives me pause.

“You’re mouthy. Our customers don’t like that.”

My chin hits my chest. “I’m mouthy when some asshole puts his hands on my freaking ass or asks me to shake my tits in his face.”

Tim sighs. “You work in a fucking gentleman’s club, Gabriella. It’s a part of the gig.”

“Sexual harassment is *not* a part of the gig.”

“This is what I’m talking about. You run your mouth, and the rest of the staff lose out on tips. You’re hot, but you’re a pain in my ass.” He walks away. “And you’re always fucking late.”

“Can I at least get my pay for the last week?” I yell at his back.

“Grab it from Cassie.”

Randy, the guy working the bar, keeps his eyes downcast as I skulk past.

“You complaining you were losing out on tips, Randy?”

“I gotta feed my kids, G.” He looks up, shoulders lifting. “I like you, but I like them more.”

I can’t argue with that.

“This place fucking sucks,” I mumble, flicking a pile of drink coasters off the bar.

“Real mature, G,” Randy calls out, but I ignore him, enjoying the beat of satisfaction it brings me.

Cassie hands me my pay, gives me a smile full of pity and tells me she’ll see me around.

Standing on the curb, I look skyward, inhaling deeply. “Could really use a fucking sign on what I’m supposed to do here, Mom.”

“Mom says get on your way. You’re blocking the path.”

I startle, glancing over my shoulder and glowering at the security guard outside the club. I give him the finger, and he smiles.

Walking back toward the bus stop, I know without conscious thought that I’ll be tucking my tail between my legs and begging for my job back at the diner within the hour.

The depot is busy, people pushing past one another in the general rush of life. I bite into a chocolate bar I can’t afford but couldn’t find it within me to deny myself, either. Nougat



and caramel coat my tongue, and I stare off into the yonder, exhausted and numb.

My chocolate bar at my lips, I'm about to take another bite when I'm yanked backward. I stumble, falling on my ass with a painful grunt. "What the—"

My right arm pulls back, and I scream in pain as I tumble farther, back flat, my head slamming into the concrete hard enough to make me see stars.

I cough, lifting my left arm to grab the back of my head.

The initial pain of the fall subsides, and my backpack slides from my right arm.

Senses muddled, I'm not quick enough to grab it, and a kid, not much younger than me, *apologizes* before running off with my bag.

"Hey," I yell out. "Don't apologize." I struggle to my feet, swaying from the bang to the head. "Just give me my bag back."

I run after him, but he's already miles ahead of me, and as fast as I push my legs, they can't catch him.

People watch on, bored indifference lining their faces, and a sadness that this shit is *all* too familiar punches me in the gut. "No one wanted to help me?" I scream. "He fucking took my bag. Everything I have."

Grabbing the pocket of my jean shorts in panic, I sigh in relief that my phone is tucked comfortably on my person. It's the only fucking thing that means anything to me, filled with memories I'd prefer to die than be without.

"Yeah, duck your eyes." I curse the crowd waiting for their bus. "Tell yourself you couldn't have done anything so you

can sleep better tonight.”

I’m ranting like a lunatic, but no one pays me attention. It’s just a regular fucking Tuesday for them.

Touching the back of my head, I pull my hand away, making sure I’m not bleeding. Confident I haven’t split my head open, I put my hand back, massaging the tender spot. I have a headache to challenge every migraine I’ve ever had. My tailbone throbs as I walk, and I limp, trying to keep pressure off either of my legs.

My bag was full of junk that no one could find a use for. A pair of jeans, a sweater, a few changes of underwear, my phone charger, a book, and the hideous uniform I forgot to give back to Tim. It wasn’t much, but it was mine. Except for the book I stole from the library. I was going to give it back once I’d finished reading it. Now the local library will forever be missing its copy of *Outlander*, and no one else from the district will be able to fall in love with the highlander from the seventeen hundreds.

The summer heat is warm on my face, and I lift my arms, adjusting my ponytail into a bun to keep my hair from my neck. I squint against the light, my head pounding.

I stand for what feels like forever before leaning against the first brick wall I see and dropping my ass to the concrete with a groan.

“Rough day?”

I turn my head to the voice. A woman in her sixties sits on a blanket only a few feet from where I’ve stopped. Her belongings surround her in torn plastic bags. Her clothes are thin and tattered, but they cover her body. Her fingers peek from holes in her gloves, and her shoes have been stuck

together with electrical tape. Her face is weathered and soiled with dirt and dust. But she smiles at me with her *whole* face, light blue eyes shining with a warmth I haven't felt in weeks, and it takes everything within me not to cry.

"Rough month."

She nods in understanding. "Rough decade or two." She winks.

A snort of laughter escapes me before I can stop it.

"*That's* better," she murmurs, grinning at me with kindness.

"My bag was just stolen," I tell her. "And I got fired from my job."

She makes a soft noise of comfort. "What's your name?"

"Gabriella. You?"

"God is my strength."

"Huh?"

"Your name," she clarifies. "That's what it means."

"Oh." That gives me pause. "How do you know that?"

"I'm old. I've met a few Gabriellas in my time. None as pretty as you."

"Thank you," I whisper.

"None as sad as you either."

I don't respond. My throat has closed over. Instead, I duck my head and massage my hands.

"I'm Mallory."

I twist my neck, not bothering to brush my tears away when I smile at her. "Nice to meet you, Mallory. What does

your name mean?"

She laughs. A full-bodied chuckle that garners the attention of passersby. My grin grows on my face, a peace settling inside me at her joy.

"It means unlucky or ill-omened."

"Oh!" I move to apologize but stop myself.

"You didn't kill my cat. Calm down. Laugh, it's really quite humorous when you think about it."

I chuckle.

"A lost job and a few stolen belongings aren't critical in the grand scheme of things," she says.

"It is when it means I have nowhere to sleep tonight, and everything I own, save for the clothes on my back, is now all gone. And I stole a book from the library that I now won't be able to return."

She lifts a single shoulder. "That happens more than you think. Hopefully, whoever stole your bag will take the time to read the book."

I think about the teenager who threw me to the ground to steal my bag. "Doubtful."

"Where are your parents, Gabriella?" Her smile has dropped away, concern and anguish turning her lips downward.

I want to hug her, this kind human, worrying about me when she's lived a much harder life than I have.

"My mother died a month ago. No dad."

"I'm sorry to hear about your mom," she soothes. "Do you have anywhere you can go?"

I let my mind wander to a place I've actively avoided for fear of temptation.

My entire life has been spent hiding from a world I know very little about. What I know of the Mafia is the fictional depictions I've seen on trending TV shows and Hollywood blockbusters. Those adaptations of real life could have been exaggerated for entertainment or, more frightening, watered down for the pleasure of mainstream media.

*Do you have anywhere you can go?*

"I have somewhere I can go," I concede. "*I think.*"

"You're looking at rock bottom, sweetheart. Sometimes in life, no matter how hard you fight, the universe is trying to tell you to ask for help."

Tears spring to my eyes. I've spent the past few weeks training myself *not* to cry, but as I sit beside Mallory, showing her my soul, it feels nice to break without judgment. "I promised someone I would only go there if I had no other option."

She watches me for a beat, turning her face and dipping her chin in thanks as a man drops a coin in the cup she has sitting beside her. "You're broke," she says. "You have no home, and all your belongings have just been stolen. You're homeless," she tells me, as though I don't already know. "So unless you're expecting some white knight to ride in and rescue you right about now"—she looks up and down the street for emphasis—"I'd say you have no other option."

When Rita first brought up my future, the one that didn't include her, I balked at the idea of approaching the family that would've killed her for her indiscretion. It didn't register as an option I would *ever* consider. But the clarity that death brings

into your life is nothing if not amusing. The vow I'd made in my heart already sits broken because I know that Mallory is right. My mother pleaded with me to *only* seek out my blood relatives *if* I had no other option. Isn't that the crossroad that I now stand at? I spend my life running, I spend my life fighting, or I confront it head-on. It can only end one of two ways. One, I die, which doesn't seem like the worst outcome right now. Two, I find a family who accepts me, and for the first time in my life, I can pause without fear of trekking this unforgiving journey of life alone.

Mallory, in all her wisdom, is right. I'm left with nothing and no one.

“Do you have anyone to help *you*?”

She waves a dismissive hand in my direction. “Don't concern yourself with the likes of me, Gabriella. I've weathered many storms in my wayward life. I'm coasting now, enjoying the world passing me by before I move on to my next chapter.”

Shoving my hand into the pockets of my jean shorts, I pull out the envelope of cash Cassie had handed to me after I was fired.

“Do you have enough to get you where you need to go?”

I flick through the bills. “Enough for a bus ticket and a bite to eat here or there.”

She begins rummaging through her bags of belongings. I shove my money back into my pocket, grateful I'd pushed it into my pocket in haste instead of my backpack.

“Here,” Mallory speaks again. “Just in case, a fail-safe.”

I look down at the hundred-dollar bill in her hand. “No. You need that more than I do.”

“Says who?” she questions haughtily.

“I couldn’t... I can’t...”

“What did I tell you about the universe telling you to ask for help?”

“But—”

“You could have sat down anywhere around this depot. You sat beside me. Let me do you this kindness.”

“I have money.” I tap my pocket.

“What if you can’t find who you’re looking for right away? This gives you some breathing room.”

I shake my head, and she pushes the bill in my direction. “Take it. *Please.*”

I’m offending her by refusing it. I can see it in the way her eyes crease in rejection.

I lean forward and take the hundred-dollar bill from her hand. “How can I repay you?”

“You already have.”

I raise a single eyebrow.

“You didn’t treat me like a disease on this earth. You may have sat beside me unintentionally, but you spoke to me as an equal. Being in this position, Gabriella”—she gestures to the small bags of belongings surrounding her—“people forget that you’re a human being. I’m comfortable out here on the streets. It’s all I know now. But this chapter in my life, through the eyes of others, has deemed me unworthy.”

“You’re not unworthy.”

“*That’s* the kindness you paid me, sweet girl. It’s been a long time since someone sat beside me and had a conversation.

You've made my year."

My chin trembles.

"Remember that kindness should always be passed on," she continues. "One day, when you're standing *steady* on your two feet again, you'll cross paths with someone, *many* someones, I have no doubt," she corrects, "who could likely gain something from an act of kindness from a stranger."

I watch her candidly, wondering what journey her life has taken to place her here. But I stop myself from asking. If she wanted to share her story, she would have.

"Where did you get this?" I hold up the money.

She shrugs. "Someone dropped it. I tried to return it, but they'd boarded the bus before I could catch them. I've been holding on to it, hoping to see them again. I never forget a face."

"How long ago was that?"

Her cracked bottom lip tips out. "Time is of no consequence to me. It was snowing at the time."

"That would've been months ago," I tell her. "Mallory, you could have used this. For food or a warmer jacket."

She shakes her head. "It's not mine. I've been keeping it safe. At least this way, I know that while I couldn't return it to its rightful owner, it was passed on to someone worthy."

"I like that I met you," I tell her, holding the scrunched-up Benjamin Franklin to my chest in thanks. "I'll never forget this. I'll never forget you."

"You will, but that's okay. Some moments in life don't need to be long-lasting. Sometimes they come when you need them and settle deep inside as an unconscious memory to



guide you. Go now, Gabriella. You're too pretty to stand beside me. People have stopped noticing me."

I look at her a little longer before standing. "Bye, Mallory."

She doesn't offer a farewell. Instead, she closes her eyes, leans back against the wall, and falls asleep.

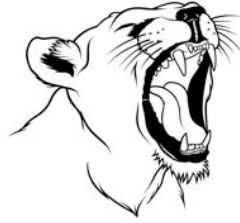
Twisting on my feet, I move back into the bus depot with only one destination in mind.

New York City.

To a future or my final chapter, whatever it may be, I'm ready.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## GABRIELLA



I don't exactly know what I expected to find when I finally stumbled across Vincent Ferrari, but I can confirm with one-hundred-percent certainty it wasn't the man I've been stalking for the past six days. I'm ashamed of how easily Hollywood has influenced my perception. I had my half-brother pictured in my mind. A middle-aged, heavy-set man with a cigar lodged between his lips, greased-back salt-and-pepper hair, and a laugh obnoxious enough to turn heads.

Vincent turns heads. There is no doubt about it, but not for the reasons I thought he would. First, he's younger than I anticipated. *Much* younger. My mother's recollection of the Ferrari brothers had me believe they were adults when she was forced to flee. *Killer. Murderer. Psychopath. Ruthless.* All words she used in discussing the sons of her secret lover, yet she would have known them only as boys who had barely breached their teenage years. As a man in his thirties, Vincent has only matured into his immortality. Darkness like the kind my mother is sure she witnessed doesn't dissipate with age and experience. If anything, it's honed, perfected like a weapon that cannot be disarmed. He has dark hair, eyes the color of molten silver, and a somber expression that leaves little doubt he'd hurt someone in the blink of his thick-lashed

eyes if he felt so inclined. A storm of malevolence circles my older brother and his perfectly cut jaw.

Women stare after him, the beauty in his face forcing them to ignore the turpitude that drips off his demeanor in warning. Every detail of his persona, from his perfectly tailored three-piece suit to the lifeless glint in his dark eyes, is immaculate. He's exquisite in his devilry.

I follow him at a distance, my legs moving quickly to keep his pace. I haven't yet worked up the courage to approach him. In all truthfulness, I'm scared. He's more menacing than I ever imagined, which is surprising, considering I'd conjured the devil in my mind.

I've spent countless hours reconciling the fact that my mother was right. These men are the last resort. I haven't even *really* tried to survive on my own. But the small amount of funds left in my pocket dwindles with every day that passes, with every gas station sandwich I buy to fill the growl in my stomach, every cent I pass over in exchange for lodgings in a seedy motel, unable to sleep for fear someone will enter without invitation chips away at my resolve to survive. I keep my head down when I walk, afraid I'll be recognized. Would authorities be searching for me? I jump when someone speaks to me, afraid they hold an ulterior motive. It's no way to live. So as frightening as this man who shares my blood seems, he's a haven I have to hope and pray doesn't turn into my biggest mistake.

Vincent pauses outside a restaurant, pulling out his cell and turning toward the street. I move with him, turning my back on him and moving a few steps away. Waiting a solid minute, I glance back over my shoulder, only to find him gone. I rush forward, looking over the street in irritation.

“*Fuck.*”

I step toward the restaurant, my eyes traveling over the visible space through the vast expanse of windows. When I can't locate him, I groan in frustration.

Turning on my heel, I take a single step straight into the punishing frame of a man who towers over me.

“*Umph,*” I cough out, lifting my eyes.

Vincent looks down at me curiously, his eyes tracking my face in an attempt to place me.

Hands tucked into the pockets of his dress pants, I work against my panicked need to stare at the gun strapped to his body.

“Sorry,” I mumble, moving to step around him.

He moves with me, his height shrouding me in a shadow that feels incredibly fitting for the moment.

“Excuse me.” I step the other way, keeping my eyes downcast.

He moves again, cutting off my path, and I loathe the rapid thrum of my heart pushing against my rib cage.

“What the hell, man?” I bite out. “I’m trying to get past.”

He remains quiet.

Internally, everything within me screams to turn and run, but my feet are glued to the ground. My flight response has completely failed me.

I lift my face, meeting his eyes head-on and keeping them.

“Considering you’ve been following me for the past six days, I assume you have *some* idea of who I am.”

I stare at him, my voice having retreated into itself.

“Answer me.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “It seemed more like a statement than a question.”

The side of his mouth ticks up in amusement, and I take a step back, the gesture too hellish to be jovial. “You know who I am,” he states, “which means you know what I do.”

I lift my chin, afraid he’ll see my throat move with dread.

He dips his chin. “You know what I do,” he states again. “Beggars the question then, why would a young girl be following me? Poorly, I might add. Your stalking skills could use some work.”

I scowl. “I didn’t realize murderers were funny.” My hand flies to my mouth. My eyes open wide enough to hurt.

Vincent laughs. A soft chuckle, again, like his smile, more heinous than affable. “What do you want?”

I choose silence, any form of vocabulary having vacated my brain cells and leaving me to only blink at him in response.

“That was the only opportunity you had to have my audience. Stop following me.”

He steps past me, pausing at the door of the restaurant. “I don’t think I need to tell you the ramifications if you keep it up.”

The moment he’s gone, I stumble toward the brick wall, my chest heaving with something attuned to panic.

He just threatened to kill me.

*My motherfucking brother just threatened to kill me.*

My hands fist themselves over the straps of my new backpack. I squeeze the canvas staring into the pedestrian traffic in shock.

Vincent may not look like what I had idealized as a made man, but he fits the brief impeccably in every other way. From the absence of humanity in his intimidating stature to the ease with which threats roll from his tongue. I do not doubt that my brother would kill me without hesitation.

I want to believe *I tried*. Prying my hands from my backpack, I press my index and forefingers against the sockets of my eyes. The tension coiling into the stem of my skull thrums against the tenderness of my temple.

I haven't tried, though. I haven't talked to him. *On my terms*. I've followed him for almost a week, stupid enough to believe he wouldn't notice. I told myself I needed time, that I was searching for the *right* time when I was complacent in my cowardice. I can't even blame him for his lack of humility when *he* put us out of our misery and approached me. I'd offer a lame stalker the same reaction.

"*Fuck,*" I spit.

I take a steadying breath, ignoring the way my lungs protest. Adjusting my hair, I tuck it behind my ears.

"If I die today." I tip my head up to the sky. "Make sure my afterlife is wherever my mother is. *Please,*" I add, turning and moving toward the restaurant Vincent entered.

# CHAPTER FIVE



## GABRIELLA



*M*anufactured cold air hits the bare touch of my skin as I enter. Goose bumps break along my arms, and I shake them, adjusting to the sudden drop in temperature.

The restaurant is fancy; the thick, plush carpet makes you feel like you're walking on a cloud. I push my foot heavier into the floor, testing its resistance. Obnoxiously large chandeliers hang from the ceiling, and my eyes scan the glistening crystal in awe. Abundant arrays of white flowers are scattered tastefully throughout the room. I lean into one close enough to smell, my lips tipping out in appreciation. *Fresh*. Soft music filters through the dining room, hushed conversation mingling with the gentle melody and making a song in itself.

“Can I help you?”

I turn my attention to the man standing behind a tall lectern-style table. Dressed in a pressed shirt and black bow tie, he looks down his nose at me, eyes scanning over my denim shorts and scuffed Doc Martens in distaste.

I adjust my bag, and he eyes it warily.

*Asshole.*

I plaster on a wide smile. “So kind of you,” I praise, “but no.”

Walking past him without permission, he huffs loudly enough to make me roll my eyes. “Excuse me!”

“You’re excused.” I keep walking, my eyes on the two men seated at the back table.

“You cannot just waltz in here,” he bites out.

Having noticed my bothersome friend and me, Vincent sits back in fascination as he watches me approach.

“*Sir*,” the rude man following me apologizes. “I’m sorry, she barged past me,” he splutters.

“Leave.” The man beside Vincent flicks his wrist, and the maître d’ dips his head, walking away without another word. “Friend of yours?” he asks Vincent, his eyes roaming over my body.

My clothes hang more loosely than usual. My limited diet and attempt at conserving my funds have reduced my ability to afford food. My thick curves have lessened enough that my shorts hang lower on my hips than they used to. The cuffs of my shorts no longer glue themselves to the heavy sway of my thighs like they did only two weeks ago. Still, Vincent’s friend’s eyes track my body in appreciation.

“She’s been following me for a few days,” Vincent answers, focusing now on the amber liquid in the glass held in his hand.

Using my right hand, I brush at the hair on the left side of my face, bringing it over my neck and away from my eyes. I suddenly wish I had spent more time styling the dense ebony curls before I left my motel this morning.

“Sit down.”

I look at the chair the man gestures to. I shake my head, suddenly uncertain.

“No?” He’s taken aback by my abrupt refusal but settles his surprise.

“No, thank you.” I make the last-minute decision to use my manners, the hairs on the back of my neck standing with a sudden onslaught of apprehension.

“It’s obvious you have no idea who I am.”

I move to speak, but he lifts his hand. “I didn’t give you permission to open your mouth.”

My chin dips back on its own accord, my eyes widening.

“I know you don’t know who I am,” the man continues, “because you had the fucking audacity to approach my table without an invitation. I’ve killed men for less. Not only do you interrupt my lunch”—he gestures down to the untouched bowl of risotto in front of him—“but you also do it with an attitude. Acting like I owe *you* something when you need something from me.”

“Him.” I point at Vincent before I can stop myself.

Vincent, who has remained quiet through his friend’s monologue, finally lifts his head, eyes scanning over me in curiosity.

The stranger that is really fucking with my ability to speak to Vincent while I still have the guts rubs at his jaw, leaning forward. “You want something from my guys, you want something from me.”

My eyebrows pull together.

*My guys.*

He gestures to the chair across from them again. “I won’t repeat myself.”

I remove my backpack slowly, holding it in my right hand as I sit. I move to speak multiple times but think better of it, opening my mouth only to close it again.

“I don’t know who you are.” The man puts me out of my misery and speaks again. “Frankly, I don’t give a shit. Whatever you’re seeking, we don’t want to give it. We’re not in the business of avenging eighteen-year-old women who have had their hearts broken.”

I should be frightened. The man before me exudes a power I’ve never come into contact with before. No one, except for Vincent, is game enough to even meet his eyes. But I’m tired, I’m really fucking sad, and right now, I kind of hope this douchebag shoots me so I never have to see him again.

*Lie about your age.*

“I don’t know who you are, so you were correct in that assumption. I apologize for my bad manners. I should’ve spoken to that hideously judgmental man at the front and asked to speak with Vincent, but with one look, he had already decided to ask me to leave. I refused to give him that chance.”

Confident I won’t be interrupted, I take a breath before speaking again. “Your assumptions about me are severely misaligned. I’m seventeen, not eighteen, and if any fool broke my heart, I’d exact revenge myself. It’s the only way I’d know it was done properly. But to be heartbroken, you’d need a heart, and I left that behind in a place you don’t need to know about with the only person I’ll ever be certain deserved it.”

“What do you want?” Vincent finally speaks, and I take a grateful breath, turning my attention to him completely.

“Can we speak in private?” I ask, lowering my voice.

“No,” he answers. “Whatever you need to say to me, you can say in front of Lorenzo.”

My throat immediately goes dry. “Lorenzo Caruso?” I whisper, turning back to the man I’d slathered in disrespect.

Lorenzo smiles, but the gesture is anything but pleasant. Lips separating, the tip of his tongue dances over the sharp lines of his canines, eyes hooding over in pleasure at the obvious way I shift in my seat.

“*Oh my God,*” I breathe. I pick up a glass of water from the table. “May I?” I gulp it down before either man has the time to answer.

What in the actual fuck? Lorenzo Caruso has to be even younger than Vincent.

The boss of the family looks less than a decade older than I do. *Jesus, Mom.* I curse the heavens.

“You know what?” I laugh. “You were right. My ex-boyfriend cheated on me with my best friend, and I was angry,” I lie pitifully. “You guys don’t want to deal with my petty drama.” I move to stand.

“Sit down.”

My ass is off the seat, my legs bent. “I—”

Opening the lapel of his jacket, Lorenzo shifts his gaze downward, and my eyes follow his line of sight, widening when they rest on a gun.

He flicks the button on his holster with his middle finger, sliding the weapon from its hiding place.

I glance around the restaurant.

“I own this place,” Lorenzo says, laying the gun on the table beside him. “Which means I could shoot you in your pretty face, and not a single person would even *look* in our direction.”

I slide back into my seat.

“That’s a good little lioness,” he praises mockingly.

My tongue crackles in my mouth, the simple curse of telling him to eat shit tingling at the muscle. I bite down.

“The one thing I despise more than disrespect,” Lorenzo states, “is lying. Now, lying is its own form of disrespect, of course, but it’s *so* much worse. It’s worse because you either fucked up and you’re trying to hide it from me or have information that I need, and instead of respecting my intelligence, you question it with your woeful fabrications.”

I sit on my hands to hide the way they shake. My back straightens in an influx of the fear I had promised myself I wouldn’t allow myself to feel.

Lorenzo watches me. Vincent sips his whiskey.

I cough to clear my throat and nod. “My name is Gabriella, and after losing my mother, I have come to the depressing realization that I have nowhere else to go.”

My chin trembles, but I bite my bottom lip, forcing it to stop. Confident I’ve calmed the quiver, I let it go, soothing the trauma of my teeth with my tongue and tasting blood.

“You both know my mother. *Knew*,” I correct.

“Please don’t tell me that you’re about to drop that Vincent here is your daddy.” Lorenzo laughs, and Vincent’s eyebrows pull together.

“Not possible,” my brother says.

“Not father, no,” I ignore Lorenzo’s mirth. “*Brother.*”

Neither of them moves or speaks, and I take that as my cue to continue. “My mother is, *was*,” I correct again. “Rita Romano.”

I let that information sink in.

“Rita was of no relation to me.”

“I thought she was dead,” Lorenzo speaks over Vincent.

The callous way he speaks of her death twists my gut, but I ignore the stab of pain. “She is now,” I answer Lorenzo first. “She was pregnant when she fled.”

“That makes no sense,” Vincent speaks. “Big Joey—”

“Is not my father,” I cut him off.

Lorenzo’s brows raise into his hairline. “This is bullshit. Your story doesn’t add up.”

He doesn’t believe me. But even with his dubiety, his curiosity has been piqued with the soft tilt of his head. His tone has changed, the indifferent conversation having morphed into pointed questions that demand answers.

Vincent is just as affected, leaning forward to listen more carefully.

“Carlo Ferrari was my biological father. My mother and Carlo,” I say to Vincent, “were involved. When they found out she was pregnant, Carlo helped her run.”

Vincent shakes his head.

I begin speaking before he can open his mouth to deny me. “I’ll do whatever test you need me to do to prove it to you.” I pull my phone from my bag. I hold up the screen, a photo of my mother and me saved to the screensaver. “This was my mother days before she passed.” I glance down, hiding the way my eyes fill with tears. I unlock the screen, pulling up my photo app. I slide the phone across the table. “You’ll see hundreds of photos of the two of us. Before she was sick, side by side—”

“You look similar,” Vincent agrees. “That doesn’t prove Carlo...”

I shrug. “I know I have a million and one reasons to lie. Namely, the need to protect myself from the wrath of Big Joey. My mother assured me he would kill me if he knew the truth.”

Neither man denies it.

“I have no one else, Vincent. If I had any other option, I would have taken it. But I’m seventeen. I’m not going into foster care only for the system to spit me out in six or so months. I don’t know how to survive on the streets. I could give it a red hot go. I’ve spent my entire life looking over my shoulder.” I pause. “But I miss my mom, and while I don’t expect us to fall into a loving sibling relationship, you’re the only family I feel safe enough knowing. You may kill me, and if that’s my ending, so be it. I’m as good as dead on the streets anyway.”

Lorenzo turns his head, watching Vincent expectantly. Vincent reluctantly pulls his gaze from me, meeting the boss’s somber stare.

I expected disbelief and rejection, but I never imagined concern would leak into the tightly pulled form of my



brother's face. He massages his hands absently, firmly pushing into his palms with his thumbs.

I watch his hands move.

He stops abruptly, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I'll call John," Vincent says.

Lorenzo dips his chin. "Call Leonardo as well. Have him meet us here."

Vincent stands without further acknowledging me.

I ignore the reality that I'm sitting across from a mob boss. *Alone.* My gaze follows Vincent, more to avoid looking at the man across from me than anything else. He's nestled his cell between his shoulder and ear, the baritone drawl of his voice commanding in the way he delivers sharp instruction to whoever is on the other end of the line. His left hand remains tightly punched into his pocket, and I deduce that Vincent likes control. His impassivity has slowly been pushed aside as my story unfolded. Concern, dread, resignation, and suspicion have made themselves known on his face, and he's unraveling.

"They call him Necktie."

I turn toward Lorenzo's voice. "Who?"

He tips his chin in Vincent's direction. "Vincent *Necktie* Ferrari."

"Why?"

Rubbing his knuckles along his chin, he smirks. "See his hand in his pocket?"

I nod without looking back.

"He's playing with barbed wire."

My eyebrows pull together. *Play* and *barbed wire* are words not conducive to a positive experience.

“The people who cross him wear his favorite metal like a bow tie into the afterlife.”

My top lip turns up in disgust. Lorenzo grins widely, turning his attention away from me and beckoning for someone to approach with two fingers.

The maître d’ is beside us in a matter of seconds.

“Restaurant is now closed. I want everyone out in the next five minutes. I’ll cover the cost of their meals.”

Hands behind his back, the maître d’ cannot resist looking at me.

“I didn’t say look at my guest. I said clear the fucking restaurant out.”

“Yes, sir,” he splutters, rushing away with haste.

Vincent sits back down, and the tension I hadn’t realized had snapped into my shoulders releases.

“John is on his way. As is Leo.”

Lorenzo nods.

“Are you about to kill me?” I ask, Lorenzo’s words playing in my mind on a loop. “Because, like, I’m kind of expecting it, but I’d like to know for certain.”

“No,” Vincent answers. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Reassuring,” I murmur.

“If you are who you say you are, your life will be spared. But if you’re lying”—Lorenzo gestures around the lavish dining room—“there are worse places to die.”

I shrug. “Bit rich for my tastes.” I hope the sarcasm in my voice masks my fear. The truth is, up until this moment, I never considered that my mother would be lying. But now that my life hangs precariously in the balance, I run every conversation we’ve ever had through my mind, searching for gaps or holes in her recollection. She was certain Carlo was my father. I have to trust her. Now more than ever.

“Am I allowed to know who John and Leo are and why they are on their way?”

“John is a doctor. He’ll conduct a DNA test.”

Fair enough. “Okay.” I nod.

“Leo is Lorenzo’s brother. He will be made aware of the situation.”

The situation being me.

My stomach growls loud enough for both men to hear, and I shift in my seat. “If I have to wait here for some doctor to poke me with a needle, any chance of being fed?”

The room is now empty, save a few waitstaff clearing the tables. Vincent beckons one over.

“*Buongiorno,*” the young server greets, dipping his head to Lorenzo before turning his attention onto me.

“Hello,” I say awkwardly.

Holding back a grin, Vincent passes me the menu, and I open it.

I stare at it for a moment trying to decipher the Italian words melding into one another on the page.

I clear my throat. “It’s all in Italian.”

“You’re in an Italian restaurant,” Lorenzo points out.

I inhale deeply. “I don’t speak Italian.”

By the look of confusion on the server’s face, he doesn’t speak English.

“What do you want?” Vincent sighs.

“Anything will be fine, thank you.”

Vincent moves to speak, but Lorenzo holds up a finger to silence him.

Beckoning the server closer, he murmurs in Italian. His tone is hushed to the point that even if I spoke the language, I wouldn’t be able to hear from my position across the table, so I sit back and turn my gaze to Vincent.

He watches me candidly. “My father told me everything.”

I lift my shoulders. “I guess not everything.” I don’t aim to come off dismissive, but I don’t know what else he could expect. I can accept his apprehension. I didn’t for a second consider he’d believe me right away. I’m a stranger—a girl with desperation in her eyes. I can feel how they widen when he looks my way. The way they stare a little too intently, begging him to see my sincerity. If he chooses to reject me after he knows we’re bound by blood, that’s his prerogative. One I’ll have to begrudgingly accept. But the possibility that he could very well be *unwilling* to believe me, reluctant to confirm or deny our lineage, will be harder to swallow.

Vincent’s hand moves slowly to his face. Metal, thick silver, and black rings that stand out against the natural tan of his skin adorn most of his fingers. He rubs at his jaw, a slow and methodical movement as he assesses me openly. He doesn’t move to speak.

I also choose silence.

The words my mother used to label him run through my mind on a loop, working to fix themselves to the man before me.

*Ruthless. Killer. Murderer. Vincent. Brother. Enforcer.*

*Ruthless. Killer. Murderer. Vincent. Brother. Enforcer.*

Each toxic portrayal settles inside me with every heavy beat of my heart.

He threatened to kill me, and I should feel scared. I should be shaking with nerves, yet his curious gaze only seems to settle the churning anxiety in the pit of my stomach.

He has yet to show me any form of kindness or civility, for that matter, but as I stare into his eyes, a flicker of safety lets me breathe a little easier.

This man, this *enforcer*, this ruthless murderer has me believing I'll be okay. All without a single freaking word of reassurance.

*“Mi scusi.”*

The server breaks whatever silent judgment Vincent and I were comfortably caught up in. I sit back in my seat, focusing on the young man. He holds a silver dish with a matching dome that covers the meal he's delivering to our table. Sliding it directly in front of me, he pauses, looking at Lorenzo for instruction.

Lorenzo speaks Italian, ushering him away with a simple flick of his fingers. *“Grazie.”*

“Does that mean thank you?”

“Yes,” Vincent answers.

“*Grazie,*” I call after the server, but he ignores me.

I stare at the obnoxious dome, my eyebrows pulling together.

“Please,” Lorenzo says, gesturing to the dish. “Eat.”

Tentatively, I grab the metal dome by the small handle, lifting it away from the serving dish.

My tongue hits the roof of my mouth to stop my lips from falling open. Following the initial shock, my tongue sucks at my top row of teeth, indecision crawling up my spine. I stare down at the roughly torn clump of bread, the fibers having hardened after being left for some time. My jaw wires shut, and I despise the way it quivers.

My eyes lock on Lorenzo, and he watches me back with bored indifference.

He’s an attractive man. Some would even classify him as beautiful, I would imagine. The face of an angel dripped in sin. Fallen from somewhere ambrosial but more comfortable spending his time in the depths of hell gambling with misdeeds than living with virtue and morality.

His hair is dark, shorn against his head at the sides and back, but thicker on top, brushed up and away from his forehead. Sable brows sit heavily over his piercingly solemn stare. Eyes the color of sapphire sink heavily into their sockets, embodying the wounded and querulous man they belong to. The strong line of his jaw is chiseled with power and muted only by the light dusting of hair that frames the bottom half of his face. His lips are thick, forever twisted with animosity, which contradicts the soft blush coloring. Lorenzo Caruso could heat your cheeks with a simple glance. Women would kneel in front of him and thank him for the opportunity.

But when you refuse to be blinded by the beauty, when you push past the allure and look deeper into the flames of purgatory, you'll see him clearly. You'll see the cruel and merciless man who heads up an organization famed for corruption and criminality. The devil may watch over hell, but he does it under Lorenzo's watchful eye.

I consider throwing the stale bread at his face, but I have zero doubt he'd shoot me, and in all honesty, I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Nodding my head slowly, I break our gaze. Placing the dome lid to the side of my plate, I lift the single piece of bread.

I'm embarrassed that even the parched dough has my stomach screaming loudly enough for the two men to hear.

"Michelin stars have changed a little since I last visited a restaurant like this."

Vincent ducks his face, but not quick enough that I miss his smile.

"Thing is," I continue, "I already ate this exact thing this morning. It would be a shame to indulge twice in one day."

I stand, leaning across the table with no manners. "Why don't I take this off your hands?" I lift Lorenzo's cold risotto and place the stale bread in front of him. "And you can partake in the delicacy of homelessness."

I sit back down, lifting a spoon and shoving a large mouthful of rice between my lips.

Something akin to pride touches the corners of Lorenzo's smirk, but I refuse to acknowledge the flames of plume sparking in the very pit of my stomach. I don't care to impress this man. His admiration shouldn't be something I ever strive

for, and it definitely shouldn't be something I preen over when it's offered.

I eat until my stomach churns in protest. I'm full. But I've been on a diet of gas station sandwiches for weeks. The smooth and creamy taste of the risotto I'm shoveling into my mouth tastes like fucking heaven in a bowl, and I'm unwilling to waste it. Even having gone cold, the flavors burst along my tastebuds.

"Mr. Caruso. Mr. Ferrari." An older man steps up to the table, and I finally give in, placing my spoon down and using a white napkin to pat my lips.

"You can't be finished." Lorenzo ignores the man, watching me with a frown.

"Huh?"

He gestures to the half-eaten meal.

"There is still half a bowl left."

"It's cold," I lie.

He looks around the restaurant. "I'll have some more made up for you."

"No," I bite out. "Thank you, but I'm finished."

He glances back down at the bowl, jaw tight and eyes dark with distrust.

The older man at the table clears his throat, and I turn my gaze from Lorenzo to him. A black bag is held tightly at his side.

"John, thanks for coming on such short notice." Lorenzo pulls a thick wad of cash from his pocket, placing it on the table beside his gun.



The doctor's eyes fall to the money, a slight dip of his chin acknowledging the payment.

"How quickly can you have the results?"

"Twenty-four hours," John, who must be the doctor, answers.

"I'll double this"—Lorenzo taps the cash—"if I get them faster."

"I'll see what I can do. To be safe, I'd like to do two tests. Bloods and a cheek swab."

"This is your subject." Lorenzo points at me.

"Whose DNA am I comparing hers to?"

"Mine," Vincent answers.

John nods. "Okay, young lady, let's get you sorted first." He places his bag on the table and opens it up to pull out a tray of medical supplies. He sanitizes his hands and pulls on a pair of blue latex-like gloves.

I watch every move he makes with intrigue. He's methodical, which is reassuring. He's not some quack they've yanked out of a veterinarian clinic and have forced to perform medical procedures on humans. Or he is, and he's just super confident that DNA testing in animals isn't much different than in humans.

He swabs my cheeks and takes a blood sample, refusing to meet my eyes the entire time. I'd consider his behavior rude if he didn't treat Vincent with the same apathy. I guess this is his way of remaining indifferent. He does what he needs to do to get paid; no more, no less.

"I didn't realize we could test the blood for lack of humanity."

I pull my gaze from watching him draw Vincent's blood.

Vincent flips off the newcomer.

"Are you eating stale fucking bread?" The man flicks the lump of crust in front of Lorenzo, his mouth twisted in distaste.

"I'm told it's a delicacy. What took you so long?"

The man sighs. "Armando had an issue at the club. Roberto is causing more and more problems."

"Roberto is not our concern right now."

The man finally looks at me.

I lift a hand in an awkward wave.

"Who are you?"

I move to speak, but Lorenzo cuts me off. "That's what we're trying to work out." He lifts his chin in Vincent's direction.

"I don't get it."

"Leonardo, meet Gabriella, daughter of Rita Romano."

Leo's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. "I thought she was dead."

"She is," Lorenzo answers, and I'm thankful I don't have to speak around the lump in my throat. "*Now*. It seems Carlo and Rita liked to fuck behind Big Joey's back. Rita skipped town when Ferrari's seed caught."

"Scandalous," Leo surmises with a smile. "Nice to meet you, Gabriella. Forgive me for not believing your little story. It's a little far-fucking-fetched."

I shrug. "The results won't lie." *I hope*, I don't add.

“If she isn’t lying—highly unlikely—but still, Big Joey’s not gonna take too kindly to this.” He eyes me warily. “She’s as good as fucking dead.”

“Jesus, Leonardo,” Vincent growls. “There’s a time and a place to run your fucking mouth.”

“I’ll call you with the results,” John interrupts.

Leonardo takes the envelope sitting in front of Lorenzo, handing it to John. John leaves the restaurant without another word.

I glance around the table, recognizing the danger I’ve inserted myself in as I look at the three scariest motherfuckers I’ve ever come in contact with.

“Are we going to wait here until the results are in? And if so, is there a dessert menu?”

Leonardo laughs long and loud. “You’re a funny little liar.”

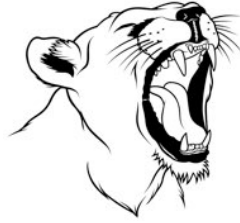
“You’ll stay with me until I can determine what the fuck we’re going to do.” Vincent turns to Lorenzo. “You’ll call me the moment you hear?”

Lorenzo dips his chin.

“Grab your bag,” Vincent instructs me. “Let’s go.”

# CHAPTER SIX

## GABRIELLA



“Where are you staying?” Vincent asks as we walk.  
“We’ll stop past and grab the rest of your things.”

I turn, showing him my pack. “I have my things.”

His feet stop. “Everything you own fits in that backpack?”

“Mm-hmm.” I keep walking, not caring to witness the pity that would likely settle in his eyes. Imagine if he knew it was basically empty. “Where do you live?”

“Close.” He catches me in two quick strides.

“I’m not lying, you know.”

He inhales deeply. “I know.”

That gives me pause. “You do?”

He glances at me from the corner of his eye. “No one would be stupid enough to lie about something this farfetched to Lorenzo or me. So you’re either telling the truth or trying to hurt yourself in a really fucked-up way.”

He turns into an apartment building, pausing to let a man open the door for us.

“Mr. Ferrari,” the elderly gentleman greets.

“George.”

I smile as I follow a step behind Vincent. No one spares me a second glance, and I consider the thought that he either brings young women to his apartment regularly or they all know not to look too closely for fear of death. My guess is the latter.

“Do you live here with your wife?”

“No.”

I’m power-walking to keep up. “Girlfriend?”

“No.” He hits the elevator button, hands finding their way into his pockets as he waits.

“Dog?”

“Stop talking. You’re giving me a fucking headache.”

We step into the elevator.

I lean against the wall, staring at Vincent in the reflection of the lift. If he senses my stare, he doesn’t let on, choosing to stare at the digital reader that moves higher with every floor that passes.

“Penthouse,” I murmur.

“*Sub*-penthouse.”

“And here I was thinking *I* was poor.”

His eyes close, but I catch the slight uptick of his lips before he pushes it away by frowning. I like that I can make him smile. It seems like a juvenile pleasure, but it sparks hope in the very bottom of my gut. Maybe if I can make him like me, my life here won’t be *so* bad, and *one* day, he’ll love me, and this big fucking world won’t seem so lonely.

The elevator doors open, and Vincent places a palm across the frame. “After you.”

“Thank you.” I smile, stepping into his apartment.

It’s different from what I expected. Minimalistic in a non-purposeful way. It’s a place for him to rest his head, but nothing about it screams *home*. The furniture looks like it was selected by someone he paid to decorate. And I say *decorate* loosely. There are no homey features. No picture frames or knickknacks. No open books or candles. It’s neat, nothing out of place, but it would need to exist for something to be *out of place*.

“You need greenery.”

“Hm?” He checks his watch.

“Greenery,” I repeat. “Plants.”

He lifts his head, looking around the apartment. “Plants need looking after. I do not want or care for anything that requires constant attention.”

“You know, it’s been proven that they clean the air, so it’s healthy. They also reduce stress.”

The thick line of his brows pulls together. “A plant reduces stress.”

I nod. “Mm-hmm. They do. I’ve read studies that say a single glance at a plant can reduce your heart rate.”

He blinks.

I turn away, placing my backpack beside the couch. “Will you tell me about our dad? Do you have any pictures?”

He hesitates.

Sitting on the arm of the chair, I cross my arms over my chest. “You said you believed me.”

He scratches the back of his neck. “I do.”

“So there’s no harm in me asking questions, then.”

He slips off his jacket, laying it gently over the back of the couch. He removes his cuff links, then folds the material of his shirt back, bringing his forearms into view. He sits down, and I turn to keep him in sight. Elbows to his knees, his shoulders bunch, and his hands roll themselves into fists only to release again almost immediately. “Carlo was... *ingrained* in this life. He lived and breathed the family. He died for it too.”

I smile sadly. “That’s not what I asked,” I tell him. “My mother loved him enough to risk her life by carrying on an affair. Something about him must have appealed to her. She wouldn’t speak about their relationship. I want to know that I came from at least a strong *fondness*, even if it wasn’t love on his part.”

Rubbing a hand roughly down his face, Vincent holds his breath for a beat before releasing it noisily. “Carlo was charming. He was handsome and funny. He could make you feel like you were the most important person in his world.”

I can feel my head nodding eagerly, soaking in every word.

“But it was all an act, Gabriella,” he says reluctantly. “Deep down, he was a fucking asshole. The most important person in his world was him. He loved no one the way he did himself. The underworld feared him, and he fed on that terror. He was ruthless and unforgiving and would kill men for merely looking at him the wrong way. Ultimately, he was a liability to the family he lived for, and it killed him.”

Searching my face, Vincent *almost* looks apologetic. “You wanted a fairy tale.”

I shrug. “Not a fairy tale. I knew the story didn’t have a happy ending, obviously. I just wanted to know that my



mother gave her life away for a man who deserved it.”

“She didn’t give her life away for Carlo. She gave it away for you. That’s your fairy tale.”

I duck my head, hiding the way tears coat my eyes. “Was he good to you?” I speak to my feet.

“He taught me what I needed to know to survive in this world, to succeed in it.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

I wipe my hands over my face, trying to disguise my need to brush away tears.

Vincent pretends not to notice. “Not particularly, no. He beat on me if I stepped out of line and celebrated like the proud father he was the first time I killed a man. He was rarely home. He cheated on my mother and treated her like a useless possession. You were better off not having known him.”

I had wondered if knowing more about Carlo Ferrari, the man who spawned me, the reason for my existence, and the cause of my life being what it was, would settle something inside me. I racked my brain, trying to work out what knowing more about him would bring to me. Would it offer me peace? Belonging? Identity? But Vincent’s words have brought me none of those things. But they also haven’t magnified my emptiness or longing. In fact, numbness settles within me, and I agree with my older brother; he’s better off not existing in my life or my memories.

“I’m tired,” I say, pushing up from the arm of the chair and glancing around the room.

Vincent stands. “I’ll show you to the spare room.” He walks past me, and I watch his retreat, but my feet remain glued to the floor.

Glancing over his shoulder, he stops walking when he realizes I'm not following.

“Would you mind if I slept on the couch?”

The last few weeks have been spent hiding away in motel rooms that have likely seen things that would make even Vincent's stomach turn. Every night I'd curl myself into a ball, arms cuddling my knees. I watched the door, refusing to let sleep claim me, afraid of how easy it would be for someone to break the flimsy lock. The walls narrowed as my body and mind craved the sleep I denied it. The bed would shrink under me, and my breathing would shorten, my frame quaking in short, sharp inhales and exhales of air. I was hot and cold all at once, my limbs shaking and teeth chattering, but sweat would cover my skin. I knew none of it was real. I knew my anxiety had claimed me, and every thought and feeling was irrational, but it didn't change it. The ringing in my ears would grow louder and louder, and then the sun would rise, and I'd take my first full breath, grateful to be able to leave the stale room.

Vincent looks at the couch, then back at me.

“Look, you don't one-hundred-percent trust me. The feeling is mutual. I refuse to be confined to a single bedroom. Who's to say you won't lock me in there?”

He's not quick enough to stop the surprised bark of laughter that breaks from his lips. His eyebrows raised, he lifts his shoulders. “Keeping captives isn't really where my expertise lies.”

“Exactly what a kidnapper would say.”

His eyes narrow. “You came to me. Let's not forget that important piece of the story.”

“Can I sleep on the couch or not?”

He lifts a hand, palm turned upward. “Be my guest. I have work to do.”

I sit on the large sofa, enjoying the vast space of his sub-penthouse. The walls don’t feel like they’re closing in on me here. I tell myself it has everything to do with the sheer spaciousness of his apartment and *not* the comfort of his presence making me feel safe.

I unlace my boots, placing them neatly beside my bag. Grabbing a cushion, I punch it a few times, testing its firmness. Confident it’s soft enough to let me sleep but rigid enough to support my neck, I lie down.



MY MIND WAKES before my body, and I groan, protesting the reality of consciousness. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, trying to convince myself I’m not awake. I give up after a second, opening my eyes and staring at the ceiling. Stretching my arms up, I arch my body and relish the feeling of my muscles screaming in dissent.

Eyes damp with the need to adjust to the sudden intrusion of light, I wipe at them, lying flat for a moment longer before pulling myself upright.

“*Buongiorno.*” Lorenzo, seated on the sofa across from me, sips coffee.

I check my watch. “What does that mean?”

“Good morning,” he says.

I lift my chin, refusing to return the greeting. “Where’s Vincent?”

Finishing his coffee, he leans forward to place his empty cup on the coffee table. “Out on business.”

There’s a hint of something sinister in his tone, and my nostrils flare at the enjoyment he seems to get out of my ignorance.

I glance around the room, readjusting my clothes and shifting in my seat.

“Your results came back.”

My head flies up, eyes wide and set on Lorenzo.

“How?” I check my watch. “When?”

“You’ve been asleep for about fifteen hours.”

“Shit,” I mumble.

“Anyway,” Lorenzo speaks again. “Congratulations, you’re a Ferrari.”

It was as though I’d been holding my breath since I approached Vincent and Lorenzo in that restaurant. Fear having claimed my ability to breathe easily following their threat of death if I was found to be lying. I knew *I* wasn’t lying, but that didn’t mean my mother hadn’t fed me incorrect information. But knowing my truth was absolute uncoils the tension in my muscles, and my shoulders deflate.

“I already knew that.”

He nods once. “You need to know, Gabriella, this puts us in a very awkward situation. I’m not going to sugarcoat it for you, I *was* hoping you were lying so we could rid you from our lives and move forward.”

I don't react to his thinly veiled threat.

“We can't just throw a party and introduce you to the family as one of them. Your existence will cause disharmony and anger. Vincent is already... *protective*. I can't have an all-out war in my outfit. You've complicated my life at an incredibly inopportune time.” His knuckles stroke the line of his bearded chin, lips pursed in distaste.

I don't know what he expects me to say. *Sorry?* “My mother dying wasn't exactly fortuitous for me either. Nor was living from one dodgy motel to another with the reality of homelessness inching closer every day.”

He doesn't shy away from the harsh truth of my words. Soaking up my honesty with little to no empathy and a blank stare. “Your mother wasn't wrong when she told you Big Joey would kill you.”

He speaks of death with such ease. As though the loss of life isn't something to mourn. But then, if you can bring yourself to take a life, you can't exactly value it. Lorenzo Caruso speaks of life like it's a privilege. You walk the earth until a greater power erases your existence. But where I believe the greater power is out of our control, Lorenzo takes ownership, wielding his willingness to kill like it's his God-given right.

“He would cross Vincent? *And you?*” I add quietly.

He licks his lip, contemplating his next words. “Rita, in her decision to protect you, abandoned her husband. She also carried on an affair with another member of the family. She made him look like a fool.”

“Carlo was also there,” I bite back.

“Neither Carlo nor Rita are here to pay for the indiscretions. You are.”

I swallow.

“You need to give Vincent and me time to work out how to handle this. Until then, the family will not know of your existence.”

I stand quickly. “Lorenzo,” I plead.

His phone rings, and he glances at the screen before sliding his thumb across the glass and holding it to his ear, ignoring me.

“Is it done?”

He nods at whatever the person on the other end of the line says. But then his eyes narrow, and he stands. “What about her?”

He coughs, his voice changing from conversational to confrontational in a breath. “Why the fuck would I want to do that?”

Whoever he spoke with must’ve hung up because he pulls his cell from his ear, lips pushed into a thin line on his face.

“Everything okay?”

His head lifts slowly, a scowl forming on his face. “Stay put, don’t step out of fucking line. You want to live and survive in this family, you’ll follow my fucking orders. Am I understood?”

I don’t even attempt to hide my shock. Lorenzo is as scary as he needs to be in everyday life. He’s not obvious or overblown with the threat of his person. He doesn’t need to be. One look and the peril at crossing him is indisputable. He doesn’t need to advertise his menace. It’s who he is. He’s

almost jovial with it. Sarcastic and aloof, and altogether disinterested. He'll condemn you with a smile.

His temper is something new. Something that doesn't even come close to threatening. It's real—one hundred percent—and if I could disappear from his presence and the boiling rage of his anger, I would.

“I asked you a goddamn fucking question.”

“Ye-es,” I stutter.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



## GABRIELLA



I pause my movie when I hear the elevator.

Vincent steps into the apartment, and I smile. “*Ciao.*”

I’ve been teaching myself the basics of Italian, keeping it as simple as possible. Practicing my hellos and thank yous in the mirror with Google translate. Through my research, I’ve read too many horror stories in random forums of people misusing phrases or terms in the most inopportune situations. So my focus will be simple pleasantries to save me from talking about my vagina when asking if someone owns a cat.

“*Ciao,*” Lorenzo echoes my greeting, the single syllable rolling off his tongue conversationally.

He follows Vincent into the apartment, hands casually stuffed into his pants pockets. I scowl at him. He smiles back, and my top lip curls up in disgust.

“Easy, little lioness,” he scolds. “I come in peace.”

Vincent takes a seat beside me on the couch. “How are you?”

I lift my shoulders lazily, pulling my gaze from the man whose apartment I’ve found myself a prisoner. “Bored.”

Soon after Lorenzo and Vincent confirmed my identity, they moved me into my own apartment. The penthouse. More, Lorenzo's penthouse. Thankfully, Lorenzo doesn't live here, so I have the entire space to myself. I argued at first, but Vincent quickly pointed out that capos and soldiers drop by his home regularly to discuss business, so having me there was not an option. Lorenzo remained quiet through our discussion, eyeing me candidly and making me wary.

When he finished the penthouse tour, making sure I was comfortable, Vincent thrust a sleek laptop in my face and demanded I replace my belongings. When I quietly reminded him that I had no money, he slid a credit card onto the table and told me the card had no limit.

*No fucking limit.*

I keep it frugal. A few changes of clothes, sanitary products, a new phone charger and the book I lost. As soon as it arrived, I requested Vincent post it to the Denver Public Library with my apology note for losing their copy. He looked at me like I'd grown two heads. But then, he often looks at me like that.

The penthouse is nice. It's sparse, like Vincent's home, but it has a couch comfy enough to sleep on and a TV subscribed to all the streaming services, so I can't complain. I may be a prisoner, but there are worse shackles to have.

Regret narrows Vincent's eyes, but he blinks it away, sighing heavily. "My wife and I have to go away for a while."

I sit up straight. "Wife? You said you weren't married."

I ignore the bark of laughter from Lorenzo.

"I wasn't when you asked me," Vincent says. "It only happened yesterday."

I frown. “Oh.” My brows pull together, and I open my mouth to speak, closing it again. “You said you didn’t have a girlfriend.”

“It isn’t that type of union.”

“Not for Bianca anyway,” Lorenzo quips.

“I would have liked to come to your wedding.” Hurt leaks into my words, and I decide it’s better not to try to hide it.

“It wasn’t a wedding, Gabriella. It was a…” He trails off.

“A transaction to broker peace,” Lorenzo speaks for him.

My nose wrinkles and I suddenly feel dirty in their presence. “A transaction? You *bought* her?”

“No, I didn’t fucking buy her.” Vincent rubs a hand down his face roughly. “I married her to protect her.”

My confusion grows. “I don’t understand.”

Vincent’s jaw clenches, his tone sharp when he speaks again. “You don’t need to.”

A million and one questions run through my mind. I want to know about his new wife and why she needs protection. But I refrain, watching his irritation increase with every word I speak.

“How long will you be gone?”

Cracking his knuckles one by one, Vincent watches me blankly. “I don’t know. But I can’t have you here alone while I’m gone.”

“So I’ll come with you.” I’m very much aware of how desperate my words sound.

Vincent denies me with a single shake of his head. “I don’t know how much I can trust Bianca. Your existence needs to

remain between me, Lorenzo, and Leonardo.”

My eyes flick toward Lorenzo, moving away quickly when I find his gaze trained on me. I drop my voice. “I spent my whole life in hiding, Vincent. I didn’t realize when I approached you that I’d be living the same way.”

Vincent grabs my hand, and it’s the first time he’s ever touched me or shown affection. “It won’t be forever,” he implores. “You have my word on that.”

I like the reassurance his hand on mine brings, but I rip it away all the same, hurt by his empty promise. “You keep saying that.”

“Until I can be certain you’ll be safe, the family cannot know you exist.”

We’ve been dancing this same waltz for the last few days. He’s had dinner with me once or twice, and he calls and texts me daily to check in, but we still don’t seem closer to a solution that he deems *safe* enough. I’m beginning to question his motive.

I turn my face from his. “If this will be my life, Vincent, just call Big Joey now and have him execute me. It’ll be better than living this way.”

“Gabriella,” Vincent warns. “Don’t make this harder than it needs to be. You have no fucking idea what I’m dealing with right now. I’m trying to help you. Please,” he begs. “Return the fucking favor.”

Hiding away in an ivory tower isn’t what I imagined for my life. My mother urged me not to live lonely. But it’s a little hard to honor her wish when I’m a prisoner of *safety*, as these men seem to constantly remind me.

“Where will I go while you’re away?” I give in, knowing I have no other option.

The room falls quiet, and I watch Vincent expectantly. He glances at Lorenzo, and my eyes widen. “You can’t be serious? Don’t you have a brother? Don’t *we* have a brother?” I ask. “Can I stay with him?”

Vincent’s lip curls up in disgust. “He’s dead.”

“What?” I breathe. “When?”

He shrugs. “All that matters is that he’s gone, and the world is better because of it. There is no other option.”

“Like fuck there’s not,” I spit.

“You run your mouth a lot for someone entirely dependent on us for your safety.”

My eyes close of their own volition. I force a steady breath before opening them again and turning to Lorenzo. “Excuse me?”

“You may be family, Gabriella.” My name rolls across his tongue with the hint of an accent that is otherwise nonexistent. My mother used to say my name the same way. Only it sounded beautiful on her lips. “But that doesn’t excuse you from your need to show respect. I’ve allowed your discourtesy over the past few days because I appreciate this is all new for you.” He gestures around the apartment. “This world is not for the weak. You have a nasty little roar, but you are no match for me, Vincent, and most of my family’s men. Best you learn that quickly before I extinguish your fire for good. Do you understand?”

I swallow.

“I asked you if you understood.”

I'm so tired of rules. I grew up surrounded by them—the dos and don'ts of defense. *Do* make friends, but don't get *too* close. Be yourself, but never reveal your true identity. And now, *you* are family. We just don't want anyone else to know.

I've never been free to be me. To explore who I am and what I want in life. I thought Vincent would offer me a different path. But it seems I was wrong.

“Yes.” The word cracks when I speak it, but he hears it clearly enough.

“Good. Pack what you need. You have five minutes.”

I glance at Vincent, but his gaze is on Lorenzo.

I stand on shaky legs.

“Vincent,” I call and wait for him to turn to me. “I trust you. I'm placing all my faith in you to keep your promise. But I need you to know my credence has an expiration date. I don't say that to pressure you. It's just a fact that I need you to be aware of. I'm trying to remain open to this life. You talk a lot about family and respect and loyalty.” I glance at Lorenzo, too, making sure he's listening. “I'm bound by the rules without the reward of the life I was promised. How can I be expected to fall into line when you treat me like a captive?”

He opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. “I'll make it on my own in this world if I have to.”

“I don't want you to do that.” He doesn't say anything further. He doesn't tell me he loves me or enjoys my company. He doesn't reassure me that we're family and I'm where I belong. But I understand the meaning in his words all the same.

“I don't want to have to, either.”

“Go pack,” he murmurs.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



## GABRIELLA



Lorenzo lives a thirty-minute drive out of Manhattan. The suburb is quiet and full of veteran trees that dwarf the size of the front yards in the homes we pass. It's green and leafy and more domesticated than I imagined for the boss of the New York family.

“Are we going to your childhood home?”

He shakes his head, adjusting his position in his seat. “No. I didn't want to live where my mother and father had built their life. I needed my own space.”

I understand that. Not that I vocalize it.

“Where did you live with Rita?”

Vincent had to go back and collect Bianca, which immediately left me in Lorenzo's care.

For the past twenty minutes, we've sat in complete silence, save the soft clearing of a throat.

“Unalaska.”

Lorenzo doesn't even attempt to hide his shock. “What the fuck?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nod. “It was the most obscure place she and Carlo could think of. But when she got really sick, she was

moved to a hospital in Juneau. That's where she died."

"You were close," he states.

"We were all one another had. Getting close to other people was never an option. Self-preservation was always our top priority."

"Lonely life," he murmurs.

"To a degree, I guess. I didn't know any different."

I stare at his profile, working to see if he can detect my lie. It *was* fucking lonely. Awfully so. And I *did* know different. I saw it all around me. The friendships that spanned a lifetime I was and would never be a part of. The big families that seemed larger than life and full of love and jubilation. I spent my adolescence and teenage years being eaten away by the craving for human contact. I finally accepted that my yearning would forever remain. I couldn't in good conscience change it when my mother had sacrificed everything for our safety. That realization settled an emptiness inside me. Even with its naivety, the world had cast me aside as unwanted, and I knew the scar would stay with me forever.

"What are her other kids like?" I change the subject, unwilling to focus on the tightness in my throat or how my eyes stung with tears. "Dante and Luna?"

"Big Joey is my uncle on my mother's side." He shocks me by admitting. "Dante and Luna are my cousins."

"This is a difficult position for you to be in."

He shrugs it off. "Not particularly. Vincent is... he's my closest ally. I'd do anything for him."

"Even lie to your family?"

"Even lie to my family."

I don't know what to say. Thank you seems redundant. He's not doing it for me. He's doing it for Vincent, and I don't need a harsh reminder when he needs to enlighten me.

“Dante is working his way up the ranks in the family. He's a soldier and works alongside his dad. His dad is a fucking asshole, Dante not so much. Luna's more like her father, a fucking bulldog, but she keeps to herself. She just recently married one of my capos.”

“Was it a transaction like Vincent and Bianca?”

“No. True love.” He laughs.

“You're being facetious. Please don't treat me like an idiot. I'm just trying to understand.”

He sighs. “They needed to marry to save Bruno's fucking neck. He's an asset to me. I need him. He fucked Luna, with her consent,” he adds before I can ask, “and knocked her up, the stupid fucking imbecile.”

“Did she want to get married?”

He shrugs. “More than he did.”

“Poor girl. I'd hate to marry someone who didn't really want me.”

“He wanted her enough to fuck her.”

I turn in my seat. “Do you really think that is the same thing?”

“No, but my family is a business, Gabriella. I'm in charge of ensuring everyone is protected, and our businesses are profitable. I can't spend my days playing matchmaker to make sure people are in love. I also can't allow unions that involve outsiders. There are too many variables trying to destroy us. This setup has worked for centuries. If you're a part of the

family, you abide by the rules, as prehistoric as you may feel they are.”

I long to argue. To disagree. But in some fucked-up way, I see his point. I understand his need to control the narrative for no other reason than to save what he’s been handed and what he continues to build.

That and to provide for his unmistakable expensive taste. I run my hands over the stitching on the suede-like seats of his car. “I didn’t realize Lamborghini made an SUV.”

The thick purr of the engine builds beneath us as Lorenzo accelerates. “It was a bit of a selfish indulgence, but she’s just so pretty.”

He smirks, watching me from his peripheral vision.

“How fast does it go?” The control system looks like how I envisage the cockpit of an airplane to look. Buttons and touch screens and digital outputs that make my eyes blur.

His palm moves over the steering wheel. “One-eighty-nine.”

My bottom lip tips out in admiration. “How often do you push her that hard?”

He licks his lips, and I ignore the way my eyes settle on the wet touch of his mouth. “When I’m not driving through the suburbs with my best friend’s little sister in the car.”

“Lame.” I roll my eyes.

He pulls into a driveway, and I move my focus from him slowly, taking in the old-fashioned yet contemporary-style home before me.

It’s beautiful. A little rustic with grand white window frames that span both the bottom and top floors. It’s

surrounded by trees and lush grass. I unclick my seat belt absently, removing myself from the car to get a better look.

“I assumed you’d live in Manhattan.”

“I own a penthouse there too, but it’s currently occupied by an unexpected guest.”

“Sorry about that,” I say, sounding anything but.

I move down the paved path toward the home. Testing the front door, it’s locked, and I glance back, but Lorenzo is now out of sight. I move around the side of the house, looking around in awe at the beauty of his home. It isn’t in the slightest what I imagined for a Mafia boss, but as I look around at the understated grandeur of the building, it fits him.

I gasp when I reach the back. Large rock formations configure the staircase down to an infinity pool that glistens in the warm afternoon sun. The Hudson River flows past his backyard, and I glance back at the house. Windows, not unlike the front, adorn the back of the house, and I have no doubt this view is visible from every room.

“Come,” Lorenzo yells from the patio door he must have just opened. “I’ll show you to your room, and then you can explore. I have work to do.”

I swallow the snide remark about murder and robbery, balancing on my tongue. This situation would have to be as awkward for Lorenzo as it would be for me. The head of the family tasked with babysitting. In all honesty, I’m a little surprised he agreed to it.

Walking through the home, I struggle to take in everything the way they long to. Dark wood and polished floors are framed by muted white walls and high ceilings. Natural light pours through the expansive windows, and I smile as the sun

touches my skin. The furniture is neutral. Gray couches, white throws, shadowed art pieces, and dusky blue rugs touch each room. It's tasteful and minimal, and I love it.

I follow Lorenzo up a small staircase. The muscles in his back move with purpose as he carries our bags.

“Do you have a wife?”

Glancing over his shoulder, he frowns. “I don't have time for a wife.”

He turns back around, taking the last few steps to the landing. He waits for me to reach him, gesturing to a bedroom to the right. “After you.”

I open the door tentatively, peering inside.

“Each bedroom has its own bathroom, so you'll have complete privacy,” he says, dropping my bag to the queen-size bed in the center of the room. “You can move about the house freely. Just stay out of my room and my office.”

I move to the large bay window, staring out at the view. I can see the pool, the Hudson, and the trees. I don't even hide my smile when I turn back to Lorenzo to nod. “You have a beautiful home.”

His lips thin. “I'll be downstairs in my office if you need me.”

“I'm good.”

He walks away.

“Actually,” I yell. “Is there food?”

“Fully stocked fridge and cupboards. Help yourself.”

He moves away again, and confident he's out of sight, I spin in a circle. This house is fucking everything. I won't be

locked away in a fucking tower. I can swim and sunbathe and walk and explore. I can breathe fresh fucking air.

# CHAPTER NINE



## LORENZO



She sleeps on the couch. A five-bedroom home at her disposal, and she chooses the sofa. Curled up in a ball as small as she can manage, her arms hug the pillow she's resting her head upon. More of her comforter warms the carpet than it does her body, thrown over her frame haphazardly as she snores softly. She keeps the window open, no matter that it is fucking freezing, snuggling farther into the couch, ignoring the breeze that turns her cheeks red.

She thinks I don't know. She waits until she thinks I'm asleep before creeping down the stairs, pillow and blanket in tow to find slumber. She's gone again just as the sun rises, back into the bedroom she's claimed, confident in her knowledge that I'm none the wiser.

I almost woke her the first night, convinced she'd passed out unintentionally, but Vincent had told me she had done the same thing in his apartment too. Waffled on with some shit about being afraid that we weren't trustworthy, she refused to be locked away as a prisoner in a single room. Vincent believed her readily enough, but I'm sure there's more to it.

It's already eleven in the evening, and after the first night I found her, I made certain I was in my room or office before ten to give her ample time to sleep. But I've been working

overtime trying to sort the clusterfuck of a fallout following Vincent's cunt of a brother's death. The feds have been circling Vincent's new blushing bride, so he's taken her away on the pretense of their honeymoon while I can create a different fucking narrative. One that doesn't include Bianca Ferrari or any of my family, for that matter. But it's proving to be more difficult than I expected. Not that I think Vincent would complain. He's locked away in a secluded cabin with his beautiful little piece. I'll be lucky if my consigliere ever comes home.

I slide the side of my fork into the lasagna on my plate, using it like a knife to cut a piece off. Stabbing the pasta sheets, I shove them in my mouth, chewing in the darkened kitchen.

Gabriella was here earlier this afternoon, but I kept my distance, as it seems to be her preference. But I hadn't eaten all day. My stomach rumbled the second I entered the kitchen to find a plate of lasagna and a bowl of salad covered in plastic wrap left on the counter. It crossed my mind, for the briefest of seconds, that she could be trying to poison me, but it just smelled so fucking good that I pushed the slight possibility aside and began eating what she had prepared. And it's fucking delicious. Like my mom used to make.

My cell buzzes in my pocket, and I retrieve it, answering it on speakerphone.

"Dante," I greet, mouth still full of food.

"Have you seen or heard from Bruno?"

I like that about the kid. He's not about bullshit. My younger cousin is a loyal soldier. I'll make him capo one day *when* he's ready. He's still a little too green for leadership right

now, but after a few years of dirty hands, he'll make a good fucking head of one of our enterprises.

“Nah, I'm in Palisades dealing with something else. Why?”

He sighs. “He was supposed to take delivery of some product for tonight's poker game. One of our suppliers started blowing up my phone, trying to work out why Bruno wasn't where he was supposed to be and why he wasn't answering his phone.”

I drop my fork with a loud clang against my plate. “What happened to the product?” I growl.

Our poker games happen every other month. Tables filled with bored husbands of the Upper East Side with too much money to burn. Money, I'm happy to take off their pudgy little fucking hands. Our girls rub their tits in their beady little faces. They devour *crates* of our most expensive whiskey and snort more snow than I can get my hands on half the time.

“I convinced him to wait at the drop zone. I met him instead, *late*, which pissed him off and cost us an extra few G's.”

“I'm gonna kill him.” I grind my teeth, clenching my fists to stop myself from throwing my dinner across the room. “You haven't been able to locate him?”

“His phone is still off. I've called Luna, but she couldn't give two shits where he's at right now. She's back down the rabbit hole of Mom's disappearance. Dad's avoiding her, which means he's avoiding Bruno, so he doesn't have a fucking clue either.”

Lasagna lodges in my throat, and I punch my chest to clear it. “If he's not with your sister and he's not where he's

supposed to be, you can guaran-fucking-tee he's at the club with one of the girls deep-throating his limp dick. Call Armando and check."

"Yes, boss."

"If he is there," I continue, "call Leonardo. I want him to meet you at the club. Tell him I said Bruno needs a little reminder about protocol and who the fuck he answers to."

"Yes, boss."

He hangs up, and I wait a second before calling him back.

"Yeah?"

"Luna and your mom," I cough. "What the fuck is that about?"

"Same fucking shit, different day." Dante sighs. "I thought she was done with it. But it's the twentieth anniversary of her disappearance or some shit, so she's like a dog with a fucking bone."

"Twenty years?" I question, standing up straight.

"Yeah," he answers distractedly. "It's fucking obvious she's dead, right? Dad knows it. I know it. Why can't *she* fucking accept it?"

I push my plate of food away, my head aching.

"Lorenzo?"

"Huh?"

"You good?"

I nod. "Yeah, I just need to get this Bruno situation sorted. It's the last thing I fucking need with Roberto just being murdered. I don't need two dead fucking leaders, but I'm

inching closer to executing that fucking brother-in-law of yours every day.”

He laughs.

“Keep me posted on your sister.”

“Luna? Oh shit, don’t worry about that. You don’t want to be kept in the loop, trust me. It’s an endless cycle that usually ends with her accusing Dad of killing Mom. Like I said, it’s fucking exhausting.”

“Good luck with that.” I force a laugh. “Speak soon.”

I hang up before he can say his farewell, cracking my knuckles in front of my body before bracing my hands at the back of my head.

I should be concerned about paying more for snow than I needed to. I already pay a premium for a quality product.

I should be preoccupied with finding ways to punish Bruno for his continued insolence.

I should be consumed with getting the feds off our asses about Roberto’s death.

But I’m none of those things.

Instead, I’m lost to a throwaway comment made by a soldier, which should be inconsequential.

*It’s the twentieth anniversary of her disappearance.*

I walk out of the kitchen, staring at her sleeping form in my living room. I take a single step toward her but pause again. Scratching my beard, I move back to my phone, picking it up and tapping it against my lips.

*I’m seventeen, not eighteen.*

That little fucking liar.

I was only nine when Rita Romano vanished. The circumstances of her disappearance were hush-hush. *No one* spoke of it. She was just gone, and the family seemed to accept it. My father and Big Joey had people looking into it, but it wasn't discussed. She was killed, and they had no leads on who was responsible. Or she'd skipped town, and again, they had no idea where to. Each endgame made them look like idiots. Unable to keep track of or avenge the wife of a high-ranking family member. Big Joey went on with life like she'd never existed. I don't know how it affected Dante and Luna. I was still grieving the death of my own mother, so the loss of an aunty seemed insignificant to me. I barely gave her a second thought and, like the rest of the family, went about my life like she was never there.

When Gabriella approached Vincent and me a week ago, I was so caught up in her story and the proof that Rita had been alive. My mind had erased the recollection of *when* she'd gone missing. Leonardo kept telling me something was off about Gabriella's story, but I pushed his worries aside, thinking I knew better. Shit, he was barely out of diapers when Rita vanished from our lives.

I laugh to myself, the sound a quiet snort of amusement surrounded by the shadows of my home.

She's brave, I'll give her that.

I open my cell, pulling up my call list.

"How's babysitting?" my brother mocks me. "Have you invited your girlfriend over to try to get to third base?"

"You know I could kill you, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, give me a sec," Leonardo mumbles. "Honey," he murmurs, his voice now far away. "It's time for

you to go home. I called you an Uber, and it's on its way. Thanks for tonight. You there?" His voice is back.

"Any of them ever tell you that you're a pig?"

He snorts. "They know what they're getting, a few orgasms and a ride home in an Uber Premier."

"Listen." I change the subject. "I need you to look into something for me. No one is to fucking know, understood? Not even Vincent."

"Come again?"

I never keep anything from Vincent. He's not only my closest adviser. He's my best friend. I trust him with my life, and he does me. Case in point, I'm the only one he holds enough confidence in to protect his sister while he can't.

"Leonardo," I warn.

"No Vincent. Got it. Fire away."

"Gabriella is lying to us."

"I fucking *knew* it," he spits, his tone more jovial than displeased.

"I was just talking to Dante. He mentioned Luna was losing her shit over the twentieth anniversary of Rita's disappearance."

"Mm," he agrees. "Big Joey was sayin' something similar."

I wait for him to work it out on his own, but silence meets me at the end of the line.

"Gabriella told us she was seventeen, Leonardo."

I wait another second before I hear the penny drop, a sharp inhale of air the only tell that realization has dawned.

“I need her birth certificate. Gabriella whatever-the-fuck-last-name she went by, born in Unalaska.”

“Why not just ask her?”

I scowl even though he can't see me. “She's been so forthcoming so far. Why would she lie?” I bite.

“Fair call. Leave it with me. I'll call you when I have it.”

“Good. Listen, another thing. Dante will be calling you any second. Bruno missed the fucking drop for product, and I'm pretty certain he's busy having his cock sucked instead of preparing for tonight's game.”

Leonardo mumbles profanities under his breath. I'm not the only one sick of Bruno's bullshit. “What do you need from me?”

“First, I need you at the game.”

“Done.”

“Second, let the motherfucker know I saved his neck once. He's now fucking with *my* business. He's a dead man the next time he steps outta line.”

“Got it.”

“And Leonardo, when you're telling him all this, make sure he bleeds. Stupid cunt doesn't need all ten fingers.”

I hang up, dropping my phone on the counter.

I take a breath, confident Leonardo will deal with Bruno.

One fire ready to be quelled, one remaining.

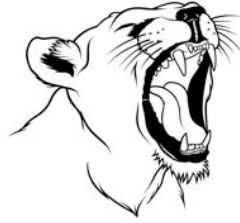
My lips spread into a smile, and I shake my head. That lying fucking lioness. Vincent's little sister might be more suited to this world than she wants to think.



A girl brainwashed to think we were the enemy. A woman who wanted more than the legacy of loneliness her mother left behind. She walked into the lion's den with her chin held high and deceit on her tongue. A confident little con artist with so much to gain and even more to lose. I should rip her throat out for her deception. I should take a piece of leather, whip it across her skin, and ensure she's forever scarred by her treachery. Branded with the knowledge that I will always be one step ahead. A reminder she'll be forced to accept every time she looks in the mirror. But as my smile grows and the thrill of the unknown buzzes under my skin, I know that violence is the last thing on my mind. For the first time in a very fucking long time, I'm excited by a woman. Or more, the taste of her defeat. I've finally met someone who will look me in the eye and swallow her fear in the face of self-preservation. I can't fucking wait to watch the panic and terror on her pretty fucking face when she realizes I know the truth and have her in checkmate.

# CHAPTER TEN

## GABRIELLA



Lorenzo has kept his distance since we arrived. I've heard him move about the house, but we've managed to avoid coming face-to-face. I keep reassuring myself that I'm relieved. My mind is at ease without the pressure of trying to coexist with a man I know little to nothing about. And the things I *do* know aren't favorable. Therein lies my next dilemma. If I give in to curiosity to *learn* more about him, what will I find? Can it all be bad? Does the boss of the New York family hold *any* redeeming qualities, or is what he wants the world to believe his true nature? A ruthless monster with little regard for human life and the morals and ethics that guide humanity.

I thought Vincent would have at least called me to check in, but it's been radio silence since he left me in the care of his boss. I don't know whether to be worried or just pissed off. I was given no context surrounding *why* Vincent and his new wife, Bianca, had to go away. Initially, I had assumed it was their honeymoon, but the more I thought about it, the more Vincent's peculiar wording played in my mind. He didn't say they were going away. He said they *had* to go away. For someone so methodical, I know his words were chosen purposely, which only fires my already prying mind.

I've tried to call his cell multiple times, but it's off. I left a few messages but stopped when I received no response or acknowledgment.

I'd thought I was isolated before. Stuck in that chasmal and barren penthouse with no one's company but my own. I *was* alone and, like always, unwanted. But my solitude has magnified without Vincent's daily check-in, without seeing his face and being able to talk to him and have him listen to me waffle on about nothing. As much as I told myself I wouldn't, I've fed off the scraps of attention my brother has been able to offer me. I've built it into the beginning sparks of familial love, and now that they've been extinguished, I feel more abandoned than ever.

My saving grace is the homey jail Lorenzo has locked me away in. Most days, I can keep myself busy. I can explore the grassy property and spend my time reading under the shade of one of the many trees in the yard. I can spend hours upon hours swimming in the pool and sleeping in the sun. It has a library filled with as many books as my heart desires. The kitchen is colossal and never without supplies. I cook dinner every night, as has become our silent agreement. Every evening I eat, leaving a plate out for Lorenzo. Every morning I come down, his plate is gone and replaced by one filled with pancakes, sometimes waffles and bacon and eggs, and a bowl of fruit and freshly brewed coffee—domesticated avoidance at its finest.

It's the nighttime that eats away at me—the hours between when the sun sets and when it rises. I lay awake, considering what I would tell my mother if I saw her now.

She told me not to live lonely, and I gave her my word. Yet here I am, as empty and reclusive as I have ever been. I'd

argue it's not my choice, but I know that would be a lie. I decided to seek out Vincent, knowing the family was a part of his identity. I could leave, but every day I make the decision to stay, believing the offer of *more* is greater than the reality of nothing.

Sliding my arms into an oversized sleep shirt, I open my bedroom door, glancing over at Lorenzo's, my shoulders relaxing at the lack of light underneath his door. My feet patter softly down the staircase.

Filling a mug of water, I pop it in the microwave, watching the ceramic cup in the dull light behind the door as it spins in circles. I stop it when the timer has one-second remaining, afraid the high-pitched beep will wake Lorenzo. Dropping a tea bag in the now-warmed water, I sit at the kitchen table.

It's midnight, and my ears hyperfocus on the wall clock in front of me. I stare at it, annoyed at how it doesn't tick as I long it to, to provide some much-needed relief from the deafening silence. Instead, it flows seamlessly across the face, time passing too quickly without the proclamation it's supposed to offer.

I wait every night for this time to sneak downstairs to sleep on the couch. I still haven't felt comfortable enough to find slumber in a bed. Nothing and nowhere feels like home. The breeze on my face and the ability to see the front door helps me believe I'm mere steps away from freedom if I so desire it.

Blowing on the heated water of my tea, I bring the cup to my lips, taking a small sip only to grimace at the way it burns my tongue.

Leaving the tea to cool, I unlock my cell phone. Opening the photo app, I let myself get lost in photos of Mom and me. It hurts, but in the same way, it brings me peace, like a movie

that makes you cry happy tears. Overwhelmed by love but saddened by the realization that it's no longer real.

I believed her when she told me that the crucial parts of her would remain with me always. That her love would follow me. I just wish I knew it would be with condition. I feel her in my heart, but only when searching for her. I thought her love and presence would be more obvious. Like a guardian angel I felt beside me, guiding and providing a shield of love, even in death. But she and her love are hidden away in the shadows unless I look.

Turning the volume down on my phone, I move to the videos folder. Scrolling to the earliest files, I pull the first one up, planning to watch each one chronologically to immerse myself in her final months.

Toward the end, when I knew I would inevitably lose her, I began recording as often as possible. Most of the time, she was unaware. I'd steal away moments of her watching TV and giving me a play-by-play even though I was sitting beside her and watching the same show. I'd pocket long minutes of her reading or making up words to fit in *The New York Times* crossword just to piss off the next person who picked up the paper.

I wanted it all, every mundane minute that would be wiped from my future.

“Gabriella.”

I startle, but not enough to alert him.

I dab my tears with the open palm of my hand, keeping my face averted. Locking my phone, I place it facedown on the table, deleting my mother from the conversation.

“I hate the way you say my name,” I snap, finally turning to search for Lorenzo in the dark.

He rests casually against the doorjamb of the kitchen, dressed only in a loose pair of sweatpants. The gray material hangs dangerously low on his hips. On their own accord, my eyes trail the prominent dips of his hip bones and the dark trail of hair that leads into the freely tied material.

Admiring the physical allure of a man like Lorenzo Caruso is challenging to hide. Especially for a nineteen-year-old virgin who has *never* been kissed and has limited experience with the opposite sex. But in the minimal interactions Lorenzo and I have shared, my brain and the particular regions of my body I’ve neglected to *service*—save for general hygiene—thoroughly enjoy the way he looks. Which is an inconvenience when I’m supposed to be seventeen, and my libido should *not* be lusting after a man who is edging close to thirty. That and the very concrete reality that I despise his very existence.

I lift my gaze awkwardly, staring at his right ear instead. A white shirt has been thrown over his shoulder, and I wish he’d put it on because the expanse of his chest is too much of a temptation to admire in my emotional state.

His concern doesn’t leak away the way I wanted it to at my harsh tone. I had hoped if I’d defaulted to acting like a bitch, his temper would flare. Then I’d be saved the warmth and compassion cutting across his face, softening the hard edge of his demeanor. It’s worse than pity. It lulls me into the stupid notion that he cares. That I’m more than just a point of business, a responsibility he neither wanted nor bargained for.

He also doesn’t respond, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I’m hanging on a knife’s edge of hysteria and am ready to crack wide open. I’m afraid of what I’ll reveal if I do. I don’t, in fact,

hate the way he says my name. The familiarity in the way it sounds on his lips warms something profound inside me. Something I don't ever want to explore because my vulnerability has been locked away, and I never want it to surface.

“Why are you crying?”

New tears have appeared, and I swipe at them again, angered by the way they refuse to leave me.

“Just leave me alone, Lorenzo.”

He moves into the kitchen, and my chest tightens in panic.

“Why are you crying?” he asks again.

“I don't know, Lorenzo. You tell me. Take a look at my life.” I lift my hands, gesturing around the room. “What could I possibly be upset about?”

He steps close enough to see me in the dark, and I refuse to cower under his curiosity. Instead, I stare at him, and he stares back. My eyes ache with the need to blink, but I push past the pain, my vision blurring with the moisture that builds in my sockets.

His gaze moves first, settling on my turned-over cell phone, and I blink long and hard.

He clears his throat, and his voice lowers. “After my mother died,” he divulges, “I couldn't bring myself to look at photos of her. I was afraid of looking into her eyes. She used to have this room in the house, like a sunroom, I guess.” He shrugs, now lost to his memories and no longer present in space. “She used to sit there, drink coffee and do whatever she felt like. She'd read, do a jigsaw puzzle... she'd knit sometimes. Anyway, after she died, my father kept that room



closed. But I would go in there because it still smelled like her. I could feel her there if I sat in the sun and closed my eyes.”

He shakes his head, bringing himself back to the moment.

My eyes are wet. I was so engrossed in what he was saying I hadn't realized I started to cry again, my heart aching at the longing in his voice when he spoke of his mother.

“I didn't realize you'd lost your mother and father.” I sniff.

His gaze settles on me again, and I expect him to talk more about her, but he doesn't. “I'm the only one here, Gabriella.” He ignores my earlier snipe at using my name, gesturing around the darkened kitchen. “You can talk to me about her.”

“Why?” I argue. “So you can tell me she was a traitor?”

He rejects the notion with a soft shake of his head. “Rita's choice to flee had no impact on my life. I hold no judgment.”

I hate that his words are sincere. I hate that I believe him. I hate that I want to talk to him about her.

“I never got to bury her. Do you know that?”

His head moves from side to side.

I exhale shakily. “I don't even know where she's laid to rest. *Rest*,” I cough out the word. “If you can call it that.”

“You don't believe she's at peace?”

My jaw rested in my palm, my eyes narrow but not in animosity. “How could she be?” I question. “She spent nearly twenty years running from someone with the power and drive to kill her. Almost half of her life was spent looking over her shoulder, wondering if that day was the day that it would all come undone. She was never at peace. Even in my favorite memories of her, regret and worry sat comfortably by her side.

How lonely must she have been? No one to share that burden with. Now even in death, she's alone. In a grave that likely doesn't even hold her real name. I can't help but think she'll be watching over her shoulder in the afterlife too." My voice cracks and I cover my face with my hands.

Lorenzo's hand touches my shoulder, and I shrug it off. "Don't do that. Don't comfort me."

I stand, and he steps back.

I feel stripped bare, open, and exposed. The vulnerability I had so artfully buried up until now pushes its way to the surface. My tight chest tingles with anticipation. I attempt to swallow, the sound heavy in the silence between us. I grab at my elbows, pulling my arms around myself, hating the way the room has decided to shrink around us. I will myself to do the same, to fade into nothing and disappear.

I sidestep the imposing frame of his body, ready to walk away and put as much distance between us as I can. I showed him my heart, and now he knows my deepest shame. But I've only made it one step when the heat of his palm curls around my forearm.

"*Enzo*," I plead, the shake in my voice expanding.

He pulls me back, and I don't have it in me to fight him.

His palm releases my arm, my body aligned with his, only a breath separating us.

Lifting his thumb, he drags it down my cheek, alongside my tear, not wiping it away, but watching it with reverence. "So pretty when you cry," he murmurs, lost in his thoughts. "It makes me want to make you do it always."

I can't find my voice, so I whisper, "You want to hurt me and make me cry?"

His eyes close on a breath wrapped around a slight cough of laughter. “There are other ways to make women cry, my lioness.” His lips meet my forehead, and while my mind screams at me to push him away, my body melts into him, craving an intimacy I’ve never felt before.

The warmth of his lips leaves my forehead, and I look up at him, shocked by his tenderness.

Moments ago, I could have sworn the room was closing in on me. *On us*. The walls were pushing in closer, and I couldn’t find a full breath. Now the walls have fallen away. The house doesn’t exist. We’re standing in the middle of nothing. If I were to look left or right, blank space would be the only thing my eyes would see. But I don’t look. I can’t bring myself to break the trance I’m caught up in. I still can’t pull a full breath, but it’s no longer caused by a tightness in my chest. Instead, I’m afraid to move. I’m unwilling to break the moment. I don’t have shackles or chains keeping me in place here. This expanse of time and space is *free*. And without those bonds, I feel... *safe?*

Lorenzo moves first, but not in the way I expected him to. I anticipated his rejection, for him to pull back and push me away with a threat or uninspiring snipe that I move on from my mother’s death for everyone’s sake. I don’t expect him to move closer or for his thumb to collect the remnants of my tears and wipe them along my bottom lip. I don’t expect his breathing to change, his eyes to twist with lust, or his mouth to descend on mine. The soft touch of his lips caresses my bottom lip, a tender kiss that lasts long-drawn-out seconds that, with anyone else, would feel forced, but with Lorenzo, it feels natural.

He pulls back, and I have to stop myself from chasing his lips. He takes a step back, his nostrils flaring with anguish and uncertainty. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t—”

“Don’t worry about it.” I swallow down my shame and embarrassment. I walk around him before it creeps to the surface, afraid of further humiliation. “Good night.”

I’ve almost made it out of the kitchen when he speaks again. “Why do you sleep on the couch?”

I glance over my shoulder, but his back remains aimed at me.

“I—”

“I’d prefer you didn’t lie,” he tells me. “If you aren’t going to tell me the truth, I’d prefer you choose your silence.”

I swallow. I’ve bared so much in a simple interaction. He knows more about me than any other person on the planet, and he might very well be the most dangerous to trust with the deepest parts of my soul, but I can’t stop myself from telling him the truth when I open my mouth to lie. “I don’t want to feel trapped.”

He turns slowly.

“After Mom died and I had to stay in seedy motels, I couldn’t sleep, afraid someone would come in. I had no way to escape. My mother always drilled it into me that people were looking for her, for us. To hurt us. Vincent’s apartment was the same as the motels, the room he offered me had one entry and exit point. I refuse to be a willing prisoner or stupid enough to lock myself in a room just for another person to throw away the key.”

“And here?”

I massage the front of my neck. “I can feel the breeze from the windows in the living room.”

“Your room upstairs has windows.”

“It has only one door. One exit point. I can see the front door from the couch. A few steps in one direction, and I can taste the freedom of outside. I can reassure myself that I’m not a captive. If danger finds me, I have a chance to run.”

His hands find their way into his pockets. “If you don’t want to be here, Gabriella, you don’t have to be. No one is forcing you to stay.”

I drop my gaze to my feet. “*I am.*”

“You are?” He’s no longer just curious, his tone forceful enough to give away his *need* to know.

“*I’m* forcing myself to stay. I’ve considered running. I’ve thought about walking out that front door and never once looking back,” I tell him honestly. “But I know I’d regret it. I know I’d spend my life in a perpetual state of what-ifs. *What if* I gave it a chance and Vincent learned to love me? *What if* I bide my time as my brother has requested and I become a solid fixture in this family? *What if* I didn’t have to start from scratch and lie about *who* I am because I found my place in a family that might accept me, even though I come from a place that might hurt them a little bit too?” My voice cracks, but I don’t shy away from the pain. “I want a place in this world, Lorenzo. One that I deserve. One that finally lets me live freely with who I am.”

“*Gabriella.*”

It’s so easy to want to lose yourself in the sentiment of another’s voice. The care and affection gripping your heart and working to convince you to believe their sincerity. Maybe they

even believe it. Maybe they *feel* it. But pity and compassion are two starkly different emotions, and mistaking one for the other could have dire consequences.

“My mother kept me hidden to keep me safe, but in doing so, she also cut me off from my family. I have siblings and cousins. I had a father and... *and* maybe I won't want them in my life, but *I* want that choice to be mine. Not anyone else's.”

He remains still, his face impassive.

“My mother loved me plenty, so not having a big extended family was enough when she was alive. But she's gone now, and I want to know whether I belong here. So it may seem pathetic to you or stupid or whatever adjective you want to come up with, but it's important to me. So I've forced myself to stay, against my better judgment, to work out if I belong. I don't want to be lonely anymore.”

He opens his mouth to speak, but I shake my head before his words can touch the air between us.

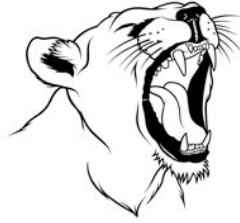
“Please don't act as if you care or understand.”

“I wasn't going to.”

I nod. “Good.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## GABRIELLA



A high-pitched whirring sound pierces my eardrums. I roll over on the couch, pulling a cushion over my head and groaning in frustration. Yanking my comforter up, I completely cover myself, hoping it drowns out the incessant noise intent on waking me up.

Since Lorenzo outed me about sleeping on the couch, my need for an alarm to ensure I could sneak back to my room before sunrise was unnecessary. I'd been used to waking up at dawn, having trained my body to only give in to fatigue when I permitted it. Permission it no longer needs because I no longer have anything to hide when it comes to my fears.

I can't remember the last time I slept through the night and into the morning. I know my mother was still alive. Letting go of the rules I'd set to protect my very intimate fears was less frightening than I could have expected. My rules were nothing but the weight of personal expectation that seems fascicle in the unforgiving light of honesty. My sleep wasn't haunted or broken. It claimed me quickly and kept me rested. I'm lighter. The shackles of my deception are breaking away. As much as that scares me, I can't remember feeling this liberated and understanding of who I am.



The noise stops, and I let out a long relieved breath *just* as it starts again.

I throw the comforter off my body and push the cushion off my face. “What *the* fuck?”

I listen carefully. Whatever the fuck it is, it’s outside, but it sounds high up. I listen harder but give up immediately. Twisting out of my blanket, I climb off the couch. Jogging up the stairs, the sound gets louder, and I pause outside my bedroom, pushing the door hesitantly to open it.

I squint at the constant sound and move toward the window tentatively, face creased with curiosity.

Lorenzo stands on a ladder outside my window. Drill in hand, his brow furrowed in concentration.

I tap the window, and he glances up.

“Hi,” I say.

He lifts a hand in greeting and then goes back to his task. I look at the window latch, my hand reaching out to unlock it, but I stop. I can’t lift the window open without hitting him, so I leave it.

I move to speak, to ask him what he’s doing, but he begins drilling again, ignoring me.

I walk quickly from the room, running down the stairs and out the front door. The cold morning air hits my bare legs, and I regret not throwing on a pair of sweats before coming outside.

I wander around the side of the house, pausing when I reach the ladder. I watch him for a moment. A thick belt has been clipped around his waist and filled with different tools. His sunglasses have been tucked into the side of his jeans, and

his white shirt offered the same treatment. The muscles in his back expand and contract as he works, and I take a second to appreciate the view before speaking.

“What are you doing?” I yell.

Lorenzo glances down at me, slides his drill into his heavy belt, and begins his descent to where I’m standing. “Sorry I didn’t make breakfast this morning.” He wipes at his brow, sweat transferring onto his hand before he rubs it along his dirtied jeans. “I had to duck out and grab some supplies.” He gestures to the ladder.

I look at the ladder rungs all the way up to my window. “I see that. Though I’m a little confused.”

His eyes settle on mine, the blue shade changing color in the light of the sun. I focus harder, trying to work out what the heaviness in his stare communicates. But I come up empty when he drops his face, a hand lifting to massage the back of his neck in uneasiness. He sighs. “You’re not a captive, Gabbi,” he says quietly. “Nor will you ever be one. You’re free to run if that’s what you need.”

“I—” No other words form, so I close my mouth.

“You now have two exit points in that room.” He clears his throat. “The window and the door. I’ve removed the screen from your window and bolted this ladder into place.” He grabs the cool metal, giving it a shake. “It’s not going anywhere.”

“I—” I try again.

“You’re Vincent’s sister,” he tells me. “You shouldn’t be forced to sleep on a couch because you’re afraid. I want you to be comfortable here, Gabbi. *Vincent* wants you to be comfortable here,” he corrects.

“I—thank you.”

He only nods in response. “I just have one more screw to secure into place.”

He moves to step onto the ladder again, pausing two steps up. “For the record, family might not be what it’s always cracked up to be, but this one *is* yours if you decide to stay.”

He continues up the rungs, pausing once more. “What I’m trying to say is that you belong. But I think you should know that being surrounded by people, family or not, doesn’t cure loneliness. You can be standing in a room full of people, Gabbi. People who claim to love you and seek out your company, but it doesn’t mean you’ll feel complete. On the contrary, you can feel more isolated than ever because it’s at moments like that you realize how fucking alone you are.”

My eyes widen.

Running a hand through his hair, he dips his chin once. “I’ll finish up here.”

He moves up the ladder without another word, and I watch him, my heart weighing more than it did when I first breached the threshold of the house only minutes prior. I massage my chest, hating the way my heart pinches with spasms of sadness. I drop my eyes to the damp grass, focusing on the way it clings to my feet. I lift one foot, brushing it across the other in an attempt to remove the grass, but it only adds more. I shiver, my arms prickling against the cold. Suddenly, my nose aches with the fresh air, and my chin wobbles unexpectedly. Clenching my teeth, I grind them back and forth.

“Go inside, lioness. It’s cold.”

I nod, unable to look up. I step back from his voice, turning to run back into the house. I race up the stairs, not

caring about the mess of wet footprints and grass residue I leave over the floors. I don't know what's wrong with me. My heart is confused. It's ready to give out but won't stop racing in my chest. It hurts in a way I've yet to experience because the pain that mimics mine *isn't* my own, and I don't know how to rationalize that in my mind. I'm not stupid or selfish enough to believe no one else in this world has felt loneliness like I have. I just never imagined it would be someone as formidable as Lorenzo Caruso.

I'm confused. My thoughts are twisted and uncertain.

Living with my own vulnerabilities is something I accepted a long time ago. However, bearing witness to another's is a lesson in heartache I'm not ready to learn.

Breaking the threshold of my room in Lorenzo's home, my feet stop abruptly. He looks up quickly from his position at the window, the banging of my door against the wall enough to shock him. I look away before our gaze connects, rushing into the bathroom and slamming the door shut. I fix the lock into place, covering my face with my hands.

*On the contrary, you can feel more isolated than ever because it's at moments like that you realize how fucking alone you are.*

*How. Fucking. Alone. You. Are.*

Playing house with Lorenzo is fucking with my thoughts. I woke this morning feeling unfettered. I'd let go of some truths and was a step closer to showing the world who I was. All it took was an unexpected show of kindness from a man I wouldn't expect to have the capacity to unravel me completely.

*You're not a captive, Gabbi.*

Gabbi. Not Gabriella. Not lioness. *Gabbi*.

I sit in the shower for nearly an hour. I let the rain of water mingle with my tears and camouflage my misery and uncertainty. Eyes closed, I push my head against the shower wall, inhaling deeply through my nose and exhaling forcibly through my lips. I work through clenching every muscle in my body, starting at my toes, holding it tensely before releasing it slowly and moving on to the next. I focus on the sounds around me—the drain’s gurgle, the water’s patter against the tiles, and the measured beats of my breathing. By the time I shut the water off, my skin pruned, I feel more controlled.

I dry myself quickly, peeking my head out of the bathroom door to make sure Lorenzo isn’t still poised at my window. He’s not, and ducking from the room, I dress hastily. I pull on a pair of jeans and engulf my upper body in a hoodie big enough to swallow my frame.

I move around the house quietly, but I can’t find Lorenzo anywhere. I check the garage, but his car remains, so I trudge back to the house. Standing at the front door, I wait. A faint crack slides through the air, and I lift my ear in its direction. It happens again and again, a minute between each blow. Intrigued, I grab my boots and shove my feet inside, jogging down the front walkway without tying them. I move toward the sound, following a path around the side of the house and into the brush.

When I step into a thick line of trees, my feet come to a jolting halt as the source of the sounds becomes visible. Despite the cooler weather, Lorenzo, still dressed only in his jeans, holds an axe over his head, slamming it down into a poor helpless log that doesn’t stand a chance.

I remain frozen. The vision before me speaks to the primal heart of my *basic* needs. My uterus contracts, my ovaries explode, and I'm thankful no one else is around because I'm confident I just whimpered aloud. This man, corded with muscle, working with his hands, has turned my brain to mush. My general disdain for everything to do with the older Caruso brother has been thrown to the wayside because I'm ready to throw myself at his feet and beg him to take me.

Here stands a mob boss. A formidable leader with an open disregard for human life. A man built to rule, a shadowed community assembled in his name, willing to lay down their life to please him. Yet here, before me, he performs the role of domesticated, suburban neighbor. As much as he would despise the title. But he fits. Acclimatized to the homey just as much as the lawless.

The world doesn't stand a fucking chance.

He's dirty and sweaty, and the animalistic brute force in his body as he endeavors to split solid wood fixtures with a single blow has me mesmerized.

He's focused, mind and body completely immersed in the task. I know, without doubt, that this is how he attacks any undertaking, work or otherwise. His concentration is impenetrable. I could stand here for hours, watching, and he wouldn't notice my presence.

I move closer. "That's a lot of wood."

He barely looks up, lifting a sizable log to place it on an even patch of ground and collecting his axe. "It was cold last night." His arms lift, holding the weapon over his shoulder before he slams it down with a violent swing. The wood splits in half without resistance, a rough grunt puffing from his lips with the effort. The two even halves drop away. He picks up

one of the split pieces, standing it up before repeating the process.

His naked skin shines with a heavy sheen of sweat. Dirt sticks to the divots of muscle, and wood chips cling to the dusting of hair that travels from his navel into the low-lying dip of his jeans. The sunglasses and shirt that were haphazardly tucked into the waist of his jeans earlier today have been discarded, thrown to the side and forgotten.

The strength in his arms pulsates with how hard his muscles work, and I don't know where to look.

At the tension in his neck when he wields the axe, the sheer determination to decimate a piece of wood so thoroughly it only resembles what it used to be.

At the defined lines of his abdominal muscles. The thick divots carved into his stomach that pulse with every slight movement he makes.

At the pronounced muscles in his biceps or the corded veins in his forearms.

Or the axe. The weapon is sharp enough to destroy whatever demons seem to be playing inside his mind.

“Can I have a turn?”

He kicks a split log away, head still downturned, eyes lifting to bring me into focus. “A turn?”

I point. “The axe. Can I slam it into the wood?”

“It's a splitting maul, and *you* want to split wood?”

I shrug. “It looks like an axe, and why not? It looks fun.”

Leaning the splitting maul against a pile of uncut logs, he moves toward his shirt. But he doesn't put it on. He wipes the

white material over his face, cleaning the sweat and dust from his skin. He moves it down the line of his neck, cleaning himself and watching me the whole time.

I shift on my feet.

“Fun?”

“Therapeutic,” I correct.

That word seems to resonate with him more, and he turns away. “Sure.”

I follow him, standing beside him.

“What you need to do—”

“Do I really need a lesson?” I cut him off. “Surely, if I slam the end of this”—I pick up the splitting maul—“into the log, it will split.”

“Go ahead.” He steps to the side, waiting patiently, unperturbed by the cold.

“Do I need something to hold the wood in place?” I second-guess myself.

“Sure, let me just hold it for you.”

I wait for a beat, but he doesn’t move. “That was a joke,” I surmise.

He smirks. “I’m rather fond of my hands.”

I roll my eyes but laugh anyway. Lifting the axe off the ground, I grunt in discomfort. “It’s heavier than I imagined.”

“Splitting axes are more lightweight, but I find the maul more efficient in what I need.”

I scuff my feet into the dirt, ensuring my stance is firm. Lifting the maul over my shoulder, I tighten my grip, eyes



focused on the log in front of me.

“Good girl,” Lorenzo murmurs.

I swing the maul downward. It lodges in the wood, cracking the log but not splitting it.

“Well done,” Lorenzo praises. “Do it again.”

I do it again. Still, it doesn’t split. I growl.

“Last time, lioness.”

I do as he says, and the log splits completely this time, dropping away in two halves.

“I did it,” I yell.

Lorenzo smiles at me, moving closer. He lifts a thick log effortlessly and places it in front of me. Coming to stand behind me, he warms my deepest regions with the heat of his body. I’m tempted to lean back, craving the warmth of his presence more significantly. I refrain, closing my eyes to inhale softly.

“See the cracks in the wood?” The rumble of his voice touches my ear, and I’m thankful for the sweater I’m wearing to hide the goose bumps that have decided to cover my skin.

Opening my eyes, I lean over the flat surface of the cut log. “Yes.” My voice cracks, and I hear the smile in Lorenzo’s tone when he speaks again.

“While starting off, try to hit it along that grain. It’ll split easier.”

I nod, and he steps away again. Finding my stance, I lift the maul, exhaling softly before throwing the edge into the wood. This time the log splits with only two hits.

We repeat this process once or twice more. Lorenzo sets a log in front of me, I hit it twice, and it splits. He praises me, his enthusiasm never dimming.

He kicks the split wood into a pile and picks up another thick log.

“I’m done,” I say. “My arms are like jelly.”

He takes the maul and lays it against the uncut logs. Staring at me for a moment, he moves closer. “You’ve got...” His hand reaches into my hair, pulling along a strand that frames my face. Holding up a small chip of wood, he flicks it away. “Better,” he murmurs.

Time stands still when we catch ourselves in moments like these. Close enough to touch, our eyes caught in a conversation neither of us understands. It’s difficult to swallow and almost impossible to breathe. I’m acutely aware of the way my chest expands and deflates. I’m certain he notices too. My eyes ache with the need to blink, but my brain denies them, afraid to break the moment. My lips dry out, and my mouth sits open *just* enough to taste the uncertainty on Lorenzo’s breath.

I deduce that we’ll remain here forever, trapped in a heated stare that feels like an unbreakable vow. Neither of us wants to move, afraid to inch closer yet petrified to break apart.

The squawking of a crow frees us from the quicksand we seem eager to drown in, and I shake my head as Lorenzo takes a sizable step backward.

“Can I help you carry some of these in?” I clear my throat.

He shakes his head. “You can help me fill these three bags, and I’ll drag them up to the house.”

Grabbing the heavy-duty bag Lorenzo passes me, I lift chunks of split wood, throwing them into the bag. I move around quietly. “Where is Vincent?”

Lorenzo glances at me briefly but looks away again almost immediately. “He told you. Away.”

I stop moving altogether, holding the half-full bag loosely in my grasp. “What does that mean? Look, I’m not an idiot, Lorenzo. I understand you can’t tell me certain things. But is he safe?”

“Yes, he’s safe,” he answers without further argument. “He won’t be gone much longer. His brother died recently, and the feds were stupid enough to think his wife, Bianca, had a hand in it. He’s doing what he can to protect her while the feds walk around with their dicks in their hands, searching for clues they’re never going to find.”

I don’t know what to make of what he’s said, so I don’t try. Instead, I resume collecting wood and placing it into the bag that’s now too heavy to drag behind me.

“I got it.” His voice hits me just before his hand brushes against mine.

“Oh.” I startle. My hand remains pressed against his for a beat before I can collect myself, pulling it away sharply. “Thanks.”

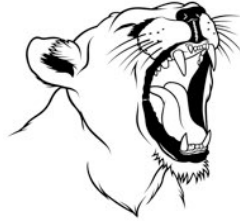
“Come, we’ll get a fire started. The sun’ll be going down in a few hours.” He’s twisted the fabric of each bag in his hands. He begins walking, the muscles in his shoulders, arms, and back tense with the small effort it takes for him to drag the seventy-pound bags up the small hill back to the house.

Grabbing his discarded shirt and sunglasses, I chase after him, throwing his shirt over my shoulder and tucking his

glasses into the neck of my sweater. His scent engulfs me, his shirt brushing my neck. It's aromatic with a mixture of sweat and cologne, and it takes everything within me not to bring it to my nose and inhale.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## LORENZO



*I* leave Gabriella in the main living area, mesmerized by the dancing flames of the fireplace. She hasn't moved in over an hour, her face flushed with heat, cheeks reddened, and eyes unblinking against the torridity.

She watched me light and stoke the fire quietly, her gaze drifting over me contemplatively, smiling softly whenever I caught her eye.

It took everything within me not to ask her what she was thinking. But breaking the moment with words felt wrong. The quiet comfort of one another's company was serene, and I longed to keep the tranquility for as long as possible.

Soon enough, her gaze had settled solely on the fire, and I could guess the rest of the world had dropped away. She was hypnotized by the inferno and content in her daze.

Moving up the stairs, I take two at a time, long strides to move me to my destination sooner. In my bedroom, I drop my ass to the edge of the bed, sighing loudly. The calluses on my hands scratch over my skin as I rub a palm over my face.

I haven't let myself stop today. My mind needed a distraction. Less than seven days and Gabriella is fucking with my head. This is why people are inconvenient. This is the

reason I prefer my solitude. People test my nonexistent patience and make me violent. But for some fucked-up reason, I don't abhor Gabriella's company.

After her bombshell last night, I couldn't fucking sleep. Her fear of remand, both figuratively and literally speaking, is so potent she's forced herself into an inescapable prison in her mind. I lay in bed last night, tossing and turning, unable to find unconsciousness, knowing she was sleeping on the couch. I wanted nothing more than to free her from the captivity of her own fucking psyche.

Which is a big fucking problem. I don't *help* people. I don't have compassion or kindness inside me. Traits like that only serve to make me weak and vulnerable. They'll eat away at the throne I've worked the last two years to build, leaving me with nothing but my dick in my hand and the humiliation of being *benevolent* in an underworld of merciless men and women. I hold the fucking crown for cruelty, and wanting to ease some orphan girl's suffering goes against everything I fucking know about myself.

My personal conjecture aside, the sun had barely risen, and I was up, looking for a solution to Gabriella's nightmares.

I woke Diego—the only family member who can work a fucking computer—demanding he text me through the home address of the local hardware store owner. Minutes later, I was banging on his door, waking his family, and petting his dog while shoving a wad of cash in his face to open the store early to get what I needed.

Gabriella was still curled into the sofa, snoring softly when I offered the only solution I could come up with to make her feel comfortable in her room.

*Her room.*

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I utter.

It was apparent she was overwhelmed by the gesture. Her face was an open book I wasn't ready to pore over. I was afraid of what I would do. Her vulnerability does something to me. Something I can't even begin to fucking decipher. Tears in her eyes, her face soft with appreciation, and her mouth agape with shock, I wanted to do everything I could to recreate that reaction.

I wanted to claim every fucking crevice of the earth, wrap it up in a big ass fucking bow and carry it to her. *On my bare fucking shoulders*. I wanted her to have everything as long as I could be the hopeless asshole who gifted it to her.

What a fucking sap. I don't even recognize myself.

I locked myself in the gym for hours, deadlifting until my body felt ready to collapse. I slung battle ropes until I couldn't breathe. I fucking *meditated*, following regimented breathing rhythms to clear my head, but nothing would fucking work.

My hands itched to cause pain. I needed to remind myself *who* I was. I wanted to speed into the city and maim the first asshole who pissed me off. I wanted to feel the distressed touch of leather in my hands. I wanted to humiliate a fucker by forcing him to remove his belt and kneel before me, begging for mercy. I yearned for the whip of leather cutting through the still air as I slung it with such force across a man's face, forever removing his ability to see. I wanted the spray of blood to explode across my hands and clothes, a crimson reminder of how easily I could take control. But I couldn't do any of that without leaving Gabriella, so I chose the only form of violence available to me.

Splitting wood.



I fucking threw that splitting maul into logs repeatedly even though my arms felt like gelatin. I grunted out my frustrations, wishing the wood would bleed, severing large stumps in the hopes of emptying my mind.

And then she was there.

*Watching* me.

Asking for a fucking turn.

Because she thought it would be fun.

Because she thought it would be therapeutic.

It was supposed to be therapeutic.

*For me.*

Instead, splitting wood is now forever ruined by the ebony-haired beauty who has seemingly hijacked my brain.

Her brow furrowed, and her tits bounced with every full-efforted swing. I could have thrown her to the ground and shoved my cock into her right there in the dirt.

I shake my head, growling in frustration. I dig into the pockets of my jeans, yanking my cell phone from the rigid denim.

I slide through messages, ignoring most, knowing I'll curse myself in a few hours when I can no longer avoid my men and their needs. I'll be up all night putting out fires from my home office and barking orders over a telephone line.

I tap Leonardo's name, bringing up his recent message.

LEONARDO

Year of birth 2002. Sneaky little bitch will be 20 before the year is out.

I smile, more relieved at the confirmation than I care to admit.

LORENZO

Bring me the birth certificate.

I stand, ready to throw my phone onto my bed and shower, when another text comes.

LEONARDO

I'll send you a picture. I'm busy.

I growl in irritation.

LORENZO

Don't. You. Fucking. Dare. No digital evidence. Send this evening's pussy home in an Uber and bring me the copy you've secured. In person.

LEONARDO

Fuck, Enzo.

LORENZO

Don't make me kill you.

LEONARDO

You don't have big enough balls.

I don't respond. As valuable as he is, my younger brother is a fucking pain in my ass sometimes. His need to fuck his way through Manhattan interferes with my business too fucking much.

I strip, throwing my filthy jeans in the clothes hamper overflowing with dirty laundry. With Gabriella here, I've sent my housekeeper away to my detriment. I consider asking the little liar to help me out for a split second, smiling to myself at the thought. I could imagine the tantrum clearly in my mind. Maybe she'd even try to kill me. The thought stirs something deep inside my stomach, and my cock thickens with excitement.

*"Fuck,"* I curse myself.

Vincent's sister has me so wound up I'm hard thinking about her lunging at me with a knife. Cum beading at my tip, fantasizing about her slicing into my skin in fury. It jerks at the image playing in my head like my own personal porno. Restraining her fighting limbs, turned on and angry, her body begging for my dick, but her words denying her darkest desires as she lashes me with insults she doesn't mean.

I turn on the cold water of the shower full blast, standing under the spray on a discomforted shout. Even the icy water does nothing to kill the hard-on bouncing between my legs.

I know I should ignore it. It's the ethical fucking thing to do. But as I squeeze my dick, groaning at the relief the pressure brings, I consider that I've never believed myself a virtuous man—unless those virtues are cloaked in shadows of gray and venture into the depraved and indecent.

Sliding my hand to my tip, I let my head fall back onto my shoulders, a long, illicit growl tickling at the very back of my throat, begging for release into the open. I give in to the craving, the sound echoing off the shower walls and wrapping itself around me as I stroke my cock.

I've immortalized the taste of Gabriella's tears on my lips, and I play the moment I was stupid enough to give in to

temptation repeatedly. Knowing if time was reversed, the only thing I'd change would be to slide my tongue inside her mouth and explore her misery more significantly.

My hand moves faster, jerking up and down in rough thrusts as I recall the teasing taste I was brave enough to steal. The heat of her skin under my mouth, the salty evidence of grief burning my lips.

“Fuck,” I grunt.

I'm sweating, even standing under the frigid rain of water. Every time my hand brushes over my tip, I groan, my crown hypersensitive to my pleasure. My dick spasms in my hand, and my legs start to shake. Cock pulsating, I know it's only a matter of time before I explode, and I'm not ready for it to end. I breathe deeply through my nose, staving off my imminent climax, wanting more time with my fantasies of Gabriella and my hand on my cock. I could live here at this moment, on the precipice of orgasm, my mind free to explore all my depraved fantasies. But my body has other plans. I'm breathing so heavily I'm fucking panting. I slam my free hand against the shower wall to brace myself.

An initial spurt of cum shoots from my dick, and I shout out, wanting to squeeze my shaft but unable to stop my hand from stroking it. Ribbons of cum follow the initial surge, and I clench my teeth to prevent my snarl of satisfaction from shattering the shower glass.

I'm dazed, and for the briefest snippet of time, my mind empties, and fuck, it feels good.

*Almost* as good as Gabriella's name on my lips when I came.

Cleaning myself up, I wash, scrubbing the sweat and grime from my skin. My skin is leather against the punishing cold of the water, no longer sensitive and altogether numb.

My mind is clearer, and my body is more relaxed than it has been in days. I can't be sure whether it's thanks to the day's physical labor or how I jerked my dick and came over images of a woman almost ten years younger than me. Honestly, I don't fucking care either way.

Wrapping a towel around my waist, I move back into my bedroom, pausing when my feet meet the carpet. The perfume of her body wash lingers in my personal space, but the glass of wine traps my attention. It's on my bedside table, four steps from the bathroom door.

Four. Measly. Steps.

She was in here.

While I was jacking off.

*She was in here.*

While I was jacking off, *thinking about her.*

Grabbing hold of my face, I open my mouth, using my hand to click my jaw one way and then the other. I eat up the small distance between myself and the wineglass. Picking it up, I lift it to my nose, inhaling deeply as I turn around. The warm spices and sugary notes of black cherries and plum filter through my nostrils. Sipping, the rich-bodied flavor of the Cabernet clings to my taste buds as I stand where she did. I savor the taste, staring into the open bathroom. The shower isn't visible from this standpoint, so she likely didn't *see* what I was doing, but she would have fucking heard it.

Opening my throat, I tip the entire glass of wine into my mouth, swallowing it all in one fell swoop. "*Fuck.*"

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## LORENZO



“*W* here’s my brother?”

My feet are slow on the stairs. I wait outside the kitchen entrance, listening to their exchange.

Gabriella’s silence lasts long enough that I think she won’t answer. “He taught me how to use a splitting maul earlier today. I killed him with it and buried him in the yard.”

I smile, and Leonardo laughs.

“I plan on living in his big beautiful house while the rest of the family searches for the boss who has mysteriously gone missing.”

“Except you just told me, running your mouth in a fatal faux pas.” My brother is enjoying himself, the mirth in his tone almost breaking into a humored chuckle.

“Oh, you wouldn’t destroy your brother’s reputation like that.” She argues her logic. “Imagine what that would do to the family’s image. The *feared* Lorenzo Caruso taken out by a *girl*,” Gabriella whispers.

My name sounds like fucking sin on her tongue, and I squeeze the stem of the empty wineglass clasped in my hand. She wants to hate me. I know that much. But, like me, the more time we spend together, the blurrier that line between

hate and lust grows. She recited my name with awe in her tone that she'd never admit. The lure of my power sucked her in and aroused her curiosity. For a woman forced into docility for almost twenty years, the taste of sovereignty is like honey to a fucking bee.

“No one else would need to know,” Leonardo combats. “Only me. I thoroughly enjoy introducing liars to the art I can create with my knife. Especially pretty ones like you.”

“Ew.” The jovial lilt of Gabriella's teasing ceases instantaneously. “You're revolting. What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Unraveling secrets,” Leonardo whispers, and I don't trust my younger brother enough not to intervene.

“Leonardo,” I chide, moving from my hiding place on the stairs to the kitchen.

Gabriella stands to full height as I enter, but her eyes remain on the thick yellow envelope that Leonardo spins in circles atop the counter, taunting her.

“We're still on that, huh?” She feigns confidence she doesn't feel. Her voice is a little too high, her eyes too watchful. “You probably didn't pass science in school, but DNA doesn't lie.”

“Whatever you say, *piccolo bugiardo*.” *Little liar*. Leonardo turns to me, handing me the envelope. “I come bearing gifts.” He dips his chin for effect. “Enclosed in the envelope is the proof that you seek.”

It takes everything within me not to punch him in the face. His flair for the dramatic works wonders for me in the field. Vincent was right all those years ago. Leonardo was more disposed to this lifestyle than I gave him credit for. The fear he



wreaks in the underworld is infamous. The charming underboss who will gut you with a schoolboy smile on his face and feed you your own intestines. He lives by a code of his own morals. You fuck with the family, you die. You fuck with someone more vulnerable than you, you die. You hurt women or children, you'll spend weeks in hell you couldn't conjure in your mind, then you'll die.

Body counts are Leonardo's specialty. Both in death and sex. The more, the fucking merrier. It didn't take me long to realize that keeping him out of the game for as long as I did was likely a good thing. Manhattan would be in a population crisis if I'd let him loose as a teenager. A psychotic and hormonal juvenile with a knife is a nightmare no one fucking needs.

Gabriella clears her throat, and I fight the urge to look her way. "Follow me," I address my brother.

Pausing at the kitchen's threshold, I turn back to slide the empty wineglass onto the counter. "Thanks for the wine."

Eyes averted, cheeks flushed a deep river of crimson, she doesn't acknowledge me, choosing to keep her face pointed toward her feet.

I wait for only a second longer before walking away. "How is the Bruno situation?"

As much as I would love to lose myself in the fantasy of Gabriella's greedy ears soaking up my pleasure and wondering how fucking wet her panties were when she ran from my room, I have business to attend to.

Leonardo falls in step beside me. The document in my hands burns my fingers. But I work to remain nonchalant in

front of my brother instead of tearing the envelope open and devouring the information inside like I long to.

“Sorted.” He remains oblivious to my internal meltdown. “He flipped me off when I walked in on him motorboating one of the girls, so I cut off his middle finger and shoved it up his nose in front of his father-in-law.”

He steps into my office, heading straight for the whiskey, and I follow him in, dropping to my desk chair and reaching for my letter opener. “Gabbi is right. You’re nefarious.”

“*Gabbi?*” He pauses in pouring his whiskey, staring at me curiously. “We’re on nicknames now? And I’m pretty sure the word she used was *revolting*.”

I choose my silence and avoid eye contact, annoyed at the affection lilted across her name when I spoke.

“Avoidance works, too,” he grunts. “And let’s be clear, Bruno would be missing both his eyes if you weren’t playing babysitter for Vincent.”

I ignore the snipe.

“Something happened between the two of you?”

“What?” I cough.

“I wouldn’t judge you.” He falls into the seat across from me, sliding down into a slump and stretching his legs out. “She *is* nineteen, *nearly* twenty, as per that crisp piece of paper in your hand.”

I haven’t found the courage to open the envelope, afraid that what’s inside will shatter the small shards of self-control I have left.

“And she’s cute.”

I want to kill him for admitting that aloud. I also want to kill him for calling her *cute*. Cute. Like she's a fucking puppy you want to pet. It's offensive to what she really is. She's absolutely fucking sublime. She's not a woman you appreciate with a single glance. She's the type of woman who stops you in your tracks and steals your breath. Her beauty is a sucker punch to the fucking chest that never ceases. An endless attack that surrenders you obedient. The strongest men would drop to their knees and beg her to offer them even a scrap of attention, knowing even a shred of her affection would grant them access to a heaven that God himself wishes he could access.

“You wouldn't look at her when we were in the kitchen,” he continues.

I pull the single sheet of paper from the envelope. “You're seeing things,” I lie.

But then, what else am I supposed to say? I jerked my dick to thoughts of my best friend's sister—who is lying about her age—wielding a fucking axe like a princess warrior I'd like to poke my cock inside.

“She blushed when you walked into the room.”

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance. “I can't control the way she reacts to me.”

“Careful.” Leonardo laughs. “You're starting to sound like me.”

I finally settle my gaze over Gabriella's birth certificate, and my eyes zone greedily onto her date of birth.

Relief settles inside my gut.

“*Ha.*” Leonardo laughs. “Something totally fucking happened. Your shoulders deflated from above your ears when

you saw her date of birth in print. Something you wanna share, brother?”

I place the birth certificate back in the envelope, sealing it. “Where are we at with the feds and Bianca?” I change the subject.

He sighs, his disappointment palpable. “Sorted. They’re sniffing around where we’ve pushed them, and they’ll close it off pretty soon as a made man killed by a rival family or a drug deal gone wrong. We didn’t have to plant too much gear in his apartment. Roberto was experimenting a little too much and way too often with dope. No wonder the guy was all kinds of fucked up.”

I nod. “Good. I’ll call Vincent tonight and let him know the good news.”

“What? That you’re fucking his sister?”

I tip my head back and groan at the ceiling. “Go find another way to be useful.”

Downing the rest of his whiskey, he slides the empty glass onto my desk. Standing, he salutes me with his middle finger before making himself scarce.

The door closed behind him. I retrieve my cell, finding the number for Vincent’s burner.

“Enzo,” he greets lazily.

It’s not the first time Vincent has had to disappear for a chunk of time. In his line of work, close calls with law enforcement happen here or there. It helps that he’s anomic. Sitting alone in a cabin for weeks would cripple some men, but Vincent has always seemed to thrive in solitary. Though, this time is different. He’s not hiding to protect himself. He’s

doing it for a woman. We could've easily sent Bianca away by herself, but my enforcer wouldn't hear of it.

“Your wife killed you yet?”

I recall the first time I saw Vincent watching the older Rossi sister. The fucking idiot had no idea who she was or, more importantly, how old she was. Giggling with her sister at sixteen, I took hideous pleasure in crushing Vincent's fantasy of the fucked-up shit he was imagining doing to the girl. After that initial bombshell, I'd caught him watching her occasionally, but I never imagined his obsession ran so deep. Fucker almost had me cause an all-out war with Chicago when I told Salvatore Bianchi she was no longer his. The boss of the Outfit was ready to call in the fucking cavalry until I showed him a picture of Bianca's sister. Seems *Joker* has a taste for the doe-eyed maiden type.

Vincent and I discussed marriage as teens and into our early adult years. We both decided it wasn't for either of us. My father brought up the idea to me many times, talking about strategies of territory and power. I refused him. He had everything else I had to give. The family would *never* have my betrothal, no matter the fucking payoff. I would die before surrendering to the threat of caring for a wife and child. I had my fucked-up reasons for refuting the system. After I dropped to my knees and aimed a gun at my temple when my father told me he would force my hand, he stopped throwing viable options at me. Vincent was different. It wasn't that he despised the idea. He was just too violent to consider attaching a woman to his lifestyle. The guy is a scary motherfucker, and women, as attractive as they found him, cowered in his presence, which only turned him off.

“Close,” he answers, his voice catching.

I frown, unused to the delicate tone of my best friend's voice. "You fucked her yet?"

Vincent growls, and I smile, the familiarity of his animosity settling something inside me. "Don't fucking speak about my wife like that."

"Touchy." I can't help but laugh. "I'm still intrigued as to why you asked for her to be yours. You could have had your pick."

That's a lie. Bianca possessed his mind in a way only slaying enemies had done before her. But I like hearing him admit it. Vincent asks for nothing in this life. He's a dutiful soldier and an even more loyal friend, so when he told me he wanted Bianca, I couldn't find it in me to deny him.

He whispers something low enough that I can't hear, and I determine my consigliere might not be exactly *reluctant* about the dark shadows he and his new wife have been forced to hide within.

"Any update on when I'll be able to stop keeping Bianca captive?"

A feminine gasp cracks through the line, and I have to admit, I'm impressed. I thought it would take him much longer to break down the icy walls his fiery wife had erected. "I thought you'd be into keeping her caged."

Vincent laughs, the sound low. "Keeping her to myself holds its perks."

"I bet it fucking does," I agree. "She's a pretty fucking piece."

There's a reason she was my trump card with Chicago. Bianca is the type of woman men lust after, tongues lagging from their mouths like helpless dogs being led to the slaughter.

Gifting her to Bianchi was an offering of peace between our families. He saw the gesture for what it was. Our most sought-after prize would be his until Vincent went and caught feelings and fucked it.

“You have no idea.”

Having zero doubt Vincent is corrupting his new wife, I speak quickly. “Anyway, it’s about done. I’ll let you know when you can head home in the next twenty-four hours.”

“Do I want to know how?” he mumbles.

“Same shit, nothing exciting. Leonardo was just here. Feds are now sniffing around where we’ve guided them. Seems Cosimo didn’t need to plant too much snow around the apartment. Roberto had enough gear there already. A lot harder shit than snow as well. Your brother was unraveling.”

“How’s the other situation?” He changes the subject.

Shame sits heavy on Vincent’s shoulders for his brother’s sins. No matter how much I try to convince him that Roberto’s misdeeds are not his burden to bear, I don’t think he’ll ever see it that way.

I groan. I was hoping, balls deep in his new wife, he’d leave Gabriella out of the conversation. I hate lying to him. But, “I’m ready to put it to ground as well.”

He fucking growls at me.

“Calm down.” I sigh. “Your pet is safe and sound. *For now,*” I add.

“I gotta go.” Vincent hangs up.

I pull my cell phone from my ear, staring at the blank screen. “Well, fuck you too.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



## GABRIELLA



I'm eight-thousand percent certain I heard Lorenzo jacking off.

I wasn't planning on spying on him. He was in the living area by the fire with me one minute; the next, he was gone. I called out for him, but silence echoed his name.

Pouring myself a glass of wine, I poured one for him and moved around the house, searching for him. He wasn't in his office, and his bedroom door was wide open. I heard the shower and only meant to place the glass of wine on his bedside table before retreating.

But then they started.

The sounds.

The animalistic and wholly erotic noises had me frozen in place.

I knew I should leave like a sane person and give him his privacy, but instead, I stayed and listened like an ultimate creep.

I stood just outside his en suite and listened to him grunt, growl, and groan in satisfaction. It was the single most attractive thing I've *ever* heard.

Even in his most vulnerable state of pleasure, his noises were powerful. Thick and harsh and more than a little unhinged. It gave me an insight into what he'd be like as a lover. I'm loath to admit how envious I am of any other man or woman who has been granted access to that version of him.

I've watched plenty of porn. I'm a nineteen-year-old virgin, for Pete's sake. My kicks need to come from somewhere. But the fabricated and exaggerated grunts of pleasure in the rehearsed scenes I'd touch myself to on-screen were *nothing* compared to the gratification that escaped Lorenzo's lips and found their way into my underwear.

It felt wrong to infringe on his privacy, but I couldn't move. I was shell-shocked and intrigued. Definitely captivated and shamefully *aroused*.

My underwear was damp between my thighs, and my clit throbbed with a desperate need for attention.

I legged it from his room the moment the shower shut off. Petrified of what he'd do if he found me lurking. I locked myself away in my bedroom—the room he'd hand-built an escape route from—slid my hand into my panties and exploded the moment my fingers brushed my clit. I was *that* wound up.

In my rush to escape (and come), I'd completely spaced on the glass of wine I'd left in his room until he brought it downstairs with him. *Empty*.

My mind should have been focused on the thin envelope Leonardo found great pleasure in taunting me with. Whatever was inside the sealed packet was related to me. I knew it. I felt it in my bones. Leonardo was *far* too smug. But Lorenzo entered the space, and every thought in my mind disappeared

in a puff of smoke with the recollection of the way he moaned *my* name when he came.

My. Name.

*Gabriella.*

Gosh, what I'd give to have those four syllables recorded. To have the ability to have his rushed plea of my name on a continual loop as I pushed my fingers deep inside my pussy, pretending they could be his. I'm gluttonous and desirous, and I don't know what to do with these newfound feelings of want.

Leonardo left hours ago, a knowing smile lifting the corner of his mouth as he said goodbye. The confidence and judgment in his effortless swagger forced me to escape to my bedroom and pace the floor in anticipation and, if I'm honest, a touch of fear.

I shower and ready myself for bed, hair loose around my face and socks on my feet to ensure their silence. Cracking the door of my bedroom open, I sigh a breath of relief when I find the house cast in complete darkness.

Tiptoeing past Lorenzo's room, I ignore the way my body comes alive with recollection. Now is not the time to indulge in fantasies of my brother's best friend. A man who could and would kill me if he discovered what I was about to do.

I hold my breath as I press my foot onto every stair, praying for the wood to keep its silence under my weight. My heart races in my chest, and I glance into the kitchen, just in case, but find the room illuminated by only the digital time stamp on the oven.

Lorenzo's office is at the front of the house, and as I make my way toward a room he forbade me to enter, sweat slides over my skin. Ear pressed against the door, I listen closely. I

hear only silence and force myself to take a steadying breath before twisting my hand over the door handle cautiously. The quiet *click* echoes through the bottom level of the house, and I pause, waiting to hear Lorenzo stir. But nothing else comes. Quiet sizzles through the air, and I slowly, *painstakingly* push the door open and step inside. I close the door the same way I opened it, pressing my forehead against the wood when I've shut myself into the space.

The moon casts a delicate beam of light across the colossal desk in the center of the room. I move toward it, stopping at the edge and staring at the leather chair opposite. I could imagine Lorenzo sitting there. His persona big enough to dwarf even the weight of the heavy wood.

A whiskey bottle sits on the desk, and I pick it up, taking a heavy swallow. I grimace at the burn that crashes its way down my throat.

“Okay,” I murmur to myself, scanning the desk in the limited light in search of the envelope Leonardo had made a special visit to hand deliver.

“Top drawer.”

I spin around quickly, bumping my hip against the desk. I grunt at the pain.

Lorenzo sits in an armchair in the corner. I can barely make him out in the dark, but I feel him. The suffocating presence of a leader making me shrink against his shadow.

He shifts in his seat, and then a warm light fills the room. Settling back into his chair, he swirls the whiskey in his glass, his eyes never leaving mine.

He's dressed only in a pair of sweatpants, his chest naked. I take the opportunity to study the tattoo that begins on his

right bicep. It starts with the handle of a whip, the tail delicately crafted in fine lines over his shoulder and down his chest and abdomen, finishing at the jutting groove under his hipbone.

“Sorry?” I feign ignorance, blinking to retrain my eyes to his face.

“You’re looking for the envelope my brother delivered, are you not?”

I lift my chin with indignity, refusing to answer.

“*Please,*” he urges, lifting a hand and gesturing to his desk.

I know I should leave. Lie about coming in here by accident while looking for a bathroom. He’d know I was talking out of my ass, and so would I. So what would backtracking now gain?

Deep inside, I know that looking at whatever is in that envelope doesn’t change the fact that he knows it too.

“What are you hoping to find?” he asks.

*The resting place of my mother.*

I hadn’t even realized I’d moved, but when I lift my head to look into his eyes, I find myself already positioned at his desk, top drawer open.

“An answer to my problem of captivity,” I fib.

He doesn’t believe me. “And what if I told you it wasn’t that.”

I pick up the yellow packet.

“You’d look anyway.”

“Why should you have the upper hand?” My voice doesn’t shake in the way I thought it would. It has adopted a form of

tenacity I definitely do not feel.

His head tilts, and I hate how attractive he looks. “Upper hand?”

“Whatever is in this envelope concerns me. It’s only fair that I know what you know.”

“But you *already* know.”

“Do I?”

Realization hits. “You think I’ve been searching for where they’ve discarded your mother’s body.”

He says the words with such disregard for my feelings I don’t know whether to be impressed or hurt. My heart stutters in my chest, and I rip open the envelope with enough force that it tears the side completely.

The single sheet of paper in the envelope held crumples in my hand. My eyes lose focus, and my mind blanks.

It’s my birth certificate.

“Gabriella Rita *Smith*,” he recites, bringing me back to reality. “Mother, Rita Smith. Father, *unknown*. Born on Christmas Day, two thousand and *two*. Which, by my calculations, *lioness*, makes you nineteen, not seventeen.”

I swallow.

“It was brazen. I’ll give you that. Lying to our faces the way you did. Truthfully, I’m feeling rather contrite. I was so caught up in the genetics of it all I didn’t consider *when* Rita disappeared. Dante, your brother,” he clarifies unnecessarily. “Unknowingly unraveled it for me. It seems Luna is getting angsty, considering we hit the twentieth anniversary of her dear mother’s disappearance.”

“Anniversary,” I snort.

“Remembrance, commemoration, whatever you want to call it. But *boom*.” His fist pushes out, emulating an explosion. “Secrets are always fractured,” he whispers. “The lies within them will always slink their way into reality, unraveling your dishonesty one way or another.”

“Leonardo obviously knows,” I surmise. “Vincent?”

He shakes his head when he asks, “Why?”

“Why what?” I shove the birth certificate back into the top drawer, closing it roughly. He has his proof. No reason for me to destroy it. “Why do I want to know if Vincent knows?”

“Why lie in the first place?”

I move toward the drink trolley near the far window, collecting an empty glass. My reflection hits me in the darkened window, and I look away quickly, uninspired by the apathy staring back at me. Moving back toward the desk, I grab the whiskey bottle and, leaning against the heavy wood, I pour a sizable glass. Taking a sip, I consider lying. “My mother told me to avoid this family at all costs. She told me you were a last resort.” The truth comes out instead.

“She was protecting you from her husband.”

I dip my chin in affirmation.

“She knew you would come here anyway.”

He’s clever. In the short span of time we’ve spent together, he’s managed to *know* me in ways I’ve never shown anyone, not even my late mother.

“She told me that if I had no other choice, I needed to lie about my age.”

He waits for me to continue, his gaze focused entirely on my face, unblinking.

“She told me often that I was beautiful, but she told me I’d discover that was a curse in an organization like this.”

Understanding settles in his gaze.

“She explained how I would be used as an asset, all but sold off to the highest bidder or the biggest swinging dick. Lorenzo Caruso would send me off to whomever he pleased.”

“I’m starting to realize that my *Zia* was smarter than the family gave her credit for.”

I shrug. “Men like you and your uncle Joseph don’t want to see our intelligence. It complicates things for you if we have a voice or a brain.”

His nose scrunches in distaste. “Big Joey, maybe. But you don’t know me well enough to categorize me similarly.”

“Are you saying you *won’t* attempt to marry me off?”

He blinks, dropping his eyes and lifting his whiskey glass. He swallows the last of the amber liquid. “I won’t *attempt* to do anything, lioness. If I want something to happen, it’ll be set in the fucking stars.”

I snort. “You’re not God.”

“No, I’m not. I’m the man God made a deal with to pretend he’s in charge of what you mere mortals deem heaven in the sky.”

“You don’t believe in heaven?”

He shrugs. “In the same way I believe in hell.”

“You’ll soon know it exists when you’re living in its fiery depths.”



He laughs, and the sound is *almost* as tantalizing as the sounds I heard in his bedroom. They travel up from his stomach, scratching his vocal cords in a way that makes me believe he doesn't do it often enough. "Baby, please, surely you know the devil is just warming my seat, waiting for the rightful king to ascend to the throne when I've had enough of this world."

I don't even attempt to hide my laughter. "I'm going to bed. Good night, demon king." I drop my empty whiskey glass onto his desk.

He waits until I've reached the office door before he speaks again. "How are you going to offer me an even standing?"

Confusion furrows my brow, and I drop my hand away from the door. "Sorry?"

"You would have to agree that it's unfair."

"What's unfair?"

He smiles in a way that should make me nervous. The calculated and predatory gesture more ominous in the light of the moon. Yet I find myself moving *closer* to him instead of moving away. "You know what I sound like when I come."

My breath catches, and I gasp in shock.

He groans at the sound. "That's a start, I guess."

My eyes narrow. "That sounds like a you problem."

His forefinger grazes the line of his top lip in lazy strokes. His eyes track over my body, taking their time to appreciate my bare legs and the oversized shirt that brushes my upper thighs. I shift on my feet, and the cotton drags against my nipples, bringing attention to the fact that they're hard. I don't

need to look down to know he can see it, too, the stiff peaks pushed against the material begging for attention.

“I won’t lurk in corners, uninvited to be rewarded. If I want something, I’ll demand it.”

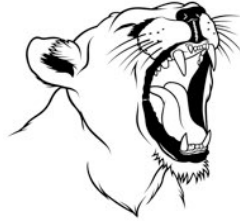
He shifts in his seat, arms resting on the couch’s backrest, legs spread in lazy comfort.

“And what do you want?”

His nostrils flare, and his chest expands. “Oh, that’s easy, *leonessa*. I want to know what you sound like when *I* make you come.”

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## GABRIELLA



*M*y mouth drops open in shock.

*I want to know what you sound like when I make you come.*

My legs wobble, and I clench my thighs together at the bawdy words he just spoke.

“*What?*” My voice puffs out in a breath of unrestrained need.

“Do you want me to repeat it because you misheard me or because it makes your clit throb?”

Not yet recovered from his first bombshell, my mouth closes only to open again.

“I...”

“You want me to tell you that I won’t be satisfied playing audience to your pleasure? Fine. Hearing you come and *making* you come are two starkly different fantasies. Only I know deep down how the sounds will differ. *Hearing* you will make me rock fucking hard. Make no mistake there, my sweet little liar. But the desperation in your moans and whimpers as you *beg* for relief, my name a plea from your dishonest lips as I bring you to a point of pleasure you couldn’t even dream existed, *that’s* what I want. That’s what I’m *owed*.”

“Owed?” I ask dumbfoundedly, impressed that I can still form coherent words.

He hums in affirmation. “I didn’t give you permission to eavesdrop, to listen to the sounds I make when I jerk my dick thinking about things I definitely shouldn’t be thinking about.” His eyes scan my body in appreciation, making me acutely aware that he’s talking about me. “In fact, if memory serves me correctly, I forbade you from entering my bedroom *and* my office. You’ve disobeyed both orders.”

I gulp.

“And we both know the moment you ran from my room, panties damp with the way I made you feel, you gave in to temptation.”

“Temptation?”

“You touched your pussy, didn’t you, Gabbi? You touched your pussy thinking about *me*.”

A shaky breath escapes my nose.

Lorenzo stands.

The air in the room disappears, and I forget how to breathe.

Eyes wide, I watch his approach.

His gait is lazy but purposeful. A predator approaching its target, cautious yet determined, moving slowly so as not to startle the defenseless prey.

This moment is reminiscent of only nights ago when he pressed his lips to my forehead, letting me into his darkest thoughts.

*So pretty when you cry. It makes me want to make you do it always.*

*There are other ways to make women cry, my lioness.*

God.

I should run away. I know he'd let me. As dangerous as the man is, I know he wouldn't *hurt* me. Not without my permission, anyway.

*Good God, listen to me.*

Standing directly in front of me, the heat of his body warms mine. He leans in, skating his nose along the line of my jaw. "*Breathe.*"

I suck in a deep breath. It trembles into my mouth, quivering as I exhale against his naked shoulder.

"Good girl."

My eyes close.

Pulling back, he meets my cheekbone with the calloused touch of his thumb. "You're blushing." His touch grazes over my cheek, down to my bottom lip. "Do I make you nervous?"

"No," I answer honestly.

"Do I turn you on?"

I whimper.

"I asked you a question, lioness. Don't make me repeat myself."

"*Ye-es.*"

He growls, the sound thick with approval.

"You're a naughty little liar," he muses, thumb tracing the sockets of my eyes. "Making me want the things I do."

He grabs my chin so abruptly that I suck in a sharp breath.

“Are you naughty, *leonessa*? Do you want the same things?”

I tremble in his hands.

Leaning in, he licks the shell of my ear. “Don’t. Make. Me. Repeat. Myself.”

“Yes,” I rush out, afraid he’ll stop.

He hums, and I decide it’s my new favorite sound. More so than rain on a tin roof or the crunch of snow beneath my feet. The carnal touch that sounds more like a moan, dripping with praise and polluted with approval, I should feel humiliated for craving.

Backing me up against the closed door, my hands fall against his naked chest. His heart beats hard and heavy against my palm, and I look at him in shock.

“Surprised that you’re not the only one going fucking crazy?”

“Kinda,” I whisper.

The smuggest of smirks pulls at the corner of his mouth, and my eyes narrow.

“Your arrogance is unbecoming.”

Left hand on my naked thigh, he lifts it, wrapping my leg against his waist and settling himself firmly between my thighs. “You don’t really think that.” The fingers of his right hand skate up my right thigh, inching closer to where I need him most. “If you really thought that your pussy wouldn’t be wet. Shall we see if your pussy is wet, Gabbi?”

“Stop talking.”

He strokes the edge of my panties, his smirk growing into a grin of pleasure. “Lace.”

Sliding his hands securely over my lace-covered apex, he does that infuriating hum that forces me to arch into his touch.

He groans. “Fucking *drenched*. What were you saying about my arrogance being unbecoming?”

“I said stop talking.”

His hand moves, trailing up my stomach. It hollows, the feel of his coarse fingers on my naked skin sending shock waves through my body. “*Fuck.*”

He slides his hand into my underwear, and I hold my breath, afraid to move.

“Breathe,” he murmurs, a whisper away from my open lips.

I move to kiss him, to distract myself, but he pulls back, the corners of his mouth curling up dangerously. “If you think I’m gonna miss looking at your face while I play with your pussy, you’re sorely fucking mistaken. You’re gonna look me in the eyes when I make you come, Gabbi, and then, when I’ve blown your world apart, you’re gonna fucking thank me for it.” His fingers brush my clit the moment he stops speaking, and I let go of a breath shaky enough to rattle us both.

It’s not supposed to feel this way. Lorenzo Caruso was never supposed to have carnal knowledge of my body. But as his rough fingers rub ardent circles over my swollen clit, I admit, if only to myself, that I wouldn’t want this moment with anyone else.

He might claim to be the devil’s keeper, but power fucking to him. To preside over Lucifer himself would take a king unrivaled, one who has visceral knowledge of both heaven and



hell, melding the heat from one nirvana and the peace from another to create an illicit in-between that only the most broken of souls can find.

“*Enzo*,” I whimper.

He groans. “My name sounds good as a prayer, baby.” He slides a finger inside me.

I grab his shoulders. “*Oh my god*.”

“*Enzo*, baby. Not God. *Enzo*. Make that mistake again, and I’ll stop.” Thumb still circling my clit, he pushes a second finger inside me. “Jesus, *fuck*, you’re *so tight*.” He drops his face to the center of my chest.

His heady growl vibrates against my heart, and he scissors his fingers, stretching me open.

I roll my hips, adjusting to the welcome pressure.

Head lifting, he bites my right nipple through the cotton of my shirt.

My eyes close.

“Eyes open, lioness. I want you to watch what I do to you. *Feel* what I do to you.”

It takes everything in me to pry my eyes open.

He watches me, the blue in his gaze darkening, a cloud of lust lowering his lids salaciously. “If this is how good your cunt feels around my fingers, I don’t stand a fucking chance.”

This man and his filthy mouth.

His cock is hard against my hip, thick and insistent and *big*. *So fucking big*. Monstrous against the comparison of his hand. My pussy is thoroughly filled with just his two fingers, and my mind blanks, a touch of fear crawling into my

thoughts, wondering how the fuck that thing will possibly fit inside me.

“Get out of your head.” He pinches my clit tenderly, and I moan.

“Your cock,” I say softly. My gaze drops, seeking out a visual of the emphatic part of his body, causing my heart to stutter in apprehension.

“You don’t need to worry about my cock right now. You’ll become acquainted at another time.”

Relief settles inside me. Thoughts of losing my virginity pushed up against a door, ripped open by Lorenzo’s giant cock, snuffed out with the way he massages the inside of my pussy and strums on my oversensitive bud with his thumb.

He continues his assault, fingers, thumb, and mouth all moving over the most sensitive areas of my body. My nipples ache until he sucks on them, the cotton of my shirt now see-through from the caress of his tongue. He bites my breasts, the thick flesh underneath my nipples no doubt red and bruised from the attack of his teeth.

My body begins to shake, and I smile to myself, the beginning of my orgasm overwhelming me.

“Don’t come until I tell you to.”

“What?” I grind against his hand, seeking the relief my body is cresting toward.

“Don’t you dare fucking come, Gabbi. You wait for my permission.”

“Your permission?” My words are twisted around my disbelief, and the needy want to obey him.

His thumb falls away from my clit, and I tip my hips, silently begging for more. “*Enzo?*”

“*Shhh,*” he murmurs, his fingers curling up to stroke my inner walls.

“I... I...”

My stomach dips, and an internal pull of pleasure drags *deep* inside my body. It’s less intense than the thrill that pressure against my clit brings, but a blissful energy settles within me, buzzing under my skin and setting my body alight.

“That, my sweet little liar, is what I like to call the sweet spot.”

“*En-zo.*” The adoration in his name doesn’t go unnoticed, his nostrils flaring with pride and, if I’m not mistaken, his trademark hint of arrogance.

“You like that?”

“Mm.” There is no point in lying. I want to come, and the man playing me like a goddamn fucking puppet is the only one right now with the power to do so.

“Good girl.”

The familiar pull in my body picks up, and my muscles tense. I lift a hand, squeezing one of my breasts. I pinch my nipple, humming in pleasure.

“Don’t do it,” he warns gently.

I whimper.

“Trust me,” he whispers.

“Never.”

He laughs, the rumble of delight moving through his body like a vibration I could only pray for.

“Like that.” My muscles tense.

“Push. It. Back.” He pinches my clit, sending shock waves through me.

My eyes narrow. “That’s not fair.”

“Be a good girl.”

I *ache* with the need to come. Every nerve ending inside my body pulsates in yearning. I’m shaking. I’m sweating. My breath comes forcibly through my nostrils as I try my hardest to obey his demand.

*Be a good girl.*

“Fuck,” I grunt. “I can’t...”

“You’re throbbing around my fingers. Your greedy cunt wants more.”

I close my eyes.

“Open them.”

I do as he says.

“What do you feel?”

*“Helpless.”*

He groans long and loud, pushing the thick line of his cock against my hip. “Exactly how I want you.” I don’t even think he’s realized he’s spoken, the words mumbled like a private thought as he balances on the ledge of chaos.

His fingers retreat from my body, and I cry out in alarm. “No!”

“*Shhh,*” he soothes.

Pushing his fingers back inside, he’s added a third finger, and I wince at the intrusion. “You’re dripping down my

fingers and over my hand.”

Helpless is even too generous for what I feel. I am nothing more than an ode to his dominance.

“*Please,*” I beg.

“Please what, baby?”

I bite my lip, wishing he’d kiss me.

“Say it.” His mouth is so close his breath rushes over my face.

I shake my head, my chin quivering.

Neither of us blinks.

“Say. It.”

I can’t stop the cry I was attempting to drown before it escapes. Blissful misery has my hands ripping at his shoulders, staving off the orgasm he seems intent on denying me.

“Please let me come.” I give in, my pride wretched, but my body is flying high.

He ignores my plea.

I groan in frustration.

“That’s it,” he praises. “Just a little longer.”

A sob breaks from my lips, my body begging for release.

“*There* she is.” He moves so quickly I barely feel the tear touch my skin before he licks it away. “*Come*, baby. I’ve broken you. It’s time to shatter.” He pushes his thumb against my clit and bites my neck.

“*Enzo!*” I scream, my soul exiting my body.

He pushes me roughly against the door, keeping me upright while I quake and cry in his arms.

“What do you feel?” he asks quietly. It’s amazing I can hear him over the thunderous beat of my heart.

“Free,” I answer without thinking.

“*Free.*” The single word sounds scarier as it echoes back at me, brimming with more meaning than I can explain.

It takes me a good few minutes before my vision clears. Silent, stuttered cries tremble through my frame, and Lorenzo watches on, a gratified smile stretched over his handsome face.

I whimper when he pulls his fingers from my body.

“You did *so* well, lioness.”

I preen at the praise, my heart swelling in my chest.

“You’re tran- *fucking*-scendant when you cry for me.”

I can still feel tears on my lashes, and I blink, liking the way they feel on my skin.

Lorenzo releases my thigh, gently placing my leg back down. My legs are still shaky, but he holds my upper arms until he knows I’m steady.

“You’re bleeding,” I blurt out, lifting my hands from his shoulders. Smears of blood are blotted over my fingertips, and I look at them in awe.

“My *leonessa* has claws.”

Hand to my mouth, I gasp. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t ever be sorry for marking me. Understood?”

I nod vehemently.

Eyes tracking the rest of his body, my gaze snags on the *very* noticeable bulge in his sweatpants.

He grabs his hard-on, growling in something akin to pleasure and pain. “*Cazzo.*”

I step forward, and he steps back.

I frown. “I want—”

“I know what you want.” He cuts me off. “You’ll get it when you deserve it. Until then, go and get some rest.”

My mouth falls open, the frigid reality of his dismissal smacking me in the face. “*Deserve it?*”

He turns away, moving back toward his desk and retrieving his bottle of whiskey. “We’re going to have a conversation tomorrow about limits and experience,” he tells me, his back turned to me as he pours a nip into my empty glass.

“Limits and experience?”

Throwing the liquid into his mouth, he turns back to me. “Stop repeating everything I say and go to bed.”

I blink.

“Gabriella,” he warns.

“Ugh.” I yank open his office door.

“Wait,” he calls after me, and I pause, hating the way my chest expands in anticipation.

I turn, waiting for him to speak.

“You didn’t say thank you,” he says conversationally.

I grind my teeth, ready to tell him to go fuck himself, but my words lodge in my throat because the asshole looks me dead in the eye, slides his fingers into his mouth, and sucks them clean.

He stalks toward the open door, and even though my mind screams at me to cause him physical harm, excitement bubbles in my stomach. He smirks, reading my face easily enough. My eyes fall to his crotch and the very prominent bulge that has yet to subside. Mere steps separating us, I wait for him to cross the threshold of his office and claim me. Instead, he grips the door and slams it in my face.

“*Motherfucker*,” I curse, turning and storming up the stairs.

Slamming my bedroom door, I stare at it, hating the way I feel locked away. I open it quietly, hoping like hell he didn’t hear, and climb into bed, caught between euphoria and irritation.

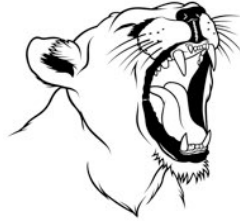
I toss and turn, my release, still slick between my thighs, refusing to let me find rest. I replay the events in my head, trying to reconcile how easily he played me and how *easily* I let him. It’s only then that I realize he didn’t even fucking kiss me.

The boss of the fucking mob just blew my mind to smithereens with an orgasm to rival a nuclear explosion, but through the whole ordeal, he refused to claim my lips.



# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## LORENZO



*F*ree.

*Helpless.*

The breathy plea in each word repeatedly plays in my mind.

*Helpless.*

*Free.*

I throw myself out of bed before I can give in to the gnawing temptation to grab my dick. It hasn't gone down since the events of last night unfolded. *Fuck*. I don't know what came over me. I was fucking possessed.

After Leonardo left, I didn't move from my office. My fantasies had barely formed, and already he could see inside my brain. It's the last thing I need, my windbag of a younger brother digging into the salacious thoughts I'm harboring for the secret family member with the power to blow our hierarchy apart.

Vincent is on alert. Concern is an *inkling* of the shitstorm brewing in *my* brain. I'm fucking buried in a catastrophic burden. My best friend has found a sister, and he's building a make-believe life in his head of how we can all play happy families. His vision is clouded with hope, which only further

fires my unease. Vincent Ferrari isn't hopeful. He's cautious, he's vigilant, he's fatalistic. Between Bianca and Gabriella, his edges are beginning to smooth, and it scares me. He's supposed to be my voice of reason, my fairy fucking godmother.

I'm not an optimist. I'm not a pessimist. I'm a fucking realist with the need to prepare for day-of-reckoning calamities. It's my responsibility. I can't lead with love hearts in my eyes or a trigger-ready finger. I watch and listen with a grenade hidden in my palm, checking myself four or five times before pulling the detonation pin.

I'm hyper-aware that this story doesn't have a happy ending. I know it, and I know deep fucking down that Vincent does too. No matter what plan we set in motion, the old guard isn't going to accept the bombshell of Gabriella's existence without repudiation. Big Joey will want justice, he'll want revenge, and he'll claim that with blood. He'll demand Gabriella pay for his wife's sins.

I know my capos are loyal, as are my soldiers. But there is a limit to their allegiance when our customs are challenged. Pieces will fall. I just can't be confident in which direction, and the person I rely on for that intel, for that clear-headed thought process, is the man with his head now stuck in the fucking clouds.

Gabriella feels like a captive—she's said as much—but she doesn't understand the alternative. She says she does, but making an offhanded comment about dying is really fucking different from staring your imminent end in the eye.

I've conceded that I won't let her pay for Rita's indiscretions. *Vincent* won't let her pay for Rita's indiscretions. Our metaphorical swords have been drawn. We've chosen our

side when the others aren't even goddamn aware of the line being drawn.

Gabriella Ferrari could be the flick of a match on an all-out war in my family.

I should kill her myself. But then Vincent would also have to die because in murdering his sister, I'd become his greatest foe and he my deadliest threat.

I *should* want her dead. I can't afford the complications that will arise from her existence. But I won't kill her because, in the most arguably shortsighted and nonsensical desire, I want her alive. I won't even contemplate my rationale.

Last night was a mistake, one I know I won't learn from.

I sat in my darkened office, *obsessing* over the thought of her in my room, listening to me pounding my cock while thinking about her. I couldn't deny it even if I wanted to. I know I said her name. I fucking *groaned* that shit like a man on his knees begging for mercy. It didn't just slip out. It clawed at my insides, ripping from my throat like a prayer only she could answer.

*Gabriella.*

*She* was the reason my dick was hard. *She* was the reason I was jacking off. *She* was the reason I came so fucking hard.

Then she was there, creeping around my private space, disobeying me. I was already fucking vulnerable. She stood there, openly challenging me in nothing but an oversized shirt and knee-high fucking socks.

*I want to know what you sound like when I make you come.* I had no control over the words I spoke. She insulted me, calling me a demon king, and I wanted nothing more than to show her how hard I could rule her body.

The next thing I knew, I had three fingers stuffed inside her *tight* cunt. There isn't a word that exists to describe how fucking snug she was. Her clit, swollen with need, preened under the attention of my thumb. Her eyes were blown out in lust, and I knew, I fucking *knew*, I could make her shatter.

My life is spent in command, but nothing, absolutely fucking *nothing*, compared to taking control of her body and mind. I watched on as anguish and panic consumed her eyes when I forbade her from coming. I felt her *throb* and quiver with how hard she strived to obey.

*Helpless.*

*Free.*

I was a fucking king. *Her* fucking king, and you'd have to pull my unbeating heart from my lifeless body before I ever renounced that title.

And then the tears came; the salty evidence of her fragility and submission leaked onto the skin of her cheek, and I felt more powerful soaking up that tear with my tongue than I've ever felt with a whip or gun in my hand.

My dick twitches, but I roll my shoulders, ignoring it. Pulling on a pair of jeans and a shirt, I check my phone, making sure nothing is amiss with the family. Seeing a blank screen, I sigh a breath of relief and jog downstairs.

Gabriella is in the kitchen nursing a cup of coffee, and she looks up as I enter. "Morning. I made coffee." Her eyes slide to the coffeepot and then back.

"You're up early."

"And you're wearing a shirt. Miracles do happen."

She doesn't see my smile. Filling a mug with coffee, I take a sip, relaxing immediately as the caffeine courses through my veins. "Sleep okay?"

She shrugs. "Not really."

I sit at the table across from her. "Did you sleep in your room or on the couch?"

Ducking her face, she hides her smile. "The bedroom."

Not *her* room. The bedroom. Still, she slept in the bedroom and not on the fucking couch.

"Is the bed uncomfortable?"

She shakes her head. "I couldn't switch my mind off."

My gaze catches hers, and I refuse to let it go. "I know the feeling."

She breaks our stare first, leaning over her coffee to blow on the liquid.

"First thing." She looks up as I slide my phone across the table. "Put your number in my phone."

She arches her brow. "Do you have something against manners?"

We stare at one another, and something akin to anger and lust twists around my spine, making me shift in my seat. "Put your number in my phone."

Her teeth grind.

"Please."

Jaw still set tight, she grabs my phone, her thumbs moving furiously over the screen. Placing it back on the table, she spins it and pushes it back over.

Picking it up, I hit dial on the number she just saved, and her mobile phone vibrates beside her. “You now have my number,” I tell her unnecessarily. “You’re welcome.”

She snorts in disgust.

“Are you on birth control?”

“Excuse me?” Her voice rises at least two octaves, her chin touching her neck and her eyes expanding into wide saucers.

I sigh, irritated by the need for theatrics for such a mundane conversation. “I asked you if you were on birth control. I plan on fucking you, and I plan on doing it a lot while we’re locked away in this hell together. Children are not in my five-year plan. I need to know if I need to use protection.”

“Who said I’d be comfortable being intimate with you *without* protection?” she bites back. “And who said I was going to have sex with you!”

I place my coffee mug on the table, a bark of laughter escaping my lips. “Gabriella. We’re going to fuck. You know it. I know it. You want it, and I know *I* fucking want it.”

She blinks at me but doesn’t speak.

I wait.

“I’m on birth control.”

I dip my chin. “You’re right, though. It was presumptuous of me to assume you’d be comfortable not using protection. I’d prefer not to, but in the end, that’s your decision. I can give you the blood work on my recent workup if that would make you more comfortable. It’s clean,” I add needlessly.

“That won’t be necessary.”

I stand, moving toward the counter to retrieve a small notepad and pen I leave out to jot down any grocery items for the housekeeper to pick up. I place it down in front of her, taking my seat across from her once again. “I need the names of any man who’s fucked you.”

She spits coffee across the table, and I stand again, grabbing a dish towel and wiping the spill from the table.

“What?” The back of her hand sits against her mouth, and she pats away stray coffee.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Are you going to make a list of all the women you’ve fucked?” she hisses.

“Are you planning on killing them?”

Her confusion makes me smile.

“Why would... Oh my god, you can’t be serious. So you expect me to write names down here, knowing you plan on *killing* them?”

“It’s who I am.”

Another spray of coffee. “A psychotic murderer?”

I lean across the table, taking her mug. “Just until you’ve calmed the need to spit at me.”

She glowers.

I pick up my mug, making a show of sipping slowly before answering her. “You can call me whatever you want. It has no bearing on the truth.”

“Which is?”

“I’m a man who indulges in things that aren’t easily attainable by the common man.” I straighten my mug on the



table, leaning my elbows on the wood and resting my chin on my hands. “I have expensive taste and a dangerous mind. I want to possess all that thrills me, and you, my little lioness, entice me in a way I can’t quite comprehend. I’ve decided that any man who has sampled something that I, at this moment, want to seize needs to suffer.”

She watches me quietly.

“We both know whatever happens between us has an expiration date. First, I won’t marry, so I need you to remove any preconceived notion that I might fall in love from your mind, for both our sakes. Love and marriage make men weak. It would also place any woman unfortunate enough to belong to me at risk.”

She opens her mouth, but I lift a hand to stop her.

“I’m also not an idiot. I might turn you on, but I’m very aware that you despise me, Gabriella. You’re as capable of falling in love with me as I am with you. Calm that fire in your eyes.”

She settles.

“Second, I’m still not convinced you won’t run and, arguably most importantly, you’re Vincent’s sister. I have very few friends and fewer people I can trust completely. He is one of two. I’m already spitting on our bond by engaging in an illicit affair, but you have me inflicted with lust. I’ve tried to ignore it, but I can’t.”

“That doesn’t explain why you’d need a list of men—”

“You’ve brought something out in me I didn’t think existed. *Possessiveness*. I will kill anyone who has touched you because my mind is murderous at the thought that any

other man could've experienced what I did last night. I want it to be mine and mine only."

Understanding flashes through her eyes. "You will *not* kill anyone."

I smile. "Gabriella, I'll find it out one way or another. You'll come to realize that I'm a resourceful man—one who will *always* get what he wants. Now, I'm happy to go digging into your history. It'll just take me away from more important endeavors. In addition, it'll piss me off, and when I'm pissed off, shit gets messy."

I enjoy watching her face as she thinks. The range of emotions that flash through her eyes and twist her nose and lips. She considers me for a long while, and silence stretches between us.

"You don't need to kill anyone," she finally says.

My eyes close, and anger tickles my nostrils. "Gab—"

"Lorenzo, *please*." She stresses the words, looking me right in the eyes as she speaks. "All you need to know is that no one needs to die."

It takes me a second. "You're a virgin." The cloud of red forming in my stomach settles.

"Ten points to the mobster at the table." She leans forward to retrieve her coffee, but I grab her wrist, my fingers pushed against her pulse.

"Are you lying?"

She frowns. "Why would I lie about something as humiliating as that?"

"What's humiliating about being a virgin?"

She attempts to pull her arm back, but I hold it steady, keeping her pulse at my fingertips.

“As you’ve already discovered, I’m almost twenty, Lorenzo.”

“And?” I ask, confused by the shade of red decorating her cheeks.

“When did you lose your virginity?”

I let go of her wrist. “It’s not the same.”

“Oh,”—she laughs sarcastically—“because I’m a woman?”

“No, not because you’re a woman, but because you lived a different life than I did. You were sheltered; I was not. There is nothing to feel humiliated by, Gabriella. Your sexual experience or lack thereof has no bearing on who you are as a person.”

She wraps her arms around her chest, cuddling into herself. “You’re telling me that my being a virgin doesn’t turn you off?”

My face breaks wide open, and I laugh. Loudly.

She stands, the tips of her ears now red with anger. She storms past me, but I grab her waist, pulling her down onto my lap in one swift movement.

She opens her mouth to argue, but I fit her against the swell of my cock. “Does that feel like I’m turned off?”

Her ass arches into my lap more significantly, feeling the way she affects me.

I brush her hair off her shoulder, bringing my lips to her ear. “The things *I* can teach you, lioness, it makes me feel like

a king.”

A shaky breath courses over her.

“*Your* king,” I add, watching her eyes close.

My tongue dips out, caressing her ear lobe, and she arches her neck, giving me greater access. I suck it into my mouth and drag it through my teeth.

“I do need to know what experience you *have* had,” I murmur. “It will help me get an understanding of your limits. To begin with, anyway.”

She shakes her head, her eyes opening. “I’m not talking to you about that.”

I wait for a single beat. “*Please.*”

She clamps her lips shut.

“Okay,” I concede, my hand cupping the side of her neck, my thumb rubbing circles on the side of her jaw. “Don’t speak. Just shake your head or nod when I ask.”

A sound of refusal makes its way up her throat, but I cut her off.

“*Shhh.*” I push my lips against her jaw. Goose bumps break out over her skin, and I smile into her neck.

“Has anyone put their mouth on you? *Here.*” I brush my free hand up her inner thigh, letting my fingers caress her apex.

She swallows audibly, and just when I think she’s not going to play my game, her head shakes.

“That’s a good girl.” I hum in approval. “Okay, no one’s fucked your pussy with their mouth. Their loss, my gain.”

She whimpers, her eyelashes brushing her cheeks as her eyes shutter closed.

I remove my hand from her thigh, skating my thumb over her dry lips. “Has anyone ever put their cock in here?”

Her eyes flash open, and she looks at me in shock.

I squeeze her jaw restlessly. My hand shakes as her head moves side to side.

*No.*

I groan in relief, lifting my hips an inch to push myself against her ass. “You’re making me so hard. Feel this?” I ask, and she nods without delay. “Have you ever felt a cock in your palm? Wrapped your hand around it and stroked it?”

Another silent no, and I’m about ready to blow a load in my jeans.

My nostrils flare, and I exhale heavily through my nose.

“Was last night the first time anyone has ever put their fingers in your pussy?” My voice is strained.

“*God*, the way you speak.” Her voice trembles when she speaks, and I know without feeling it that her heart would be thundering in her chest. *Just* like mine.

“Enzo,” I correct. “*Enzo*, the way you speak.”

A tiny moan breaks from her lips, and it takes everything within me not to swallow it.

“*Gabbi*,” I warn. “Has anyone felt the inside of your pussy with their fingers?”

Her chin trembles, but she still manages to nod.

“I’m not talking about you,” I whisper. “Has anyone *but* you put their fingers in your pussy?”

Her teeth bite her bottom lip hard enough that the pink cushion turns white. She shakes her head.

“Jesus, lioness, you’re fucking killing me. What about these?” I circle my thumb over one nipple and then the next. “Has anyone fucked these? Sucked, licked, or bitten them?”

“No,” she says.

“I’m not even gonna ask about your ass because you’ll break my heart if you say yes.”

She repositions on my lap, twisting to straddle me, and I want so badly to shove my dick deep inside her right here and now and claim her virginity in this brutally open moment.

I rub a palm down my face. “You’re a blank fucking canvas.”

“Completely blank.” Her voice is so soft, so tentative that I can barely hear her. “*Lorenzo...*”

“Tell me,” I push, impatience claiming me.

“Why didn’t you kiss me last night?”

A bolt of electricity shoots through me, and I grab her jaw, bringing her face closer to mine. Disbelief claims me completely. “No one has ever even felt these beautiful lips?” My thumb pulls her bottom lip down.

“Only you. The other night.”

“*That* was your first?” I growl.

“Yes.”

“Gabbi, *baby*. That wasn’t a fucking kiss.”

Eliminating the breath between us, I pull her lips to mine and kiss her. Softly at first, my self-control hanging on by the barest of threads, ripe for snapping.

“*Yess,*” she breathes.

That single throaty moan undoes me completely. My hands cup either side of her jaw, and I tilt her face, slamming my lips to hers and claiming her mouth. Her lips open, and I waste no time sliding my tongue inside, needing to taste her innocence and inexperience in the way I need a gunshot wound to the fucking heart, *certain* it will forever and irrevocably slay me.

Her tongue meets mine in a hesitant touch, and even that tiny sample has a growl forming in my throat and pouring into her open mouth.

She moans, and I pull her closer.

My cock is rigid, *painfully* hard, and I tilt my hips, wanting, *needing*, the pressure of her weight to stop me from blowing all over myself like a pubescent teenager.

Her confidence grows with every eager stroke of her tongue. It now caresses mine with conviction. Hands fisted in my shirt, she bites my bottom lip, dragging it through her teeth before kissing me again.

Our embrace has moved from tentative to greedy to altogether fucking frantic in seconds. Our tongues war, our teeth clash, and our lips fight for dominance. It’s a battle for desires already claimed, the prize already held firmly in one another’s hands.

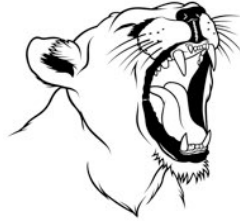
Had someone told me at any point up until now that the simplicity in a kiss could be transcendent, pleasure coursing through my veins at an intensity that could and would immobilize me, I would’ve laughed in their face. I would have been a fucking fool. Euphoria exists, and it inhabits the place in which Gabriella Ferrari—my best friend’s sister—and I

have found ourselves tangled up in. And who the fuck am I to  
look ecstasy in the face and deny it?



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## GABRIELLA



*H*e picks me up with little effort, his hands clasped on my thighs, my legs circling his narrow waist. He walks us from the kitchen and up the stairs. He strides with purpose.

I know what we're doing is wrong on so many levels. First and foremost, he's right. I despise him. Or more, what he represents. The archaic and patriarchal hierarchy in the organization he *proudly* heads up makes my stomach twist. It may be horrifying to admit, but the lawless undertakings he pursues don't cause me disquiet. His sins are his and his alone. I might disagree with the misdeeds he and the family engage in. Still, I'm here, willingly offering my allegiance to their outfit anyway. It's the belief that women are *less* that gives me pause. A system he has no inclination to overturn, even in power.

*Love and marriage make men weak.*

*Ugh.* Men make themselves weak. Their lack of control when it comes to the opposite sex is more a reflection of themselves than anything else. So blinded by their own ego they can't see that.

Lorenzo Caruso might stand against everything I believe in. But it doesn't mean he can't be enjoyed. After all, he is really fucking pretty, and if what he did to my body last night

is a preview of the things he can make me feel, I'd only be doing myself a disservice by denying him.

I don't even let my mind wander to my brother and the hurt this could cause him. He has no standing on my body. It's mine to do with as I wish and *who* I wish.

Stepping into his bedroom, Lorenzo moves to kick the door closed behind us. Shifting backward, he stops it with his ankle, booting it open forcefully enough that it bangs against the wall. "I really hope you don't feel the need to run right now." He kneads my ass cheeks with his hands, pulling me closer still. "But if at any time..." His words trail off, the strained plea enough to articulate his point.

Something twinges in my chest. Unwilling to explore it, I pull his mouth back to mine, distracting myself with the frenzy of his lips.

"*Thank fuck,*" he mumbles into my mouth, walking deeper into his room.

Still consumed with the way his tongue caresses mine, I'm flying through the air before I've realized he's untangled my limbs from his frame. I land on the bed with a thud.

Readying myself to curse his lack of manners, he moves into my space, dragging me down the mattress enough for his face to hover over mine.

His eyes are a deeper blue than I initially thought, flecks of midnight tapered through his carnal gaze.

"I need to ask you, Gabbi, are you sure about this? I'm *dying* to fuck you. I'm mad with how badly I want it, but if you're not ready, it's not too late to stop. This situation, you stuck here with me, the thought that you might feel pressured..."

I stare up at him, taken aback by the sentiment in his tone. He's almost *feral* with lust, but his concern for my well-being is stronger. My hands find his cheeks. "I want this. I want you."

Relief forces his eyes shut. Inhaling through his nose, he opens them again. "If you need me to stop, don't hesitate to let me know."

"Don't stop." The words rush out before I can stop them, and the corner of his mouth pulls up in the sexiest fucking grin I've ever seen.

I groan, tipping my head back and letting it loose into the air around us.

He takes the opportunity to put his lips to my neck, tongue trailing up the very center all the way to my chin. One chaste kiss, and he pulls back, fitting his hands at the hem of my shirt. "I just know you're gonna have the prettiest fucking tits I've ever seen."

His palms slide up my body, taking my shirt with them. My nipples are already hard, anticipation and the brush of his calloused hands at my sides enough to make them ache for attention.

A growl rolls in his throat. "No bra," he says to himself. Pulling my shirt over my head, he throws it aside, shifting back to look at me. "Prettiest fucking tits I've ever seen," he confirms, reaching out to grab them in his big hands. "Fucking juicy and round and rosy nipples." He pinches them between his thumbs and forefingers. "They're the same fucking color as your cheeks when you blush." His wild eyes meet mine. "Did you know that?"

The question doesn't need an answer, so I keep my silence, enjoying the ardent caresses he praises my nipples with.

"Your shirt." He obeys without thought, grabbing his shirt at the nape of his neck to rip it from his body. Chest bare, I trail my fingers from his sternum and over the divots of his abs. "You're beautiful."

"Was just thinking the same fucking thing."

I look up at his eyes, and time stops. I can't breathe or swallow or blink.

He moves first, granting me mercy. Hands on the waist of my shorts, he yanks them off in one fell swoop, my underwear disappearing only seconds later.

My knees close.

"Spread your legs, Gabriella, and look at me."

My heart pounds in my chest. The beats are so prominent they rattle my throat and make it hard to breathe.

I'm soaking wet. My excitement clings to my inner thighs, and I clamp them together, pushing my backside into the silk of Lorenzo's sheets to relieve the pressure.

"I won't ask again." He stands at the end of the bed, legs shoulder width apart, arms purposely held at his sides, fists clenched hard enough that the veins in his forearms protrude. His naked chest heaves with the lumbering effort of his breath. His abdominal muscles contract and expand. The thick outline of his erection pushes against the firm denim of his jeans. Jaw set tight, his eyes remain unblinking, his focus razor sharp and, if I'm honest, more than a little frightening.

But fear does something different in the throes of arousal. It pushes past preconceived limits and welcomes you into an

awakening of desire you never, in your wildest fantasies, thought existed. Lorenzo is, without a doubt, a threat, but here in this room, the harm foreshadowing us has nothing to do with physical danger and everything to do with the collateral damage that is a given.

Even that knowledge isn't potent enough to make us stop. Passion has dug its claws in, drowning us with hunger we're too far gone to ignore.

I slide my feet toward my ass. Lorenzo's nostrils flare, and I smile. There is something so empowering about making a man as menacing as the one before me balance on a tightrope of control. Call me crazy, but I want to see him fall.

No.

I want to be the fucking *reason* he falls.

When my ankles meet the flesh of my backside, I push my feet apart—sliding them over the sleek feel of the sheets. Cool air whispers over my damp flesh, and I lift my hips, craving any sensation the elements will offer.

A rumble in Lorenzo's throat echoes through the room, and my stomach dips.

"I'm going to eat your cunt, lioness. I'm gonna suck and lick and fuck you with my tongue until you can't take it anymore. Then I'm gonna do it more. You'll be begging me to stop and pleading with me to keep going, and when you come, you won't remember your own name... but you'll know mine."

I bite my lip.

"Say it."

"*Enzo.*"

“That’s my good girl. Every time you come, baby, you say my fucking name.”

Dropping to his knees at the end of the bed, he grabs the thick sway of my thighs in his big hands and pulls me with very little finesse to the edge of the bed.

Sliding his nose through my wetness, he inhales. “Smells like heaven.” He kisses my clit. “Tastes like sin.” And then his tongue drags upward from my hole to my clit, drinking me in.

My back bows, my hips flying upward. “*Oh fuck.*”

His hands pull me back down to the bed, pinning me with a grasp hard enough to leave bruises. “Welcome to my heaven, Gabbi.”

Face pushed against me, he kisses my pussy the same way he did my mouth. Like a man starved of the touch. His tongue is relentless. It grazes up and down and round in circles. I’m moaning, writhing, and begging for more, and just when I can’t think anything could feel better, his lips close around my clit, and he sucks.

“*Enzo.*” I push up onto my elbows, watching him.

Eyelids lowered, eyes dark with longing, his gaze flicks to mine. With a smile, he moves his hands from my hips, sliding his thumbs over my pussy lips before pushing them apart. Tongue pointed, he drags it upward, the pink flesh of his mouth damp with my excitement. I watch on, mesmerized by the way his tongue moves.

“Feels *so* good,” I whisper, not trusting my voice not to give out on me if I try to speak louder.

He shoves his tongue inside me, and I fall back to the bed with a grunt. Lorenzo’s tongue dances inside me. I groan long

and loud, my chest pushing up to the ceiling, my body unaccustomed to the pleasure.

Removing his mouth, he drags his fingers down my heat. Fingertips wet with my arousal, he stretches his arm up, using my lust to rub damp circles over my pebbled nipples.

I'm assaulted by pleasure. My nipples ache and harden at his touch. My clit pulsates at the way he lavishes it with attention. I'm throbbing, and I need to come.

One hand at my breast, he uses the other to push two fingers inside. "*So. Fucking. Tight.*" He snarls, the sound as ferocious as a fucking animal, and my whole body trembles at his vulgarity.

My muscles tense, and he growls at the way I clamp down on him.

"*Fuck.*"

"Oh god."

His teeth meet my inner thigh, biting down hard enough to make me whimper.

"Enzo," I amend. "*Enzo.*"

Buzzing with approval, he returns his attention back to my pussy, tongue lapping at me. "Fucking throbbing," he hums, the deep vibration of his voice fluttering against me.

"I need to... *can I...*"

Moaning, he pushes his face deeper into me. "Such a good girl, but you don't need permission to come tonight, lioness." He sucks my clit between his lips, kissing it softly before stroking it with his tongue. "I need you dripping when I slide my cock inside you."



*“Oh.”*

“You’re still so tight around my fingers. I can’t wait to feel how much you have to stretch to accommodate my cock.”

I fall off a cliff.

My body bends, my throat closes, and I tumble into oblivion. My mind is blank, my body weightless, my eyes unseeing, and my ears hollow. I float in between pleasure and reality and pray that I never have to return. Except my body begins shaking violently, and I fall into the tangible, just in time for my body to buckle once again.

“Enzo,” I cry. “I can’t...”

He doesn’t stop.

“It’s too much,” I moan.

“Baby, it’s you,” he murmurs against my hypersensitive skin.

“Me?”

He laughs, and the tremor of his amusement has me screaming out his name.

My hands are buried in his hair, keeping his face locked against my pussy as my hips undulate against his mouth. “Oh. It’s me.” But I can’t stop.

“That’s it, lioness. Fuck my face, baby. Give me one more.”

“No,” I whimper.

“Yes,” he combats.

“But it hurts.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

He sucks on my clit. “No,” I agree. “It doesn’t.”

His fingers are relentless, massaging the spot inside me that has my muscles tensing.

“Fuck, you’re so close.”

“So close,” I echo, completely lost to my pleasure.

He pinches my nipple, grazes his teeth over my clit in the most *gentle* of caresses, and I’m gone, once again floating in oblivion.

My muscles are jelly, and my limbs fall to the bed in repose.

Lorenzo’s fingers pull from my body, and I push his face away from between my thighs. He laughs.

I pry my eyes open, drunk with lust and wholly overcome.

Towering over me, Lorenzo wipes his thumb over his chin and bottom lip. He moves closer. “Open your mouth.”

My lips fall apart.

He pushes his thumb into my mouth. “Suck.”

I obey, my lips closing over his thumb. The taste of my climax explodes over my tongue, and I moan.

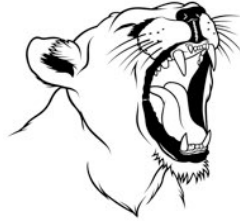
“This is the power I have over your body, lioness. Nothing will *ever* taste sweeter than the way *I* make you come.”

Still high from my mind-altering orgasms, I don’t fucking doubt it.

“Now, let’s see if I can get your virgin pussy to cry when I feed her my cock.”

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## LORENZO



*I*'m a fucking dead man. But what a way to go.

I've avoided virgin pussy my whole life, the complication associated with a tighter fit around my dick not worth the drama.

I should've bowed out the moment she told me she was untouched. But something sparked inside me. Something dark and possessive and altogether selfish. I want every one of her firsts. I want to show her how I could make her feel, knowing no other man would ever compare. I want to ruin her, stupidly ignorant of the fact she might ruin me first.

I'm not inexperienced with sex. I've taught myself enough over the years that I know how to please a woman. I pride myself on being observant too. I watch, I listen, I feel. Their bodies are fucking vocal, and as long as you're open to hearing what they have to say, you have a round-the-world ticket to making them see stars with your name on their lips.

*This* was different. I was so fucking in tune with the beauty in my bed, I almost came when she did, and she wasn't even fucking touching me. Her pleasure was out of this world explosive, and I wanted to drown in it.

Body lax, eyes lazy with desire, Gabriella smiles up at me. Her cheeks are flushed, rosy with the pinched red of her nipples. My dick hurts with how badly it needs to be inside her. I know cum is already leaking from my tip, and I'm so wound up I'm tempted to jerk off over her naked form and decorate her flawless skin with ribbons of my cum.

Shifting away from the bed to remove my jeans, I avert my face from her curious gaze.

Divested of my jeans and boxers, I crawl over her.

“Are you okay?”

I swallow, the simple act difficult with the lump in my throat.

“Yeah.” I clear my throat. “I've just never wanted someone as badly as I do you.” I choose honesty. I'm taking something from her that she'll never be able to share with anyone else, so it's only fair that I give her a slice of my unguarded heart as well. I don't add that I *shouldn't* want her the way I do. That a yearning this fucking cogent can only end in harm. I don't tell her that she's making a mistake. That I have zero doubt she'll regret this moment between us when she finds someone she actually deems worthy. I keep all that inside, afraid she'll come to her fucking senses and run.

“Don't look so sad about it.”

I lean over her, bracketing my elbows on either side of her head and kissing her. “I'm not sad about it, lioness. I'm caught off guard.”

“About time you felt like the rest of us mere mortals,” she muses, her fingers tracing the muscles of my stomach, her lips constantly moving against mine. “I'm deliriously unequipped to be this close to you. I've known that from the moment I

stormed up to your table demanding an audience with Vincent.”

I smile down at her.

“And you threatened to kill me.”

“I wouldn’t have killed you.”

Her smile grows large on her face. “Oh, you most definitely would have. My immoral mobster.” She whispers the last part, but it slams into my chest like the weight of a serrated knife.

To stop her from seeing the weird fucking thing happening to my face, I lean over her, digging around my side table for a condom.

I kneel over her body, knees bracketing her waist.

“Holy fucking shit,” she breathes.

Ripping the foil packet with my teeth, I follow her gaze to my cock. “What?” I spit the torn corner away from us.

“First, your cock is huge, Lorenzo. Are penises generally that size, and I’m just really fucking naïve, or are you just way bigger than average?”

Fuck if I don’t want to beat on my chest at the awe in her voice.

“And you’re *pierced!*”

I glance down at my cock, rubbing my thumb over the barbell that decorates my tip.

Her hand reaches out tentatively, her thumb rubbing over the bottom of the piercing before skirting over my slit and circling the top of the barbell. I groan.

“Your dick is wet.”

“Precum,” I tell her. “It’s leaking because I’m hanging on by a thread.”

Her eyes widen. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Our voices are soft, not quite a whisper but tender enough to be *just* heard. “This might be the hottest fucking experience of my life.”

“This?”

“*You.*”

Her cheeks flush, and her teeth bite into her bottom lip.

Gabriella Ferrari is peeling back layers for me to discover. She’s an enigma. I’ve barely scraped the surface of who she is as a person, and still, I’m fiendish for more. She’s brave and unwavering. But she’s sensitive and sentimental. She’s bashful but lascivious. She’ll go head-to-head with the head of the fucking mob in one moment and cower with the fear of loneliness the next.

Reaching up, she takes the open wrapper of the condom from my hands.

I smirk, pumping my cock and inching closer so she can slide it on. But she surprises the fuck out of me and throws the condom off the bed.

I pause, my hand stopping at the very tip of my cock. “You sure?”

“I’m ready for you to fuck me now.”

My nostrils flare, my eyes close, and I exhale heavily enough that my stomach contracts. “You’ve got a dirty little mouth on you, baby. If I hadn’t felt how tight your cunt is with my own hand, I’d think you were lying about holding on to your virginity.”

Her hand flies to her mouth, covering it. “You hate it?”

“*Fuck*, no,” I say. “Like I said, hottest fucking thing I’ve ever experienced.”

Her hand drops away.

Sliding back on the bed, I lift her right leg, and without further instruction, she curls it over my back, pulling me into her body.

“Are you sure you’ll fit?”

She glances down at our bodies, working to catch a glimpse of my cock.

“You’ll be able to take it, lioness. Trust me.”

She smirks. “Never.”

I kiss her, unable to stop myself. Her lips meld to mine, and with one hand on my dick, I slide it through her slick slit, wetting the tip while assaulting her mouth.

She sighs into my mouth, her body coming alive once again. She writhes beneath me, moaning every time my pierced crown kisses her clit. Her tongue moves with mine, her arms thrown over my shoulders, exploring the muscles in my back.

Lining myself up at her entrance, I inch forward, and she stills.

“Breathe, baby. Relax for me. You know I’ll make you feel good.”

She melts into the mattress, her muscles relaxing. I push forward a little more, her cunt engulfing my tip and making me curse in bliss.



I pull my hips back, kissing down her neck. Thrusting forward gently, I drive into her deeper.

She gasps, and I suck a nipple into her mouth. I lavish the pebbled peak with my tongue, and she lifts her hips, swallowing more of my cock.

She's snug, her narrow channel struggling to accommodate me. "So tight."

"So thick," she echoes.

Dipping a hand between our slick bodies, I press my thumb against her clit, rubbing soft circles around the swollen bud. She arches into the touch, and the resistance of her virginity gives slightly. I'm almost all in, her pussy spread wide to take it all. One more push, and I'm fully sheathed. Her untouched walls clench around me.

"You okay?"

The pulse in her neck pulsates against my lips, and I hold my tongue there, enjoying the steady rhythm as I try to maintain control.

My dick jerks, my stomach already pulling with the familiar feeling of climax.

"Full."

"Told you that you could take it."

"Just." She shifts, gyrating her hips. A small moan escapes her lips, and I copy the movement, rolling my hips to grind inside her. She whimpers this time.

I pull back an inch or two and slide back.

"*Oh.*" Her fingernails scratch at my back.

"You like that?"

She nods.

I do it again, retreating farther and thrusting forward a little harder this time.

A small roll of her hips. I mirror the movement, stretching her out. “*Yeah,*” she breathes.

I follow that pattern. I pull out and drive forward, circling my hips once I’m buried as deep as I can go.

My mouth latches on to a nipple, and my hand strums soft patterns over her clit. My cock moves in and out of her snug cunt, and my hips roll in circles and waves, working to open her up.

She whimpers and moans and gasps and whispers my name. “*Enzo.*”

“You feel so good, baby. You’re taking me so fucking well.”

Every muscle in my body is corded with need. I’m barely hanging on. My balls ache with the need to come. My movements stutter, and my breathing is so heavy, I’m fucking panting.

She turns her face, biting into my bicep by her head, muffling the sounds I need to hear.

“I want to hear you moan, Gabbi. You know I love the way you moan for me.”

Her teeth free themselves from my skin, and I growl at how fucking hot her bite mark on my arm looks.

She moans loudly. “*Enzo, I...*”

I rub her clit in faster circles.

“Like that,” she begs.

I abuse her body in every way I can. My tongue on her nipples, fingers on her clit, my cock driving in and out of her. I slide my free hand into one of hers, holding her hand above her head.

Her eyes land on mine, and I watch the way our pleasure slides across her face.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. I’m obsessed. I’m addicted. *Fuck, Gabbi.*”

My thrusts are erratic. My body is dying for release. “Come for me, *leonessa*. Your pussy is throbbing. She wants it.”

She cries out, her eyes wide with shock as her orgasm claims her. Her cunt contracts, closing in on my dick, and I bellow out her name, exploding inside her in the most powerful release I’ve ever experienced. My cock jerks four or five times, spilling hot splashes of cum deep into her pussy.

I collapse on top of her, my body broken. My heart is in my throat, and everything in me shakes as I attempt to catch my breath.

“Gabbi,” I breathe. “Baby. That was...”

“I know,” she whispers.

I lift my head. “Are you okay?”

“Better than okay.”

I drop my lips to her, kissing her softly before rolling off her.

We lie side by side until our heavy breathing subsides.

“Are you sore?”

She shrugs. “Yeah. A little.”

I sit up, using everything in me to push up from the bed. My legs are shaky as I move toward the bathroom. Finding a clean cloth, I run it under warm water. Gabriella watches me as I move back toward the bed. Sitting on the edge of the mattress, I bend her knee, moving her leg out of the way.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh.” I press the damp cloth against her apex, and she sucks in a sharp breath. “That feel okay?”

She nods, watching me unblinking.

Pulling the cloth back, I brush it over her swollen pussy, cleaning her up. “I should run you a bath.”

She shakes her head, taking the cloth from my hand and stretching to place it on the closest bedside table. “I’m fine.”

I nod, my hand still resting on her thigh. “I hope you don’t ever regret sharing that with me.”

“Why would I regret it?”

I shrug. “You’ll meet someone who deserves you more than I ever did. You’ll meet someone who can offer you a life. Maybe you’ll wish you shared this moment with him.”

She goes quiet for a beat of time.

“I’d want to kill him.” My voice has taken on an edge I save for enemies when I’m in the throes of bloodlust and revenge. “If you regretted me because of him, I don’t know if I’d be able to stop myself.”

My admission is heavy in my throat, and I have to gulp to swallow.

“Lorenzo,” she whispers, reaching for my hand. I let her take it.

“If I kill him, don’t hate me for it. Just remember this moment and how fucking perfect it was.” I look up, finally finding the courage to gaze into her eyes.

She nods.

“Tell me.”

“I won’t hate you for it.”

My shoulders relax.

“But you won’t need to kill anyone,” she says. “Because I’ll never regret it.”

I want to believe her. Right now, she wholeheartedly believes in her declaration. But I’ve lived a life cursed enough to know that regrets are commonplace. They hide in the shadows of contentment until the shine of our achievements wear away, leaving nothing but the bitterness of what *should* have been if only we’d taken a different path.

“I should go back to my room.”

She wants me to tell her not to. *Fuck*. I want to tell her not to. But my words don’t come, so with regret in my gut and self-disgust in my heart, I watch disappointment claim her eyes as she climbs from my bed, picks up her clothes, and leaves my room without looking back.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## GABRIELLA



*I* pee but don't shower, wanting to keep everything about what Lorenzo and I shared all over me for as long as I can.

Sliding my arms into my shirt, I hold it at my sternum, transfixed at how much bigger my nipples look, swollen from his mouth and teeth. Minor reddish-blue bruises have formed on the flesh of my breasts, and I touch them gently, hoping they hurt enough that I can remember how he abused them. But I feel nothing but the push of my fingertip, and I frown at my reflection.

Dragging a pair of sleep shorts up my legs, I cup my sex. A twinge of pain tightens my core, and I shut my eyes, enjoying the discomfort. I expected blood when I cleaned myself up, but Lorenzo must have cleared that away when he gently wiped me clean with a warm cloth in his room. That vision alone is enough for my stomach to contract, pulling at my apex in delicious intent. A man, dangerous enough to command the underworld, attended to my sensitive flesh after claiming my virginity with an affectionately tender touch and a look of reverence on his handsome face.

I brush my teeth, staring at my reflection. What just happened with Lorenzo might very well have been the *first*

thing in my entire life that I've taken for myself. I let the rules my mind insists I follow fall to my feet, and I've *never* felt more empowered. Even at Lorenzo's mercy, I was liberated.

Switching off the light in the bathroom, I move back into the room, yawning loudly. My yawn morphs into a yelp as I come to an abrupt halt. Lorenzo sits in a large armchair that wasn't there before, a mere foot or two from the bed.

"What are you doing in here?" I look at the open door toward his room and then back.

He holds a glass of whiskey against his knee, swirling the liquid around the glass contemplatively.

Boy has been busy—moving furniture and procuring himself a drink all in the time it took me to clean up.

"Just do me a favor and go to sleep, Gabriella. I'm in no state to try to explain thoughts that *I* can't even decipher."

The resignation in his tone forces me to accept his reasoning without further argument. He doesn't know why he's here, and I understand that in a way I refuse to vocalize, because the second I saw him in my room, a relief I wasn't expecting settled inside me.

"Good night," I respond.

"*Ci vediamo nei tuoi sogni.*"

I pause, knee on my bed. "Do I want to know what that means?"

"I'll see you in your dreams," he murmurs distractedly.

I climb into bed, pretending his words don't cause my legs to shake. Giving him my back, I snuggle beneath the comforter.



Five minutes ago, I felt peacefully lethargic. Sleep was ready to claim me, and I was happy to welcome it.

Now, Lorenzo sits in my room—in a chair he dragged in from somewhere else in the house—mere steps from where I’m curled up, and sleep is the last thing on my mind.

I roll over, blinking to adjust my eyesight in the dark.

His face is downturned, his focus on the screen of his cell. He sips whiskey casually, resting the glass on the arm of the chair he’s spread over. “You’re staring,” he murmurs, not lifting his gaze from his phone.

I don’t speak, and I don’t look away.

The sockets in his eyes are deep, discolored, and heavy.

“You don’t sleep much.”

“Consequence of my occupation.”

“Are you less formidable as a mobster if you’re well rested?”

That makes him laugh, and I smile against the blanket. “The family is a business. Multiple businesses,” he explains. “I have... *managers* helping me to ensure things run smoothly, but in the end, I’m responsible for every arm of the corporation. Vigilance is my greatest strength. My eyes and ears always have to be open. Otherwise, the unit of my family buckles, and I refuse to let it collapse under my rule.”

“You don’t have time to sleep.”

“Many of my business undertakings arise while the moon is visible.”

I readjust my pillow. “It all makes sense.”

“What does?” He finally lifts his head, searching for me in the moonlight.

“Why you’re such a moody asshole... You’re an insomniac.”

He smiles. “No, it’s not that. It’s little liars with pretty tits that make me moody.”

“Will you read into it if I ask you to sleep beside me?” I ask before I can stop myself.

He waits long enough that I think I’ve upset him before he responds. “Depends. Will you read into it if I say yes?”

“No,” I promise.

He stands, swallowing his whiskey in one gulp. He moves toward the bed, three steps, and he slides his empty glass onto the bedside table. He removes his jeans, leaving him only in his boxers, lifts the comforter, and climbs into bed. A pillow stuffed underneath his head, he lies on his side, watching me in the dark.

“You smell like me. Like us.”

“So do you,” I reply.

Which means he didn’t want to wash *us* from his body either.

“How is it possible that no one ever *kissed* you?”

I find his hand in the dark, wanting to feel anchored to his voice. “I kept to myself. Getting close to people was never an option.”

“Still,” he argues, “teenage boys don’t care about *knowing* you. How did they not follow you around like lost fucking

puppy dogs begging for any scraps you wanted to throw them?”

I laugh at the utter disbelief in his tone.

“It’s not funny, Gabriella. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. You’re brave and tenderhearted and playful. You’re seductive. You have a luscious body and a smile that’s the ultimate aphrodisiac. You’re a fucking wonderland for the male species.”

I’m stunned into silence.

“And not one stupid fucker has ever made you feel desired.”

“I don’t need to be desired. Being lusted after by a teenage boy, or any man, for that matter, isn’t high on my need for self-worth.”

“And it shouldn’t be,” he agrees readily. “But sometimes, when the right person *yearns* for you”—his voice drops—“it feels really fucking nice.”

I recall the lust in his eyes as his gaze devoured my naked skin. “It does feel nice.”

He harrumphs, the sound bothered.

“Would teenage Lorenzo have chased me and begged for scraps of attention?”

“I wouldn’t have needed to chase you,” he says confidently. “We would’ve been drawn to one another like we are now. But if you wanted me to, as a teenage boy, yeah, I would’ve fucking dropped to my knees and begged for a taste.”

“And now?” I whisper. “Would you beg now?”

His fingers tighten around mine, but he refuses to answer.

“Did I hurt you?” He finally speaks long after my eyes begin to feel heavy.

I shake my head in the dark. “No.”

“But you’re sore?”

“Just a little.”

He goes quiet again, taking a breath to speak, but then stops himself.

“Tell me.”

“Vincent will be home soon. The issues have been resolved. He’s taking one more day with Bianca at the cabin tomorrow, and then they’ll be home.”

“One day,” I murmur.

“Two nights,” he pushes. “*Fuck.*” He all but spits the word, grabbing my face and pulling me into a kiss.

I go without resistance, leaning over his body to let him deepen our kiss. He makes a jagged sound of relief low in his throat, and I swallow the vibration.

Hand wrapping over the back of my thigh, he yanks me, pulling me onto his body completely. I’m spread out over his semi-naked form, and before I can second-guess myself, I break our kiss. He moves to protest but stops when I cross my arms over my body, grabbing my shirt and sliding it off.

“I want to feel you against my skin,” I tell him, leaning down to kiss him again. But hands on my face, he stops me, his eyes searching mine.

My mouth opens to ask him what he’s doing, but I stop myself because caught in his gaze, I feel it. He’s cataloging the

moment so he doesn't forget it. Etching the open way we need one another into his mind so he can recall it whenever he needs to feel something.

I slide my hands down his arms, letting myself explore. I cup his jaw and run the pads of my thumbs over his lips. He kisses them gently, and something softens inside me. Continuing my exploration, I drag my palms over the tight column of his neck, and the tension in him makes me realize that no one has ever taken the time to worship or appreciate *him*. Fingertips dragging over his chest, they pause at his heart, and I listen more carefully, searching for his heartbeat. It thrums against my fingers, and I tap his chest in rhythm.

“It's racing.”

“It's you.”

I like him like this, his guard lowered, if only slightly.

I slide my hands over his obliques before moving inward to explore the carved expanse of his abdomen. It dips at my touch, and I smirk to myself.

I move, and his grasp releases my face. I kiss his jaw, soft kisses over the chiseled line before letting my lips travel down his neck. A quiet grunt of encouragement puffs from his lips, and I butterfly kisses over his sternum. I flick my tongue against one nipple and then the other. He grows hard beneath me, the insistent nudge of his cock swelling against my stomach. The moonlight cuts across his frame, and I brush the end of his tattoo with my fingertip. Tongue dipped out, I drag it along the tail of the whip, letting the darkest parts of who he is stain my tongue with his sins and awaken my carnal urges.

He snarls as my tongue moves over his shoulder, and the next thing I know, I'm on my back, his large body looming

over me, his eyes black in the shadows of night.

“I was in the middle of something.”

“And I was a fucking second away from shoving my thick cock down your throat and fucking your mouth.”

I gulp.

“It’s dangerous to send a man to the brink, lioness.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me.”

A soft growl of agreement. “No. But when we find a way to fit my cock into your throat, you better believe it won’t be in the dark. You’ll be on your knees, at my fucking mercy, begging me for the privilege with that smart mouth and those vixen eyes. You won’t be able to hide in the shadows, my lioness. When you’re worshipping my cock with that mouth, you’ll be watching me, witnessing my undoing.”

“*Wow.*”

“You’re sore, so I’m not gonna fuck you right now. But we’re gonna take your hard-on-inducing shorts off, and I’m gonna lay back so you can slide your slick cunt against my bare cock over and over again while I play with your pretty fucking tits until you’re screaming my name.”

All I can do is nod, and I do it fast.

He shoves his face into my neck, inhaling deeply. “Fuck, you’re pretty when you obey.”

He slides down my body and takes my shorts with him until I’m spread out and naked before him. His nostrils flare, and his chest heaves, and I can’t deny his words from earlier. It feels really fucking nice to have someone *yearn* for you, their desire so intensely palpable it replaces the oxygen in the room.

He strips his boxers from his body, and the thick line of his cock bounces out eagerly. My mouth waters, and I hate the night a little more than I ever have before because I want nothing more right now than to taste how hard I make him.

“Soon, lioness.”

I look up at him quizzically.

“You said you wanted to taste how hard I make you.”

I said it aloud. My cheeks burn.

Settling back onto the bed, he looks over at me. “Come here.”

I blink.

“Gabbi, baby, *come here.*”

I crawl to him, climbing over his body.

“Let’s get that wet pussy kissing the line of my cock so you can come.”

Lorenzo’s cock sits against his stomach, the size of it so fucking large it almost passes his belly button.

“Forever.”

“Huh?” I reluctantly pull my eyes away from his cock and let them fall on his face.

“Anytime you look at my dick, I want you to look at it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like all your fucking Christmases have come at once.”

“Your arrogance is showing,” I whisper, shifting to push my pussy against the underside of his straining cock. But my

words lack conviction when they trail off on a desperate sound that I couldn't even classify as a moan.

“And once again, it makes your cunt slick.”

I don't even deny him. Rolling my hips, I slide my slit up and down his cock from the base to his pierced tip. “*Fuck.*”

“You're so fucking beautiful.” His eyes are greedy as they drink me in. On my knees, perched over his lap, my hands fist into my hair, and I move my hips in circles.

Hands on my waist, he guides my movements, thick rotations that make me slide over every inch of him. “*Yes.*”

Confident I have my stride, he releases me, and I continue the way he showed me.

His hands move up to my breasts, squeezing them roughly at first before focusing on my nipples. He rubs and plucks and twists, and I ache for more.

My body is confident as I find my rhythm. An energy courses through me in a wave I've never experienced before. I feel *sexy* and provocative. I'm finding my pleasure with a man who prefers to possess it. I'm seductive, and it turns me on more.

“That's it, baby.”

I move low enough that his balls move with me on an upward stroke, and we both groan as they roll under my slippery heat. The cool metal of his piercing massages my clit when I reach his tip, making me gasp *each* time.

“Fuck, Gabbi. I'm gonna fucking blow.”

I fall over him, and he lets go of my tits, holding my hands in his. My movements come faster, my hips helping me chase the high I'm cresting toward.



“Good girl,” he groans. “Grind it. *Yes*, like that.”

“*Enzo*,” I stutter.

“You want to come?”

My body shakes, my teeth biting into my bottom lip hard enough to taste the metallic prick of blood.

“Kiss me and come,” he demands.

My lips crash against his, and the moment his tongue slides into my mouth, my world blows apart. Hips erratic, they falter in their movements. Lorenzo presses his palm into my lower back, keeping me flush against his cock.

The spasms in my body are so violent I give up trying to control them, letting myself buckle under the pressure. Lorenzo roars into my mouth, and his cock pulsates heavily between us. I feel thick, warm ribbons splash over our stomachs as he comes in an orgasm loud enough to shake the windows.

I wait until my breathing evens out, then I sit up, eyes in awe of the mess we made. Fingertip to his stomach, I drag it through the not-quite-white but not-quite-clear substance that decorates his otherwise unblemished skin. Smiling to myself, I write my name in his cum.

Looking down as I mark him, he lifts a brow. “What?”

“Just signing my name into my handiwork.”

He laughs.

“Claiming me, lioness?”

“Maybe just a little bit of you. Imagine that, little ole me having a slice of the big, bad boss of the New York family.”

Something changes in his face, but I don't let myself read into it, afraid of the hurt I'll cause myself if I do. Instead, I look away, reaching over the edge of the bed to pick up his discarded boxers.

"It's not a warm washcloth, but it'll do." I force a smile, cleaning the remnants of his climax from his skin, then doing the same to me.

He takes his underwear, throws them off the bed, and rolls us until we're facing one another.

Silence settles between us, and I feel as though I should speak, but he pushes two fingers against my lips when I open my mouth. "Shh, now, baby. Go to sleep."

I close my eyes and curl my body into his. He stiffens for a second but then wraps an arm around me, pulling me into him more forcibly. He drops a kiss on my head just as I fall under, and it's funny how right he was; I do see him in my dreams.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

## GABRIELLA



*M*y eyes flash open on a moan.

The sun has barely risen, soft light creeping through the window.

My back arches and I look down at my body. Nipples hard, stomach hollow from the way I'm bent. Lorenzo lies between my legs, his tongue stretched out, moving up and down in tender strokes through my folds. "Is this okay?"

Lids dropping, I nod my head because, holy heaven, *it's more than fucking okay.*

He hums in contentment, his eyes closing as he loses himself in the moment. Hair disheveled and creases around his eyes; it's obvious he's only just woken up, and I take pleasure in the small fact that he wanted to taste me the second his eyes opened.

I moan, letting my muscles relax into his touch. My hips lift on every upward stroke of his tongue and drop as it descends, chasing the caress against my clit. His eyelids open slowly, smile lines creasing at the edge of his mouth. "*Greedy.*"

"*Yes.*"

Using his thumbs, he slides them over the lips of my pussy affectionately before moving them back up. Rubbing a tight circle against my bud, he pushes the hood of my clit back, tongue making direct contact with the swollen and sensitive nub.

I jack up, body bending in half, hands burying themselves into his hair. “*Fuck, Enzo.*”

His smirk stays firmly in place, and he does it again.

I shove his face away, and he snarls, pushing his face into my pussy.

“*Jesus,*” I breathe, dropping back to the bed.

He bites my thigh in reprimand, and I roll my eyes.

I wait for a second, lifting my hips in search of his mouth. Growling, I push up on my elbows.

He watches me silently.

I stare back. “Why are you stopping?”

He arches a single brow.

“You are insufferable. *Enzo,*” I correct, falling back to the bed.

He rewards me by sucking on my clit.

“Fingers,” I demand, wanting, *needing* more.

“No. You’re not allowed to come.”

“*What?*” I lift onto my elbows once again.

“You’re really fucking with my rhythm.” He crawls over my body, facial hair glistening with my excitement. “Can you just shut up and let me eat my fucking breakfast?”

I can’t help it. I laugh. “You did *not* just say that.”

“I did,” he deadpans. “I woke up a man fucking starved, and the only thing I craved was the one thing that infiltrated every one of my dreams last night... the wet kiss of your pussy lips against my face.”

I gulp.

“You were lying there, naked fucking perfection, and for a second, I thought I was still dreaming.”

I clamp my lips shut.

“Now, can I fucking continue, or do I need to fuck you into obedience?”

My pussy clenches.

His teeth catch on his bottom lip and his neck cords with unforgiving restraint. His eyes close, and his nostrils flare with a feral snarl. “That fucking look. I’ll eat you later. Right now, I need to fuck you.”

Flipping me over onto my stomach, he grabs handfuls of my ass cheeks and squeezes painfully. I can only moan at the aggressive need in his touch. He moves his hands to my hips, again gripping the soft sway of my waist with a possessive embrace. “You’re so fucking soft,” he rumbles, a touch of sleep still slurring his words. “I just want to bury myself in your curves, and fucking die there.”

I drop my forehead onto the mattress.

He lifts and yanks me simultaneously, the forceful tug bringing me to my knees. My ass lands against his crotch, and he rolls his hips, the hard line of his bare cock pressing between my ass cheeks.

“God. If I didn’t need to feel the inside of your devirginized pussy so fucking badly, I’d be begging you to

grant me access to your sweet ass, lioness.”

He thrusts his erection through my cheeks, groaning loudly. “Soon,” he muses.

Wrapping my hair around his hand, he pulls, and I cry out in pain. “Up,” he says, yanking at my hair once again.

I push up on shaky arms. Fitting my back to his chest, he holds me close. He uses his grip on my hair to move my head, giving him access to my neck. He sniffs me, licking the tender skin just behind my ear.

“You make me crazy, Gabbi.”

*Crazy?* I want to laugh in his face. If he’s crazy, I’m certifiably deranged. There is no other reason to explain how I’ve wound up in this position. At the mercy of a criminal underlord who has not only threatened my life but continues to play puppeteer to my future.

Sliding his rough hand down my stomach, he cups me between my legs, growling out my name. “Figure I could slide my hand here whenever we’re together, and you’d be slippery for me.”

I roll my hips, gyrating my apex against the palm of his hand.

He *tsks* me. “Impatient.”

“Enzo,” I cry.

“I know, baby,” he soothes. “I know.”

Inching back, he reaches between our bodies, grabbing hold of his dick. I feel it press against my entrance, and I push back, attempting to swallow him.

One hand on his cock, he wraps the other around my throat, squeezing. He puts his lips to my ear, his breath jagged and hot. “Do not come without permission.”

“I can’t...”

“You can.” He clamps down on my neck, cutting off my air supply. “Do not disobey me, lioness. Don’t make me punish you.” His palm twitches when I attempt to swallow, the pressure against his hand making him smile against my ear.

Nudging the head of his cock inside, a relief settles inside me. Ease quickly replaced with bliss when he thrusts into me shallowly, his pierced crown massaging the engorged center that blurs my vision.

“Careful,” he warns, pulling back and rocking forward so depthlessly that I’ve barely managed to take an inch or two of him.

I’m caught between my need for him to maintain his current cadence and the desire for him to impale me completely, longing to feel the way he stretches me to the point of pain.

“More,” I finally choke out.

“Mm.” He drives forward, plowing deeper but still not fully.

“More,” I repeat, the word scarcely audible against the cage of his hand around my throat.

He plunges in farther, his hand, still cupped between my legs, sliding down to feel where we connect. “Fuck, the way she spreads for me. More?”

I nod, unable to speak because of the unyielding hold of his hand around my neck. It’s hard to breathe, but I stop



struggling. The stress that buzzes through my body loosens my muscles, and every small breath Lorenzo is generous enough to let me take feeds his dominance and twists my arousal into something liken to gratification.

Retreating from my body, my pussy clamps down, attempting to keep him hostage. He growls in approval. “*Hungry cunt.*” He speaks more to himself than me.

My opening locks down on his crown, silently begging him not to leave. He slams forward, filling me completely.

My mouth drops open, but nothing comes out.

My pussy spasms, and my muscles tense.

“*No,*” he growls, repeating the same movement, his hand at my neck loosening to let me suck in a breath before clamping down again.

My tits bounce with the ferocity of his thrusts. His balls slap against our point of connection.

Arm lifting, I wrap it around the back of his head, securing my stability. Not that I think I could fall, his grasp on my throat enough to keep me glued to the length of his frame.

The muscles in his arms pulsate with how hard he fucks.

“*En-zo,*” I scratch out, and he bites my shoulder.

“Ple—”

He slaps my clit with three of his thick fingers.

The beginning of an orgasm tugs at my pelvis, and I clench every muscle I can control, fighting to stave off the climax itching to claim me.

“Good girl,” he praises. “Keep it up. Just a little longer.”

I attempt to shake my head, but I'm trapped, a pawn at Lorenzo's mercy. A sob travels up my throat and a snarl, dripping with egotism, vibrates along his vocal cords.

"Cry for me, Gabbi. Let me taste your tears, and I'll let you come."

His thrusts are punishing. They hurt and thrill me, and they titillate my core until my orgasm sinks its claw in, and I cry out in panic.

My hand reaches for his, scratching at his white-knuckled grip.

"Are you scared?" I expect concern in his voice, not elation.

"*Ye-es.*" But the way my hand chooses to mold against his instead of attempting to pull it away contradicts that scratched-out and broken syllables.

Tongue on my cheek, he licks my face, and it's only then that I realize I'm crying. The salty rivers of tears cascading down my face quicken his already brutal pace.

A small slap against my clit, and he bites my jaw. "Come, *leonessa.*"

I detonate, the bones and muscles in my body turning to mush as I melt into oblivion.

Pushing me forward, Lorenzo grips my hips, slamming inside before jerking to a thunderous climax. "*Luce della mia vita.*"

My body, only seconds ago weightless from pleasure, turns to stone, and I rush forward on the bed. Lorenzo falls forward, sliding from my pussy with an anguished groan as his palms hit the mattress. "Gabbi? What the—did I hurt you?"

Placing a pillow protectively over my body, I shake my head. “Um, no. I... we were done.”

He frowns. “We absolutely *weren't* fucking done. What happened? What did I do?”

“You didn't *do* anything. It's what you said,” I whisper.

Eyebrows almost kissing as he thinks, he scratches his cheek. “*Luce della m—*”

“Don't,” I rush out. “Don't say it.”

He's kneeling on the bed, semi-hard cock hanging between his thighs. I look away, suddenly feeling incredibly small.

“What do you think it means?”

“I don't know what it means,” I snap.

“It's not an insult. It means—”

“Don't!” I yell. “I think I'm gonna be sick.” I jump from the bed.

*“Gabriella.” I pause at the threshold of my mother's hospital room door, glancing over my shoulder expectantly. “Luce della mia vita.”*

*Recalling the million and one other times she's said the exact thing, I smile. “You ever gonna tell me what that means?”*

*“You'll figure it out one day.”*

I slam the bathroom door, my hand cupping my mouth to stop the sob from echoing loud enough to alert Lorenzo.

My mother died within minutes of speaking those words.

Minutes.

*You'll figure it out one day.*

One day.

“Gabriella?” My name rolls along his tongue in affection that only heightens my panic. He knocks softly at the door. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

I exhale shakily. “I’m fine.”

My voice sounds anything but.

He tries the handle, and I squeeze my eyes shut. “I need you to give me some context here, lioness. You tell me I didn’t hurt you, but you’ve locked yourself in the bathroom to cry.”

I inhale through my nose.

“I’m about three seconds away from breaking the door down to wrap you in my arms.” He pauses. “Unless you can make me understand why I shouldn’t.”

My chest shakes with unsteady breaths. “My mother used to say that to me.”

A thump against the bathroom door, and then I hear him slide against it. We sit back to back, a thick frame of wood the only thing separating us.

“And you don’t know what it means?”

I shake my head before the realization that he can’t see me hits me. “I obviously know it means something... *sentimental*? It just became a thing. She’d say it, and I’d ask her what it meant. She’d always say the same thing. *You’ll figure it out one day.*” My voice cracks and I bring my hands to my face.

“Maybe today is that day. I don’t want to take something from Rita, something that was yours, but I don’t want to regret saying it either because it’s beautiful and it’s fitting, and at that incredibly intimate moment, I meant every fucking word.”

I wait for a beat.

*Maybe today is that day.*

No one has ever whispered that specific collection of words to me except my mother. No one, except Lorenzo Caruso.

I swallow, feeling more lost and unsure than ever before. I think that's why I do it, why I push past the resistance I'd been leaning on and take a leap, if for no other reason than to feel her close. "Can you tell me?" I speak so softly that I consider Lorenzo likely won't hear me, and if that's the case, I tell myself that it's okay, that maybe today *wasn't* the day.

But then his throat clears, and he repeats the phrase. "*Luce della mia vita*. Light of my life."

Grabbing my hair at the crown, I drag it all forward, covering my face and crying into the thick and messy locks.

"I'm at an impasse, Gabriella. Do I come in there and hold you? Or do I leave you to grieve on your own?"

Something heavy cracks inside my heart, and it frightens me in a way the threat of death never did when I made the decision to approach these men. "I think it's best that I'm alone," I confess. "Thank you, though, for telling me." I lick the tears from my cracked lips. "And for saying it and meaning it."

*"Lioness."*

"I'd like you to leave now," I whisper through the door.

I hear him stand, then the thud of his forehead against the wood. I hear the distressed sigh that echoes under the crack of the door and makes my tears come on stronger. "You don't have to break alone, lioness. I wish you'd accept that."

His footsteps are quiet on the carpet as he exits my room. Pushing myself up, I move toward the shower. I turn the water on full blast, the pressure enough to drown out the sound of my tears as I lose myself.

*Luce della mia vita. Light of my life.*

The words play over and over again in my mind, except it's no longer my mother's smile and lighthearted voice that brackets the phrase. Lorenzo Caruso's rough and endearing tone now burrs along the sentiment. A man I shouldn't want or care for. A man who holds my secrets in his hands and has the power to destroy me with little to no impact on his own life.

Standing in the shower, I wash Lorenzo from my skin. The past twenty-four hours have been a whirlwind of emotions, making my legs want to give out. Lorenzo went from my knight in sinful armor, building me an escape route from *his* house to my ultimate corruption; fracturing my secrets and burying his fingers, tongue, and cock deep inside my untouched pussy and ruining every one of my preconceived notions.

First and foremost, that sex would be more pleasurable for a man than it would *ever* be for me.

The attention and adoration that man lavished my body with have destroyed me for anyone else.

*Anyone else.*

My stomach twists and I cup a hand over my mouth to stop the bile in my gut from rushing forward.

The truth is, I'm searching for myself, but in the process, I'm losing touch with the person I held most dear, and depressingly, I don't know if who *I* am is worth that loss. Because standing in the shower, I'm building a fucking

monument inside my heart for a man who should never have been an option. I'm becoming amiable to a life I never wanted at the price of my sanity, for what, shreds of affection?

*Two nights.* Now one.

Our expiration date has moved into *hours*. This whole situation is becoming a complication I can no longer endure. Every small act of kindness he shows me hurts a little bit more. Our ending will be painful, it will be messy, and I know without a shadow of a doubt that I need to throw myself into that anguish before it proves impossible to escape.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



## GABRIELLA



*I* dress and spend the next fifteen minutes packing my handful of belongings into the small bag I arrived with.

Vincent is due home tomorrow, and it's best for everyone involved that I'm back in the home I was seeking when I came to New York. With my brother. I didn't put my life on the line for a few mind-blowing orgasms with a mob boss. I did it to find my family. My focus has skewed with the introduction of Lorenzo in my personal space. I came into his home, afraid to know him, for fear I'd find familial affection for him. I never expected to be shot into the abyss of intimacy and longing. Yet here I fucking stand.

Leaving my packed bag on the made-up bed, I ignore the twinge of lust that spreads through my stomach as my memories choose this very moment to engulf me. I shake the images from my mind and make my way downstairs, working out the best way to ask Lorenzo to take me home. *Home*. I almost want to laugh at the absurdity of it all. Home is a stretch. It's more of an ivory tower in which temptation will remain out of reach.

Lorenzo is no longer alone, the deep burr of another voice echoing my descent down the stairs. I move into the living area. Lorenzo stands against the fireplace, his legs crossed at

the ankles and hands tucked into the pockets of a dark pair of jeans.

Prior to coming to Palisades, I'd only ever seen Lorenzo dressed in dark bespoke suits. Granted, I'd only been acquainted with his company a handful of times. But with each one, the expensive material hugged his frame and spoke of money and power. But here, in his home, he's made a uniform of dark jeans and a simple cotton shirt.

His younger brother is perched upon the side of the leather couch, a coffee mug nestled in his hand. "Hey, little liar."

I force a smile in Leonardo's direction. "Hey, Leo. What brings you out here?"

"Business."

I raise my eyebrows, scanning his appearance. Dressed in a fitted pair of dark sweatpants, a matching hoodie, and white sneakers, he looks anything *but* the mafioso he's supposed to be.

"I was gonna do a workout with my brother while I was here, but he says he's busy."

It's only then that I chance a look in Lorenzo's direction. He watches me with the hawk-eye precision of someone equipped to break your soul apart, and I turn my gaze back to Leonardo, feeling safer with his easy perusal.

"Will you be leaving for the city shortly?"

He nods. "Just finishing my coffee, and then I'll be off."

I swallow the lump in my throat, hoping my voice doesn't shake when I speak. "Do you think you could give me a ride?"

He chokes on his drink, lifting his fist to his mouth as he coughs. "Sorry?"

“Vincent will be home tomorrow,” I explain unnecessarily. “I’d like to stay at home tonight. I imagine that’s not an issue?” I find the courage to look directly at Lorenzo, hoping and fucking praying that my face is as impassive as I’m trying to make it.

He stares at me but doesn’t speak. His silence draws out over seconds. Leonardo is quiet, and my body has decided to hold all attempts at breathing until further notice.

“If that’s what you want,” Lorenzo finally concedes, and the disappointment he feels in me is palpable in the expansive room.

I’m caught in his web, the prying barbs of his soul staring into mine with too much knowledge. It takes everything in me to turn away from his silent censure. “So you’ll take me?” I ask Leo.

Eyes a little wider set than usual, he looks at me and then at his brother.

Glancing at Lorenzo from my peripheral, I wait, just as Leonardo does. Eventually, he dips his chin in acquiescence. My breath releases in a slow and purposeful exhale.

“Ah, sure,” Leonardo responds, now that he’s been given approval.

“Great. Thank you. I’ll go grab my bag.”

As I make my way back down the stairs, Leonardo is barking at his older brother in hushed and fiery tones, but Lorenzo ignores him, his eyes narrowed in my direction.

I clear my throat, and Leonardo spins on his heel, lips pursed in annoyance. “Ready?”

I nod.

“I’ll leave you two to say your goodbyes. I’ll be waiting in the car.” Leo grabs my bag.

“That won’t be necessary.” Lorenzo pushes off the wall, leaving the living area without a backward glance. “Safe drive.”

My lips thin, and my eyes itch to watch his departure, but I keep my gaze trained on Leo, knowing it’s safer this way.

The younger Caruso brother steps in close. “I don’t know what the hell is going on here, but if he kills me, I swear to fucking God, I will haunt you until the devil gives me permission to kill you.”

I find it in me to scowl. “You’re so dramatic. Nothing is going on, and if Lorenzo chooses to kill you, it’ll have nothing to do with me.”

He smiles, the gesture holding no humor. “For someone who lies a whole lot, you’re really fucking terrible at it.”

I follow him out of the front door, refusing to give myself permission to look back at the house.

Leonardo drives an Audi R8. It’s sleek and sexy and hints at a lifestyle that the underboss beside me definitely lives. Fast-paced, pretty, and a little dangerous when pushed to the limit.

“Nice car.”

A grin stretches across his face, his threat from only seconds ago now forgotten. “She’s sexy, isn’t she?”

I pull my door closed. “Sure.” I shrug.

He scoffs. “*Sure*, she says. *Sure*.”

“Thanks for driving me home.”

The darkness in his gaze returns, and he stares at me until I turn my face away. “You seemed pretty at home here.” He lifts his chin in the direction of the house.

“I made the best of a situation.” I massage my hands in my lap.

“Why the rush back to Manhattan?” He turns the ignition on, and the car revs to life beneath us. “Necktie would’ve picked you up tomorrow.”

“Necktie?” My brow knits. “Oh, Vincent. The nickname. Why do they call Lorenzo the Whip?”

He reverses from the driveway, and I stare at his profile. My abrupt change in subject isn’t purposeful, a genuine curiosity claims me, and I give in to it without thinking.

A sinister glint in Leonardo’s eye makes me shift in my seat. “When Lorenzo was younger, he made a habit of maiming people who crossed him, specifically their faces.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “With their own belt.”

I lift an eyebrow.

“He forces his subject—be it traitor or foe—to remove their own belt.” His arresting delight in sharing this information with me has me both transfixed and cautious, my ears listening intently to pieces of Lorenzo he refused to show me. “Then he whips it across their face with such force, eyes have been lost.”

I grimace. “That’s disgusting.”

He tilts his face. “It’s not for those who have a weak stomach.”

“What’s your nickname?”

“I’m not telling you.”

A cloak of sadness overtakes me as we wind through the provincial streets I'd grown fond of, but rolling my shoulders, I will it to fall away. "Well, now you *have* to tell me."

He snorts. "No. I don't."

My eyes widen, excitement bubbling in my stomach and doing a half-assed job of numbing the emptiness inside my gut. "Don't be lame. Tell me."

He shakes his head, stretching the fingers on his right hand against the steering wheel before curling them over the leather once again. "It's stupid."

I wait, my eyes unblinking. He glances my way and laughs. "It should be something specific to my talent, right?"

"Talent?" I push.

"With a knife. It should be *Ripper* or something that sounds a *bit* cool."

He wants to tell me because he craves my concession at his statement. He's itching to tell me because he doesn't just *want* me to agree that it's not formidable enough. He *needs* it.

"Please, Leonardo." I'm begging, my hands pushed together in prayer, and he sighs.

"Romeo."

I bite my lip.

"I'm an underboss for the family, and the underworld knows me by a name my father gave me at five years old."

A small giggle escapes my lips, and he turns his head quickly, frowning.

I clamp my mouth closed tightly. "Romeo." I test it on my tongue, then burst out laughing.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh away,” he chides but barely a second later, his laughter joins mine.

He weaves in and out of traffic with practiced ease, the speedometer in his car racing higher with every second.

“I like it,” I tell him. “It’s fitting. Romeo is passionate and... impulsive. Maybe that’s what your dad thought when he gave you the nickname.”

“You’re sweet, G, but it had more to do with the fact that I declared my undying love to any pretty girl who crossed my path.”

“Something, from snippets of conversation I’ve heard, you’ve yet to grow out of.”

Leo honks at someone who cuts us off, flipping him off as he speeds past him through a yellow light. “I don’t declare my undying love for *anyone* anymore. I do like pretty girls, though.” He grins at me, white teeth all on show, the predator in the charm a little intoxicating in the small confines of his car.

“I like Romeo better than Ripper. You’re too charismatic to pull off a nickname with such heinous connotations.”

He moves to speak, but I cut him off. “I’m not saying you’re not heinous. The sheer joy you exude when speaking of your talent with a knife is as much as I need to know. You’re scarier this way. An epithet that alludes to something sweet when, in truth, you’re pure sin.”

Hand to his heart, he pouts. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

I push his shoulder. “I’m looking forward to seeing Vincent.” I change the subject, fearing he’ll jump into stories of his escapades, and I’d like to save myself that nightmare.

“Why does your voice contradict your words?”

“Huh?”

“You say one thing, but the shake in your voice tells me another. He didn’t tell him, you know?”

I turn in my seat, leaning against the door and watching him candidly. “Who didn’t tell him what?”

“Lorenzo,” he answers. “He didn’t tell Vincent that you lied.”

That gives me pause. “He didn’t?”

“Nope.” He pops his *p*. “As it stands, to Vincent, you’re his seventeen-year-old sister.”

“Why?” I ask.

He rolls his eyes. “I wonder.”

“Tell me.”

“All you need to know is that, for now, your secret is safe.”

I don’t know why that eases something inside of my chest. In truth, it should put me *more* on edge. Lorenzo has another secret to hang over my head, only this time, it’s bracketed on a knife edge between myself and the only family member who knows I exist.

“What do you do all day stuck in the apartment?” His phone rings, but he silences it without even checking who it is.

I shrug. “Watch TV. Sleep. Eat. Have made-up arguments with people.”

“*What?*”

“I act out arguments with people. You don’t do that?”



He slams on his brakes, and I grab the dashboard to stop myself from hurtling forward.

“Sorry,” he murmurs. “Red light and no, I don’t have make-believe arguments by myself.”

I wave a hand in dismissal. “Your loss. It’s therapeutic. I think about things that piss me off,” I explain. “And I pretend I can speak my mind about it to the person it pertains to.”

“Give me an example.”

The light goes green, and his car flies forward, reaching his desired speed within seconds.

I think. “Carlo Ferrari,” I say. “I recite what I would have said to him had he still been alive.”

He smiles. “I like this. Who else?”

“Bianca.”

“Vincent’s wife?” He balks.

“Hm.”

His laughter is friendly. It’s free and easy, and it makes me believe I can trust him. “What’s she done?”

“Stole time away that I have with my brother. She exists, so I’m left alone more often.”

He goes quiet, and I hate that I can feel sadness rolling off him.

“Your brother,” I say, ignoring the change in his mood.

It lifts almost immediately. “*Lorenzo?*”

“Hm. He’s so fucking righteous. I have make-believe arguments when I tell him he’s a jerk.”

He side-eyes me. “You had a whole lotta time to tell him that recently.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I’d like to keep both my eyes.”

His thick laughter rolls out through the car, and I let my smile grow.

“You’re a funny little liar, but you need something else to occupy your time.”

“I would be willing to take any suggestions you have that don’t involve exercise under consideration.”

Lips pursed, he thinks for only a second before nodding his head. “Got it. Hold on.”

He takes a sharp turn, traveling back in the opposite direction.

“Where are we going?”

Seconds later, he pulls into the parking lot of a shopping mall.

“Can I trust you to stay here?” He parks.

I remove my seat belt. “Why can’t I come?”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

I roll my eyes. “Why?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions.”

“There is no such thing as a stupid question.”

His lips twist. “Of course, there is. You just asked one. Can I trust you to stay put?”

“Where else will I go, Romeo?”

“First, I’ve killed men for less. Don’t be disrespectful.” His hand moves to his door handle. “Second, I’m serious, G. Don’t fucking run.”

“Where am I going to go?”

He climbs out of the car, leaning down to look me in the eye. “Nowhere. I’m trusting you. I value my life. A lot.”

“You’re being dramatic,” I yell.

He closes the door, staring at me through the tinted windows. “Stay put.”

“I’m not a freaking dog,” I mutter, but he’s already walking away.

Even in sweatpants and a hoodie, people give Leonardo a wide berth. It amuses me in the same way I find it peculiar. Leonardo is the most approachable of the three mafiosos I’ve become acquainted with. He has a laidback and easy aura. But maybe I’m comparing him to the wrong people. If I didn’t know Vincent or Lorenzo, I could see how the menace in Leonardo’s person would be a deterrent. His smile is, more often than not, a little *off*. Jovial, sure, but definitely dangerous and a *smidge* psychotic. Lined up in a row, Leonardo exudes the energy of a Labrador surrounded by a pit bull and a Rottweiler. But on his own, that playful energy denotes something different, something more sinister, and I appreciate that’s his charm; his greatest asset and most formidable threat. He’s unpredictable.

He disappears through the mall doors, and I thump my head against the headrest. His car is impeccably clean. Not a speck of dust or anything else mars the unblemished interior. I sniff. It doesn’t hold the overbearing scent of a *brand-new* car,

but it's immaculate enough that I wouldn't be surprised if he'd bought it before he made his way to Palisades this morning.

I check the time on my phone and shove it back in my pocket before I'm tempted to open the photo app to depress me more than I already am.

Ten minutes pass, and then twenty. I look through the car, checking the center console to find it empty. I open the glove box only to shut it again when I see a gun. I look around, making sure no one is watching me, and then open it again. It lays in the cubby inconspicuously, black and frightening, and just sitting *there*, like a freaking street map. I lift it, surprised at the weight as I lay it on my lap. I don't even know if it's loaded. As I lift it by the handle, someone walks in front of the car, admiring the vehicle. I panic, shoving it back in the glove compartment and slamming the door.

My heart thunders in my chest, and to distract myself from the weapon within reach, I press random buttons on the dashboard and open and close my window at least eighteen times.

Thirty minutes pass.

Opening the car door, I step out into the sunshine. Tipping my face to the sky, I let it shine down on me and smile. I make sure to hold the door open, afraid of locking the key inside and being stuck in this godforsaken parking lot for any longer than necessary.

I turn my attention to the shopping mall entrance, and Leonardo steps out a minute later, hand clasped around one bag, a coffee in the other.

*Motherfucker.*

I narrow my eyes and duck down low, rushing around the back of the car.

A passerby eyes me warily, and I lift a single finger to my lips. They frown, walking a little faster than before to escape me.

Ear turned to the side of the car, I hear Leonardo curse as he steps close to his car. “Gabriella?” he calls, panic in his tone. “Shit. Fuck. Shit. That *bitch*.”

I suck my lips into my mouth, stopping my laughter.

“Gabriella!” he bellows.

His footsteps move closer, and hunched down, I race around the car.

“*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK!*”

Now crouched at the hood of the Audi, I shift closer as quietly as I can. He mumbles something in Italian.

“Gotcha!” I scream, grabbing him by the waist.

Hands still full from his purchases, he whirls around, his foot kicking out to catch my ankle.

“Ow!” I yell.

“Shit, sorry. Are you okay?”

I’m fine but hop on one foot with a pained groan to make him feel bad.

“Fuck, G. Why did you do that?” He ducks into the car, placing the coffee and bag down before moving close to crouch at my feet. His hand moves to my ankle gently, and my laughter starts.

He looks up at me quizzically.

“I’m fine. Stand up.”

Nostrils flaring, he stands upright, towering over me. “You are *not* a nice person.”

“Serves you right for taking so long *and* for only buying yourself a coffee.”

Hand on my door, he gestures for me to get in. “You’re lucky I wasn’t holding a gun. I’m the kind of guy who shoots first and buries the evidence later.”

I slide into my seat. “It’s *asks questions later*, and I knew you weren’t carrying. You left your weapon in the glove compartment.”

He leans in close. “Let me be clear. I don’t ask *any* questions. I act, I move on, *whoops* if I put a bullet hole in the wrong person, and don’t fucking snoop.” He slams the door shut.

He takes a deep breath and opens his door.

“I was snooping because I wondered if you’d only picked up the car today. It’s so freaking clean. How was I supposed to know you’d be carrying a gun around with you?”

He sighs, lips thinning to the point they’re no longer visible on his face. “Another stupid question. I am who I am. Of course, I have a fucking gun. Drink your coffee and shut up.”

He presses the ignition, and the car spurs to life with an aggressive growl.

I look at the coffee cup and back to him.

“Caramel macchiato. Also read, blasphemy.”

“How did you know how I take my coffee?” I pick up the cup and inhale through the tiny opening on the lid.

“I called Lorenzo.”

His brother’s name makes my heart twinge, but I ignore it, bringing the coffee to my lips and drinking. “Thank you.”

He harrumphs.

“What else did you buy?”

He peels out of the parking lot and onto the road with the screech of his wheels that has pedestrians turning their heads to watch. “A different way to kill your frustrations.”

I don’t like where my mind goes, and chin to my neck, Leonardo laughs loudly. “Calm down, G. There are certain lines even I don’t cross.” He gestures to my coffee. “If you get what I’m saying.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



## GABRIELLA



Leonardo bought me a gaming console and a shit ton of violent and addictive as all hell video games.

“What the fuck was that?” I scream into the headset.

“Chill, G.” Leonardo laughs over the line, his captain coming to stand beside me.

I’m standing on the sofa, controller in my hand, and my anxiety is at an all-time high. I feel brilliant and invigorated. But I stink. Because I have no fucking hot water, and Vincent won’t let the regular maintenance guy come up and fix it.

“He almost had me at that fake defuse,” I tell Leo, groaning in frustration.

“If you had died there, you would’ve been back in noob territory, and for my own reputation, I wouldn’t have been able to let you play ever again.”

“Says you,” I argue. “Who was almost eliminated by a bot.”

“G, I gotta go. Business.” The line goes dead.

I rip off my headset and switch off the game. “Lame.”

Since the day Leonardo drove me home, our friendship has grown exponentially. He brought me back to Lorenzo’s

penthouse, set up the gaming system, and spent hours teaching me the ropes. He went through every game and showed me how to kill and survive. He taught me gaming terminology to make sure I wasn't too green when spouting off while playing. He assured me it was more for his reputation than my own, but I also think he gets a kick out of me verbally abusing other gamers with words and techniques he's coached me on. It's now become a habit. Every night, when he's not on business, we link up through some secret war and attempt to complete covert operations into the early hours of the morning. On the nights Vincent is with Bianca and not me—and Leonardo's not occupied with other female company—he'll visit, and we'll play in the penthouse. He's the closest thing I have to a friend, and while, at first, he gave me his time out of pity, I think the feeling of friendship is now mutual. Leonardo loves his life in the shadows of the underworld, but there are times when the toll is too high, and he wants to forget his sins and pretend he's someone else. I give him that.

Switching the TV off with the remote, I reach for my phone, rechecking the time. Still no word from Vincent.

I call down to reception for the umpteenth time over the past two days. I hear Lydia's hesitant tone as she greets me. The woman has had enough, and I want to scream down the line. *Me too, bitch, me fucking too.*

“Lydia, so nice to speak to you *again*. I'm still without hot freaking water. Now, I know Mr. Ferrari told you he would organize a plumber to fix the problem, but I have not been able to shower in two days. Two. Whole. Days. I'm starting to smell here.”

“Miss Gabbi, I understand your frustration.”

I growl. “Do you, though? Did you get to shower this morning, Lydia?”

She doesn't answer.

“I'm about thirty seconds away from storming into reception and asking the first poor soul to cross my path if they will let me use their home to shower. Do you think *Mr. Ferrari* will like that?”

It annoys me beyond recognition that I have to refer to him so properly. God knows what the staff of the building thinks of me. I live in a penthouse owned by the freaking *mob* without being able to tell them Vincent is my brother. I want to march down, stare into Lydia's eyes, and make her believe that I'm not a play toy Vincent keeps in the building to use as he sees fit, even though it looks that way.

“Please don't do that.” Lydia breaks into my panicked thoughts. “I assure you that Mr. Ferrari has promised me he'll have someone look at it today.”

“If you speak to him before I do, please tell him that if it's not fixed before the day is out, I will do as I threatened. I will harass your residents until someone grants me mercy.”

“I'll be sure to tell him when he arrives home.”

“And then I'll murder him,” I add for flair.

I've been shooting people online for too many hours.

“Yes, Miss Gabbi.”

I hang the phone up, screaming at the ceiling.

I busy myself cleaning the living area from the remnants of my all-nighter. Candy wrappers and empty coffee mugs decorate the table and floor. I shove rubbish into cups and

shuffle into the kitchen, dropping them into the sink with a loud clang.

The elevator sounds and my eyes pick up. “Thank fuck,” I groan, moving toward the entrance of the apartment. “Seriously, Vincent, I need a fucking shower—” My feet come to an abrupt halt. “Who the fuck are you?” I ask rudely, a heady dose of fear and surprise eliminating my ability to move.

The woman standing in my apartment eyes me with contempt. Whoever she is, she’s stunning. Thick brown hair pulled back into a high ponytail, her face is free of makeup, save a neutral color painted across her lips. Her skin is plump and unblemished, and her eyes, wide in her face, are almost black with rage.

“Who the fuck are you?” she bites back.

Unease crawls over my skin, and I cross my arms over my chest to hide the way my heart rattles my breastbone. “I asked you first.”

She doesn’t speak, her gaze tracking over my body and back up to my face. Her eyes, which were seconds ago shooting daggers in my direction, blink with sorrow, and I could swear they glisten with moisture I’d bet money on were tears.

“Whoever you are,” I speak again, more gently this time. “You shouldn’t be here.”

My phone is in the living room, and I wonder if she’d notice if I made my way into the space to collect it.

“Shouldn’t I?” she spits, her voice shaking, making the threat far less intimidating. “My husband is keeping you.”

The breath trapped in my windpipe releases, my shoulders sagging in relief. “You’re Bianca.”

I thought my comfort at her name would ease the hostility shining at me, but instead, she laughs, the sound wholly uncomfortable and a little unhinged. “Well, at least he talks to you.”

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was jealous. Torn between her anger and pain, her small frame shakes. I want to move toward her and wrap my arms around her, but something tells me that would be a bad idea.

“Fuck him and his disrespect for keeping his *goomah* in the same fucking building as his wife.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I don’t know what that word means.”

She growls. “It means mistress, Gabriella. *His side piece.*”

My lips twist, and my stomach turns.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is that word not savory enough for you?”

This bitch. This fucking bitch. First, she appears out of nowhere and impedes my time with Vincent, and now she has the audacity to accuse me of fucking my own brother. “No, it’s not. It’s fucking offensive.”

“That’s offensive.” She laughs so loud that I take a step back. “That’s offensive,” she bellows. “Not the fact that my husband keeps an underage girl as his fucking whore.”

So consumed with Bianca’s rage, I don’t see or hear Vincent’s approach until he’s standing beside his wife. “Enough.”

She jumps at his voice. Fist raised, she turns to spit fucking fire, but her words catch in her throat the moment she looks at him. “You’re bleeding.”

He looks down at his white dress shirt, stained with blotches and splatters of red. Taking a steadying breath, he flares his nostrils, and his anger rolls off him in waves. “Not my blood.”

Both Bianca and I grimace.

“What are you doing here, Bianca?”

That wasn’t what she was expecting. She falters backward. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Gabriella.” Vincent looks at me, but my gaze is still stuck on the anguish coiled in his wife’s body.

“Don’t you speak to her before me.” She moves into his line of sight, giving me her back. “You’ve lied. You’ve cheated. You’ve disrespected me enough.”

*You’ve lied. You’ve cheated.*

*My husband keeps an underage girl as his fucking whore.*

My heart hurts for her. She is as fucking oblivious to this world as I am. She has no idea who I am, and the truth in that simple reality, hurts more than I thought it would. This woman is in love with my brother. She’d lay down her life if it meant she’d rest for eternity with him. I gather, by the protective gleam in his eye, that he feels the same way. But even with that level of devotion between them, he still doesn’t want to admit that I exist.

My brother glances in my direction, apology in his eyes before he settles back on his wife. “I will not be spoken to with such blatant disrespect,” he whispers. “You are laughably misaligned in your accusations. Go back to our apartment and wait for me.”

“No.”

I clamp my lips together in shock. Fuck, even *I* would've listened to the threat in Vincent's tone.

He arches an eyebrow. "No?"

"That's what I said." She lifts her chin indignantly, and I decide right then and there that I love her. "No."

"Gabriella, I will deal with you later."

I want to argue that I haven't done anything, but I hold my tongue.

Grabbing Bianca's hand in his, she attempts to pull hers back, but her fight does nothing. "Let me go. You're covered in blood."

He all but drags her into the elevator with long strides.

"Let me go, you fucking asshole," she screeches, and I lift a hand at my brother in farewell.

It's eerily quiet the moment the elevator doors close, and I stand there staring at the same spot for ten minutes in pure shock.

*That's Bianca. That's Vincent's wife.* The woman he married to protect her. I now understand Lorenzo's bark of laughter when Vincent pulled that memorable line out when telling me he was getting married.

My brother is head over fucking heels in love with his wife. Go figure.

I go in search of my phone.

GABRIELLA

I just met Bianca.

LEONARDO

Ha. She's a fucking spitfire. Wait until you hear the whole story. She's a little liar like someone else I know.

GABRIELLA

Tell. Me.

LEONARDO

No. Vincent would carve up my neck, and I have plans tonight.

GABRIELLA

I don't like you anymore.

LEONARDO

You've always been such a terrible liar.

I smile, throwing my phone onto the sofa.

I've managed to avoid Lorenzo for weeks. He's kept his distance, and by kept his distance, I mean he's made certain our paths haven't crossed. Not once. I don't know whether to be offended or relieved. A bit of both, most likely. I had to delete his number from my cell phone, afraid I'd give in at a tender moment and beg him to come and see me. I've settled for sliding my hands into my underwear when I'm alone at night, thinking of the way he used to make me cry.

It's an odd feeling to miss someone while they're still alive. I miss my mother daily, but that's understandable. Missing Lorenzo seems ridiculous. I know he's around. I know he's safe. He's just not *around* me. We both knew what we



shared wasn't lasting. We knew it would end, yet that realization only makes me hurt more.

The elevator chimes, and I look up to see Vincent walk in. He's freshly clean and dressed in clothes that aren't stained with blood.

"I like your wife."

He smiles. "I like her, too." He moves in close, dropping a chaste kiss on my forehead. "I didn't keep your existence from her deliberately. I just didn't know how to tell her."

*"Hey, Bianca, it's Tuesday night, and I have dinner plans with my sister. You should come, she'd love to meet you. Or something like that."*

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "She knows about you now."

"Leonardo tells me there's more to the Bianca story, and I should ask you about it."

Shaking his head, he sighs. "Leonardo is a fucking shit stirrer and should mind his own business."

I shrug. "He's my friend. It is his business."

"You guys have become close?" he tests.

"We play video games."

"I like that you're comfortable with him."

"So will you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

My hands find my hips.

"You might not like me very much if I do." His hands slide into the pockets of his pants.

I say nothing. I can't dispute his claim, so why try?

"Our brother Roberto was... *betrothed* to Bianca's sister, Caterina."

I place a hand over my heart. "Another arranged marriage, how beautifully archaic."

He turns and walks away.

"Okay, okay." I rush after him. "I'll keep my ad-libs to myself."

He turns back. "You think I'm dangerous? Roberto was... he was..." He exhales in a way that makes me step closer. At first, I consider that Roberto's death is the cause of the torment in his eyes, but when I look closer, he's not saddened by the loss. His brother's sins burden him, and I wonder what a man could do for Vincent to regard him so evil. "He was rotten, Gabriella. I'm so glad you never met him."

I'm glad I didn't meet him too.

"Bianca tried to save her sister, and at the same time, the family was looking to... extinguish him from our ranks and our lives."

"The family?"

"Me, Lorenzo, and Leonardo."

"You had him killed."

He shrugs. "You don't need to know the inner workings. All you need to know is that Bianca put her life on the line. I was already attracted to her. Her loyalty and fearlessness brought me to my knees."

The vision of Vincent on his knees for anyone is preposterous. But then, I saw the way he looked at his wife. I

saw the deep love and affection crease into his eyes, overwhelming his frustration. He'd die for that woman, and I hate the way my thought runs straight to Lorenzo and why he is so against finding himself lost in the same affliction.

“Bianca has requested that I invite you back to our place so you can use our hot water. I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to have yours fixed. Business came up.”

“The blood.”

A murderous twinkle flashes in his wolf-like eyes. “The blood,” he confirms.

“Let me grab my stuff.”

Vincent calls the elevator. “I have something to take care of. I'm confident you two will get along?”

I shrug. “As long as she doesn't call me a whore again.”

He covers his mouth with his palm. “She called you a whore?”

“She did.”

“She's a little possessive.”

“Just a little?” I pinch my fingers together as the elevator doors close on Vincent's laughter.

I walk into the sub-penthouse cautiously.

“Hi.” Bianca stands awkwardly by the sofa, her hand lifted in a quick wave.

I smirk.

“I'm really sorry for calling you a whore and accusing you of fucking Vincent.” Her humiliation shades her cheeks a bright red, and I almost feel bad for her.

I snort. “It was beyond disgusting.”

She gnaws at her bottom lip. “Yeah.”

Her gaze looks past me toward the entrance of her apartment. “Where is Vincent?”

I follow her gaze. “He said he had something to take care of. But he said you were cool with me using your shower.”

“Yes.” Her cheeks stretch, a wide grin pulling across her face. “Follow me.”

While I know the layout of her home, I follow her as she shows me the way to the guest bathroom. The apartment looks different from when I was here only a few months ago. Bianca looks to have made the space more homey. It’s no longer a void of detachment and emptiness. Bianca’s presence, however short the time has been, has been fruitful for Vincent.

In all my time softly resenting Bianca for her existence in my brother’s life, I never once considered the tumultuous ride she’s been on. She was married off to my brother, shipped away into hiding after being a person of interest in Roberto Ferrari’s murder, and was under the heartbreaking impression that her husband, whom she is utterly obsessed with, was having an affair. At eighteen, the girl has been through more trauma than most experience in a lifetime.

“I’m really sorry your life is chaotic right now,” she says, the genuineness in her tone making me want to reach out and hug her.

“No different than yours, I guess,” I murmur, working hard to keep my tears at bay at her show of kindness. “Being made to marry someone you don’t know.”

“It worked out. I love Vincent.”

“I can see that. He seems as equally obsessed with you.”

Something changes on her face. Her hunger for reassurance unwarranted. “You think so?”

I arch an eyebrow. “Didn’t peg you for the insecure type. Jealous, for sure, insecure, not so much.”

I’ve embarrassed her, and she ducks her head to hide it. “Vincent isn’t big with words,” she confesses. “I can only read what I see, and sometimes I’m worried I’ve convinced myself that something is there when it really isn’t.”

She waits at the bathroom door, and I step inside, putting my things down. “It’s there.”

She moves to step forward but thinks better of it and steps backward instead. “I’ll leave you to it.”

I spend a *long* time in the shower. I sit on the tiled floor and let the water cascade over my body in a rain of distraction.

Bianca’s appearance today shook me more than I care to admit. I’ve been so set on demanding Vincent and the family give me more freedom, yet the moment an outsider stepped into my comfort zone, I’ve become unresolved. Bianca, in all her grace, took one look at me and decided I was a whore. Is that the welcome I’ll be forced to endure based on my mother and father’s indiscretions? If that’s the case, maybe hiding isn’t such a bad idea.

Hair washed, body clean, I dry my skin with one of the thick towels left out for guests. I dress casually and make my way back into the living space. “Hot water is a luxury I never care to go without. I’m spoiled, but whatever.”

Bianca stands from doing absolutely nothing on the couch. “Would you like some lunch? I’m not the greatest cook, but Heather, our—”

“Rain check?” I cut her off, regretting it immediately when disappointment settles into her forced smile. “I think I’m just going to go home and take some self-care time. I can’t remember the last time I actually dried and styled my hair.”

“Of course.”

I move toward the elevator and hit the call button.

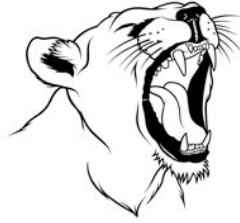
“Gabriella?” Bianca calls, and I turn around. “I really am sorry. I called you some horrible things because of my own fears, and I’m really ashamed.” She’s on the brink of tears, and I hate that I feel them in my own eyes. “I’m hoping we can be friends.”

Her words crack something inside me, and my heart sings with acceptance. Friends. A proper fucking friend who *knows* me. She knows where I came from and what I’ve been through, and still, she wants to be my friend. “You’re forgiven. I imagine if I found the man I loved keeping another woman, I would react similarly.” I imagine being forced to watch Lorenzo with another woman, and I’m taken aback by the thought. First, by how significantly heartbroken I’d be in the circumstance, and second, and more importantly, when I thought of love, Lorenzo was the first person to come to mind. “I’d like us to be friends, too.” I distract myself from my confusing thoughts. “I don’t have too many of those.”

“Me either,” she confesses quietly, and I decide then and there that I’ll make it my mission to make sure Bianca Ferrari and I are the best of friends. The loneliness that flashes in her watery eyes when she confesses that heartbreaking secret resonates with a part of me that I thought I’d forever have to accept would never change.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

## LORENZO



“*D*id you deal with your wife?”

He knows I’m referring to the situation only days ago when Bianca stormed into our club, walked in on Leonardo torturing a man who didn’t understand the word *no*, and then proceeded to attack one of our whores. A whore, who, I may add, was one of her friends. She didn’t think we were aware of her budding friendship with Trixie Madden. Stupid girl, she was our biggest fucking bargaining chip up until Vincent married her. We knew everything about her. What she ate, who she spoke to, how often she used the John and whether she waxed her fucking cunt. Then she went all out ballistic on the woman in *my* goddamn club.

“Trixie tried to fuck me. I made the mistake of telling Bianca.”

I check my watch, annoyed that Leonardo is late. He has my cargo, and I’m growing impatient.

“Just because you expect him to be early doesn’t mean he’s late,” Vincent comments, reading my irritability.

“I’m on edge,” I reply. “I’d like to see blood.”

Vincent smiles. “Who does he have?”



My knee starts to bounce, and I stand, hating the curious look Vincent gives me at my blatant show of restlessness. I don't fidget. I don't get rattled, but I've felt less and less like myself over the past few weeks.

"Some fuckwit who lost big at a recent game. He was an outsider. I don't know who granted him access. Anyway, he waited for one of our regulars in the parking lot and followed him home. Fucking prick shot him in the back, and the guy bled out in front of his wife."

Vincent doesn't react.

"You didn't answer my question about dealing with your wife."

He shrugs. "Sure. I dealt with it." There is something light in the way he speaks, and it aggravates me so significantly that I fucking snap.

Rushing at him, I wrap my hand around his throat. "Your wife is disrespectful. She's been given lenience after fucking lenience because I respect you." Spit flies from my mouth and hits his face. He still doesn't react. "I will not fucking stand for it again. I'm not stupid enough to threaten your wife," I grit, letting go of his neck. "But the next time she steps out of line, you will wear her punishment. Am I understood?"

He remains impassive.

"I asked you a fucking question!"

My best friend stands, readjusting the sleeves beneath his suit jacket before fixing the button into place. "I serve you, Caruso, and I do it honorably. I would drop to my knees and take *any* punishment deserved, but if you put your hands on me again to *threaten* me, we'll have a problem."

Something has changed between us. Only months ago, we were an impenetrable unit. Now, with the introduction of Vincent's virgin bride, the waters are muddied. Vincent's allegiance is no longer dedicated to the family, to *me*. It sits comfortably on the shoulders of a pretty brunette who tried to undermine my authority.

I'm seething. My fury makes my skin itchy.

Moving to the bar, Vincent leans across it, pulling a bottle of vodka and two shot glasses out. He moves toward me before pouring the shots. He hands one to me and takes the other.

"Bianca will not disrespect you again. You have my word. She's violently in love and unsure what to do with her pent-up rage of attraction."

*She's angry because she wants to fuck* is what he's saying. He doesn't add that he's serving her needs regularly enough to calm her down, but his smile suggests it all the same.

"She called Gabriella a whore this morning."

I shot my vodka so my best friend doesn't see the way my irises blow out at his sister's name.

"So they're friendly." I smirk.

He pours us another. "They have a shopping date planned tomorrow," he tells me. "Andre will be with them. I need to start giving Gabriella more freedom. She's starting to become addicted to that fucking game your brother plays."

My hand tenses around my shot glass. I've avoided everything to do with Gabriella Ferrari, *Smith*, or whatever fucking name she wants to go by for weeks now.

I don't visit Vincent's building. I remove myself from every conversation that relates to her, changing the subject if Vincent or Leonardo brings her up. I tell myself it's because I have a zero percent care factor, but I know it's self-preservation.

“What game?”

He acts out holding a gaming controller with his hands. “They're obsessed. They're on it every fucking night. Screaming and carrying on.”

I grunt, shooting down another vodka.

“It got me thinking.”

I wait.

“She'll be eighteen soon.”

*Or twenty, but who's counting?*

“And?” I know what he's getting at, but I keep my face blank as I watch him.

“If she's married to someone of note, someone of power... there are other families, other institutions that we could benefit from with such an arrangement,” he explains, oblivious to the way my blood boils. “What's Big Joey going to do if he discovers her parentage when she's married to a boss? Start an all-out fucking war?”

He's not wrong. I've thought the same fucking thing. Aside from killing half the family or more, marrying Gabriella into power is the only option I can think of that will offer her the greatest level of security.

*She explained how I would be used as an asset, all but sold off to the highest bidder or the biggest swinging dick. Lorenzo Caruso would send me off to whomever he pleased.*

“You’d send her away?” Vincent doesn’t notice the way my voice catches over my words.

He sighs. “I don’t want to. But what options do we have?”

I blink, waiting for him to ask *me*. It’s fucking obvious, but he doesn’t.

“Caruso,” I say without thinking.

“Leonardo? Do you think he will do it? Well, he doesn’t have a fucking choice, does he? They’re friends. I think I could broach it with her.”

My mind is reeling. He jumped straight to my brother. Not me. Not the fucking *boss*, his underling. My brother is formidable, sure, but *I’m* the fucking Caruso name.

I can’t say that, though, not without confessing *why* Gabriella would be better suited to me.

Because, in reality, she’s not.

I won’t marry her because I won’t marry, period. Vincent knows this, which is why he overlooked me, but I hate him for it all the same.

“You’ll speak to Leonardo?” he says. “And I’ll speak to Gabriella.”

“She’ll hate it,” I tell him.

“She hates being a prisoner more.”

I don’t deny him because I know he’s right. I built her a goddamn escape route in my house for that very reason. It still sits there, mocking me. Reminding me of the things I stole from her, the moments of weakness she let me keep because she wasn’t strong enough to deny me.

*Luce della mia vita.*

*Light of my life.*

The house is overflowing with memories I hate to live with but am petrified will leave me. I stole chunks of Gabriella's soul, but she fucking *destroyed* mine.

“This motherfucker!”

We both turn at Leonardo's voice.

He's sweating and bleeding, lugging an unconscious body over his shoulder. Stumbling toward us, he drops it with little finesse onto the floor at our feet. The bruised and bloodied body lands on its shoulder before rolling onto its back.

“I wanted him alive,” I murmur.

Hands to his hips, Leonardo's entire frame heaves with the effort it takes him to catch his breath. “He is fucking alive, Lorenzo. I just had to get creative with transporting him to you. He likes to fight.”

I tilt my head, looking at the man who could've unraveled an essential piece of my business with his greed. It's always the same. Men who can't afford to gamble are the biggest punters. They have the most to lose, yet they put it all on the line and cry for mercy when they're on their knees looking for handouts.

“Well, let's untie him, then. Let him fight.”

I look at Leonardo, who looks at Vincent and then at me. “You've gotta be kidding. I just lugged his sorry fucking ass here. You untie him.”

Vincent rolls his eyes. “You're always so fucking dramatic.” He pulls a knife from somewhere on his body and carves into the ropes keeping him contained.

Picking up the vodka bottle, my brother takes a heavy swallow, shouting at the way the alcohol burns his throat.

“Go find some snow out back, Leonardo. Let’s wake him up a little faster. I’m feeling impatient. He’s also in fucking gym shorts, so find a belt in the office for me to play with.”

Leonardo returns within a minute, dropping a thick leather belt onto the table before leaning over the semi-conscious and groaning lump at my feet. He slaps his face. Lifting a small silver contraption to the man’s nose, he tilts his head back. “Sniff.”

The guy, feeling the tickle of a foreign object in his nostril, does as instructed.

We wait.

“Give him more,” I tell my brother.

More blow, and the guy comes to, pushing Leonardo on his ass as he struggles to his feet.

“What the fuck?” He holds a fighter’s stance, looking left and right before settling his gaze on me.

“Do you know who I am?”

He nods.

“Speak.”

“Caruso.”

I dip my chin. “Good. So I don’t have to explain why you being here right now isn’t good for you.”

He swallows. “I didn’t do it.”

I step closer to him. “*Shhhhh*. We don’t need to lie. We all know the truth.”

He glances toward the exit.

“Maybe you could make it,” I tell him. “What is it? Between twelve and fifteen feet? But as you’ve seen, my brother here”—I point toward Leonardo—“he’s persistent. Maybe you’d make it outside the building, but with a bullet wound to the leg.” Vincent shoots him in the back of the knee, and he falls face down, wailing on his descent. “I don’t think you’d be able to outrun him, and he’s already mad.”

Leonardo has removed his knife from its sheath against his calf, turning the handle with the sharpened point of the blade pressed into the pad of his finger.

“Now, I could stand here and ask you why you did it, but in truth, I don’t fucking care. You’re going to die, and I’m feeling particularly bitter, which means you’ll have to bleed.”

“No,” he cries into the carpet. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Leonardo,” I call. “Do me a favor and remove his tongue. He’s starting to annoy me.”

My brother obliges eagerly, a psychotic flick in his smile as blood rushes over his hands and clothes as he hacks away at the struggling muscle in the man’s face.

Face in the disgusting bodily fluid and booze-stained carpet, his body writhes in pain. I move to stand over him. “Usually, for this part, I make a man get on his knees—so he learns how to beg—but you’re not a man, you’re a coward. So we’ll sit you in a chair.” Leonardo and Vincent lift him on cue, sliding him into a plush armchair. He falls forward, and Leonardo, a piece of rope in hand, ties him up to secure him. “You’ve lost a kneecap. Your tongue.” He grunts unintelligible words, but it continues to frustrate me. “Let’s go for the

trifecta, hey? What's the loss of an eyeball or two when you can't fucking speak or stand?"

He whimpers.

Like I said, *coward*.

Belt in hand, I slide it through my palms, lifting it over my shoulder only to bring it forcefully down across his face.

Images of Gabriella with an axe fly into my mind, and I whip him again and again and again. Dark hair muddled with bark, cheeks flushed with exertion, cold, and thrill. Shades of color that match her nipples. My cock grows stiff, and I roar in fury. Warm splatters of blood coat my face and clothes, and still, I thrash the belt against the ripped and oozing skin. I envisage burying my cock inside her and feeling the way her hips lift to swallow more of me in, and then it's Leonardo with his cock inside her, and I drop the belt, pull my gun from inside my jacket and shoot the motherfucker in front of me five times.

"Well, there goes the rest of our fun, you selfish twat."

I ignore my brother, sliding my gun back into its holster. "Get someone to clean this up, then come see me in the office. I have something I need to discuss with you."



# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## GABRIELLA



“*Y*ou have a sister?”

Bianca nods, sliding her foot into a bright red pump. “Caterina, she’s sweet. You’ll like her. I have a brother too, Antonio.”

Vincent caved to Bianca’s request that we go shopping. I don’t want to know *how* she convinced him. All I know is that I’m with my sister-in-law in downtown Manhattan, and I almost, *almost* feel like an average woman with a life and friends.

“Have your siblings been married off like you were to Vincent?”

She frowns at my choice of words but doesn’t comment. “Not yet. But soon, for Caterina, anyway. She’s only sixteen at the moment, soon to be seventeen.” She holds her leg out and up, admiring the shoe. “Before I married Vincent, an arrangement was made with the Chicago outfit, and I was promised to the head of their enterprise. A man by the name of Salvatore Bianchi. Caterina will take my place now.”

“Don’t you hate it?” I implore. “This system that dictates you’re all but sold off to the highest bidder.”

She lets out a long breath and removes the stiletto from her foot, placing it back on the display case. “I had my reservations and was horrified when my matches were made. Sure”—she shrugs—“it’s antiquated, and more often than not, it ends in disaster and loneliness. But so do marriages that people invest decades in. These people around us”—she holds her arms out—“have fallen in love the *right* way and have made a choice to pledge their life to someone. But life gets in the way and derails what they thought was love. At least this way, I’m protected by some form of honor. I’m cared for, and *I’ve* been lucky. I love Vincent, and whether he loves *me* is still to be determined, but I know he cares deeply for me. He *fights* for me.” She turns the wedding band on her finger. “He *protects* me. He shows me intimacy like I never imagined existed.” Her cheeks shade. “I’m happy, so how can I stand here and tell you I wish it never happened?”

I accept her reasoning without further argument because she’s right. Why would she reject something that brought her love? In the grand scheme of things, does it matter *how* it happened? A journey is that, and the focus should be on the destination, not the quest, however hazardous it may be.

“Does it work the same for men?” I ask her, passing her a gladiator sandal that she shakes her head at. “Will your brother be told who to marry?”

She hums in affirmation. “Yes. It’s the way of the family, Gabriella. Unions are hatched to bring security and prosperity.”

“What of Leonardo and Lorenzo?” I turn my face away, pretending to look at a ruby-colored boot. “Will they marry?”

Bianca makes a noncommittal noise. “Leonardo definitely. Lorenzo, I don’t think so.”

*I won't marry, so I need you to remove any preconceived notion that I might fall in love from your mind, for both our sakes. Love and marriage make men weak.*

“Why?”

She glances over her shoulder, making sure her driver Andre stands far enough away so he doesn't hear her gossiping. She drops her voice. “Lorenzo has refused every marriage arrangement brought forward, no matter the power, the political, or monetary opportunity he would gain from such a union.”

I want to shake her for pausing and demand she elaborate, but she continues before I'm forced to resort to violence.

“Lorenzo was very young when his mother was murdered,” she tells me. “*Brutally*. The story is horrible. The man who killed her shot her in front of Lorenzo. He was only nine at the time, just a little boy.”

I cup my hand over my mouth to hide my gasp. This part of the story hurts Bianca to speak of as well. She would have been too young to recall the details, but the mere mention has the color draining from her face in anguish.

“He set a record that day, one that hasn't been broken. He's the youngest family member to claim his first kill. He shot the man who took his mother's life in the back that same day.”

“*Jesus.*” *At nine.*

“His father took issue with the fact that his nine-year-old son chose to shoot someone when their back was turned. He whipped Lorenzo publicly for humiliating him with cowardice.”

*Whipped Lorenzo publicly.*

*When Lorenzo was younger, he made a habit of maiming people who crossed him, specifically their faces.*

He learned to stare people in the eye after being punished for being too afraid to do it as a child. Fucking hell. Bile rushes up my throat and burns as I swallow it back down.

“Obviously, Lorenzo has never outwardly told anyone that’s why he won’t marry. But watching your mother die so cruelly likely fucks with your emotional range.”

I sit down on the first available seat we wander past, my mind reeling and my heart turning to mush. Bianca continues looking at clothing, picking items up, and trying them on but never buying them.

Eventually, she tells me she’s finished with a tilt of her head to the door. Linking my arm in hers, I leave the store with her. And to distract myself from the horror story Bianca just laid down at my feet, I busy myself by ridiculing my sister-in-law for not spending more of Vincent’s money.

“Are you ready for lunch?” she asks, changing the subject. “I’m starving.”

“Tommy Bahama?” I look over the street and point to a few storefronts ahead.

We’ve barely taken two steps when a woman steps directly into our path, calling Bianca’s name.

She takes a step back, and I move with her. “Leave me alone.”

The woman tracks the street obsessively with her eyes, searching for something or *someone* who has her on a knife’s edge. The way she called Bianca’s name set a fire of anxiety alight in my gut. Hair messy, her clothes loose, she looks like a junkie waiting for her next fix.

“Let’s go.” I grab Bianca’s hand and drag her away.

“I’m sorry,” the woman cries.

“It’s not good enough,” Bianca replies, and I want to tell her to stop talking, to ignore the unhinged lady. “You should go. He’ll kill you if he thinks you’re harassing me.”

*He meaning Vincent.*

“You don’t think anything is wrong with that?” She grabs Bianca, and shock lacerates through me.

I look for Andre, who went in search of a bathroom only moments ago. It seems hideously coincidental that the moment Bianca’s shield is out of sight, this woman appears. Which means she’s been following us, and something uneasy and familiar slides up my spine.

“Of course there is, but I can’t do anything about it. Leave me alone.” Bianca yanks her arm back.

The woman steps forward again, but I move into her path. “Girlfriend, you heard her.”

Her eyes catch on mine in a flicker of recognition, and I stand there stunned, wondering why this woman harassing Bianca looked at me with a discernible glower.

“We’re friends.” She finally speaks, not looking away from me.

Bianca moves to stand in front of me, but it’s no use, I’m taller than her, and the woman is undeterred by the distraction.

“Are we?” Bianca snaps in her face. “Because I can’t imagine a friend I’d like to call mine who would be so willing to fuck my husband.”

Finally, she looks away from me. “You asked me what he was like... I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“I asked you that before he was *mine*,” Bianca yells.

“*Yours?*” The woman laughs. “Vincent doesn’t belong to you, Bianca. Surely you know that? He’s a criminal.”

“Don’t speak about things you don’t understand.”

Something changes in the air. This woman approached Bianca with desperation and distress, but within a blink of her too-seeing eyes, she moved into an irrational state of anger. “I understand more than you ever will.”

They yell back and forth for a few moments longer, but I tune it all out. My brain is working overtime, and I rush through memories trying to place this woman desperate to win Bianca’s affection and attention.

I blink back to reality when Bianca moves away, leaving me alone with the psycho blonde. I spare her one last glance before following Bianca.

“Who was that?” I rush to Bianca’s side.

“Trixie. I thought she was my friend, but then she tried to fuck my husband.”

My eyebrows disappear into my hairline, and I glance back across the street. *Trixie* stares at us, or more stares at *me*, and the hackles on my neck rise. Her fists are clenched, despair forcing her to take a step forward, but Andre rushes toward us from farther down the street, and she thinks better of the move, turning on her heel and disappearing in the other direction. “Mrs. Ferrari, are you okay?”

“Yes,” Bianca answers quickly.

“I ducked into the bathroom and only made it back to the car to see you walking away from her.”

Bianca touches his shoulder in reassurance. “Andre, it’s fine. She only tried to speak with me.”

He smiles at her words, but his brows knit together all the same. “I should call Mr. Ferrari.”

“Please don’t.” Bianca looks on the verge of tears, and I wrap my arm around her. “Gabriella and I are having a wonderful time, and we’re not ready to leave.”

“I have to call him. But I’ll wait until you’ve started eating,” he concedes.

I wait until we’ve been seated before speaking. “She looked really familiar.”

“Who? The maître d’?”

“Trixie,” I correct.

Bianca doesn’t seem interested in the thought.

“Has she been on TV?”

“Not that I know of. I’m going to get the shrimp salad.”

“Ahi tuna bowl for me,” I respond. “Too bad we’re too young to order a martini.”

“Vincent is going to be murderous enough with Trixie accosting me in the street.”

I laugh. “Maybe he’ll understand why you need a drink.”

After we order, Bianca jumps back into the game of asking me eight million questions.

“How long ago did your mom die?”

“Wow. That got deep fast.” I cough.



“Sorry. Forgive me.”

“It’s fine.” I pick up the glass of water the server just placed in front of me. “About six months ago.”

“*Gabriella.*”

I bite my lips to stop them from spreading into a watery smile. “Yeah, it’s still pretty raw.”

We trade stories about life and how I came to find out about the family. I give her the bare bones of my story, not quite up to diving in further.

“Isn’t this sweet?” Vincent touches my shoulder in greeting and leans down to kiss his wife. “No sign of Trixie.”

“Lucky for her, I’m guessing.”

Vincent picks at Bianca’s food, and she watches him.

“I’m concerned about Trixie’s motive,” he finally shares.

“What do you mean?” Bianca asks.

He chews his food. “How did she know you were shopping on Fifth Avenue?”

“Coincidence,” Bianca suggests, and I have to hope she’s grasping because she can’t be that naive.

Vincent orders a drink and continues discussing the woman who has railroaded our shopping date. Talk about drama. The first day out exploring, and some witch fucking ruins it with her bleached hair and terrible lip liner.

“I’m placing security on you for the time being until I can be sure she doesn’t mean you harm.”

An argument ensues. Then they start kissing and don’t stop.

“Okay. That’s enough. Family member sitting at the same table.”

Vincent turns a murderous glare my way. “Lower your tone talking about family when we’re in public. Ears are everywhere.”

I roll my eyes.

“Enzo and I have been speaking,” he murmurs, avoiding my eyes.

“Oh.”

“My protection won’t be enough when we tell the family about you.”

Something about his tone has my body curling in on itself, and I scowl.

“You’re eighteen in a few months.”

My stomach churns, and the tuna I just ate makes me want to barf all over the table. “And?”

“Vincent,” his wife warns.

But he ignores her. “I’ll need you to marry.”

I knew it was coming, but hearing the words aloud closes my throat over completely. “What?”

“We’ll talk about this when fewer people are around.”

“We’ll talk about it now,” I retort. “You’re the one who brought it up. How can I not be old enough to order alcohol but be old enough to sign my life away to an outdated institution?”

“Lower your voice.”

“I’m not a fucking possession. I won’t be a mindless doll who agrees to marry a man she doesn’t know.”

Bianca sucks in a sharp breath, and shame hits me deep in the chest. “Sorry.”

“We’ll talk about this later,” he repeats.

“Who?” I ask. “What old sicko am I supposed to marry?”

Sitting back in his seat, Vincent pulls at his shirt cuffs. “Enzo suggested Leo.”

I’ve been stabbed. Multiple times. Right in the fucking heart. “Lorenzo suggested his brother?” I talk through my teeth to stop the sob in my throat from escaping.

“He’s a good fit,” Vincent encourages, and I want to throw my glass at his head. “He’s second-in-command, Gabriella. No one in their right mind would cause an issue with your existence if you were linked to the boss.”

I know I shouldn’t, but I ask the question anyway. “Why not Lorenzo, then?”

My brother frowns. “You’re too young for him.”

I slump back in my chair with an indignant laugh. “He’s younger than you. I’m the same age as Bianca.”

*Or older, but your boss hasn’t told you that little tidbit.*

“Bianca’s and my relationship is none of your concern. You will marry Leo.”

My vision blurs, and I hate that I’m about to cry. I hate that my breath won’t come, and I hate, fucking despise, that a man who referred to me as *luce della mia vita* has decided I should marry his younger brother. “I don’t want Leo.”

“I didn’t want your brother to begin with.” I want to lean over the table and slap Bianca across the face. “But I love him now. If you open yourself up to it—”

“I will never open myself up to Leo,” I grit. “Lorenzo Caruso and his ideas can get fucked.”

“Charming,” Lorenzo burrs.

I should’ve known he would be close by, lurking and watching me break. He sits down, turning his attention to Vincent when he’s just blown my world to smithereens. “Have we located the whore?”

“Apparently, she’s right here.” I smack my chest, refusing to let him ignore me. “Sold off to the first willing bachelor.”

The asshole fucking smirks. “I wouldn’t exactly call Leonardo willing.”

“Well, that makes two of us.” I lean in close, hoping like hell he reads the disgust I hold from him in my eyes.

“Leonardo is popular with women. He’ll please you.”

My eyes narrow so significantly they’re almost closed. “Are you thinking about your brother fucking me?” I lean in close, hoping he’s recalling the times he did just that. “Are you thinking about him making me come?” I whisper.

*Don’t you dare fucking come, Gabbi. You wait for my permission.*

I know he hears it too. The roughly spoken demand whispered against my lips as he breached the entrance of my pussy for the very first time. He hears the way I sobbed and begged and the whimpered give of pleasure as he licked my tears away.

His face twists; longing and lust colliding with fury in a look that tells me he hates the idea of Leonardo touching me just as much, if not *more*, than I do.

A loud bang grabs my attention, and fist to the table, Vincent snarls at me in disapproval. I don't wait for another second. I grab my bag and storm from the restaurant with murder on my mind.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## LORENZO



*A*re you thinking about your brother fucking me? Are you thinking about him making me come?

“You didn’t expect her to take it well, did you?”

Thumbs pressed into my eyelids, I shake my head. My mind is a maze, scattered in a million different directions, with the exception of the more pressing issues that actually require my attention. Instead, Gabriella’s words play on repeat. The snarky barbs she stabbed into me about my brother fucking her.

Has she forgotten that she was the one who left? I said *one* thing that fucked with her head, and she couldn’t run away fast enough. How was I supposed to know that a simple phrase thrown out in a moment of passion would flood her with memories and regrets?

I had artfully avoided her for weeks. Not that distance lessened my longing. If anything, it made it worse. Every waking moment, she consumed my thoughts. I haven’t been able to complete a single fucking task without being railroaded by Gabriella Ferrari. I even found myself collecting my composure before walking into that restaurant today. *Collecting* myself—deep breaths and straightened shoulders in preparation for seeing her. My body was on high alert, and I

despised myself a little more when the only emotion I could recognize when my eyes caught sight of her was relief. *Relief*. My distress subsided, and I felt more like myself because of her presence. What the fuck is that about? A few fucking orgasms and now my entire being has decided that life only makes sense when she's by my side. Talk about voodoo pussy. Gabriella Ferrari has trapped me in a hell I refuse to believe in.

She looked so fucking beautiful. Throwing insults like sharp daggers, I wanted to taste her rejection on my lips. I wanted to twist her fury and turn it into lust. I wanted the potent cocktail of hate and longing to explode against my lips and help me focus again.

My nasty little lioness knew where to cut me too. From the second Vincent brought up a union between her and Leonardo, I haven't been able to get the image of him fucking her out of my head. I wake up hard and give in to the temptation to fuck my fist. I recall the breathy pleas and shocked gasps of pleasure she let me eat up. I elicit the taste of her arousal and climax on my tongue. I rouse the snug feel of her cunt on my fingers and cock, and *just* as I'm about to blow, she moans Leonardo's name, and I want to stab them both to death for betraying me.

"Did Vincent send you a photo of that fucking dog he and Bianca bought? What even is that?"

Pulling my hands from my face, I scowl in my brother's direction. "What?"

He turns his phone toward me, showing me a photo. "This. It's supposed to be a dog, and he let her name it Panda."

"I just fucking told you that Gabriella stormed out of a restaurant, all but cursing us all to hell. She'll refuse to get married. What other option do I have? Kill everyone?"



Leonardo tucks his phone back into his pocket. “I’ll talk to her. She’ll come around.”

*Come.*

I throw the first thing within reach at him.

“Did you just try to stab me with a fucking letter opener?”

“I threw it at you. If I wanted to stab you, you’d be dead.”

He picks up the paper knife, twirling it over his knuckles over and over again. “Who shit in your fucking Cheerios? You’ve been a moody asshole for weeks now.”

I’m saved from having to answer him when my phone rings.

“Vin,” I greet.

“Enzo,” he all but spits down the line. “Trixie has just entered Gabriella’s apartment.”

I stand up. “Are you home?”

“No. I’m not at fucking home. If I were, I’d be calling to tell you we have a working girl with a serious fucking headache. I’m on my way. I’ll meet you there.”

I already have my keys and am storming out the door with Leonardo on my heels. “What the fuck is happening?”

“That whore Bianca attacked the other week has just entered the penthouse.”

“Penthouse?” He slides into the passenger seat of my Lamborghini.

“Gabriella’s apartment, you fucking idiot.”

“Whoa!” he yells. “Hold the insults. Why the fuck would she be visiting G?”

Sometimes I want to shoot my brother. I love him. I'd die for him. But sometimes, when he doesn't use his fucking brain, I want to shoot him between the eyes *just* to relieve the headache he brings me.

"I don't fucking know, Leonardo," I bite out. "Maybe you could tell me since you're such good fucking friends."

He shifts in his seat. "Why don't you just come out and ask me?"

"Ask you what?" I'm seething, red clouding my vision as I weave through traffic and slam on my horn for anyone stupid enough to be on the road with me right now.

"If I'm fucking the girl you're in love with."

My knuckles turn white on the steering wheel, and I push down on the accelerator, flying through a red light and causing other cars to swerve. "Fuck you."

"I'm not, and I don't want to. But if you force me to marry her, and she wants kids..."

"Can you stop running your mouth for one fucking second? One. Fucking. Second!" I bellow, punching the steering wheel. "Where you put your dick is of no concern to me. We have a rogue fucking whore who we should've killed the moment we fired her. She's been harassing Bianca, and now she's in Gabriella's apartment. Something isn't right."

Pulling to a halt in front of Gabriella's building, I open my door. "Anyone touches my fucking car, they die," I tell the doorman as I storm past him.

The elevator takes way too fucking long, and I push the penthouse button over and over again.

Leonardo remains quiet the entire time.

The doors open, and we're met with a fucking scene like I haven't had to deal with in a long fucking time. There's a dead guy on the ground, Bianca sobbing over his lifeless body, Vincent is aiming a gun at my heart, and Gabriella is noticeably absent.

"Just us. What the fuck happened? Where's Gabbi?"

Vincent and Bianca are talking about the dead guy, ignoring me, and I step closer. "Where's Gabbi?"

Still, everyone ignores me. Vincent's placating voice and Bianca's incessant sobs are like nails on a chalkboard, and I crack my neck. "You can grieve your driver another time. Someone answer my fucking question," I yell. "Where is Gabbi?"

I search the room for signs of a struggle, but aside from the dead driver, nothing seems amiss.

"Andre."

"What?" I turn my attention to Bianca.

"His name is Andre," she says, and it takes everything in me not to offer her the same ending as *Andre*.

Vincent saves her life by finally fucking speaking. "Trixie and Gabriella left through the emergency exit on level one. No noticeable injuries for Gabriella, as per the clerk working the front desk."

"What the fuck does a whore want with your sister?"

Vincent shrugs. He fucking shrugs.

"Who is Krista Delaney?" Leonardo yells out from the kitchen.

When he receives no response from anyone in the room, he turns his attention back to the phone call I didn't realize he was on before moving back toward us. "Contact at the FBI says Gabriella was in witsec with her mom up until Rita's death."

"Rita was talking to the feds?" I ask. That makes no fucking sense. "How did our contacts overlook that?"

"Possibly. My guy is looking into it. Likely a need-to-know basis that our guys didn't have access to."

"Leo, do me a favor and take Panda to my apartment," Vincent says.

"Do I look like a fucking lap dog?"

"Take the fucking dog," I snap, wanting our attention on Gabriella and not Bianca and her fucking dog.

"Gabbi recognized her," Bianca finally speaks an iota of sense when Leonardo leaves the room.

"Huh?"

"Gabbi," she clarifies. "When Trixie approached me on the street, she said she recognized her from somewhere. She couldn't place it, though."

"She mentioned it at lunch," Vincent echoes.

"Trixie looked at her funny, too. Stared for a few seconds longer than comfortable. I didn't think anything of it at the time. I assumed it was because Gabbi got in her face. But now that I think about it, there was something deeper to it."

"You think they were friends?" This shit doesn't make any fucking sense. My head hurts.

Bianca shakes her head. "No."

“What then?”

“I don’t fucking know. I’m just telling you what I observed,” she snaps at me, and I have to give it to her; for a tiny thing, she has balls of steel to go up against me like that when I’m hanging on a tight wire of control.

Another phone call from Leonardo’s contact in the feds informs us that our little blonde whore is, in fact, an FBI agent with a hard-on for the mob. It turns out her strategy of choice is harassment, and she was working her damndest to break Rita to turn on her family. I guess my *Zia* stayed loyal to the end. She gave them nothing, maybe some bare minimums to protect her and Gabriella, but that was it.

I can only assume that this Krista bitch—or Trixie, whatever she goes by—recognized Gabbi and surmised her cover was blown. She’s not only rogue but also in damage control, and she’s taken my girl as collateral.

I’m gonna fucking gut her.

I activated the entire family in the search for Gabriella, much to Vincent’s disdain. He wants his sister safe, but he’s afraid of what this will do to her safety. There will be questions. I made my standpoint very clear—anyone hurts a hair on Gabbi’s head, and they die. By my hand. Vincent didn’t like that much, either.

Now we’re sitting outside a seedy fucking motel on the outskirts of the city, watching two crooked feds waltz into the room where they’re certain Gabriella is being held.

“Affirmative,” Leonardo confirms, climbing from the car, Vincent and I fast on his heels. He doesn’t wait for a single beat, kicking open the door with an excited, “Knock. Knock.”

I push him out of the way, needing to see Gabriella, needing to know she's safe and unharmed.

She's handcuffed to a bed, her eyes swollen and red from crying. Her gaze meets mine for a split second, and she dismisses me, searching for her brother.

I can't hear. I can't think. I can't fucking move.

She's immobilized me.

My greatest fear has come to fruition, and instead of stepping up to the challenge, I've frozen. She's handcuffed to a fucking bed, for fuck's sake, with a gun aimed in her direction.

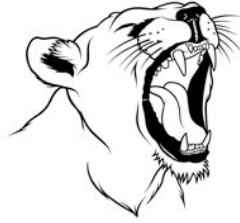
I growl low in my throat.

She begins crying and yanking at the metal cuff on her wrist. I move toward her, but a gun fires, and everything fucking stops. *No*. My heart fucking stops. My eyes widen, and I can't move them from her cowering frame.

And then she screams, and I realize the bullet wasn't aimed at her but instead at the bitch who took her, and my breath settles itself back into my body now that I know she's safe.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## GABRIELLA



*I* watched two people die today, and in a shocking moment of self-realization, I discovered that my trauma surrounding the whole situation is skewed beyond recognition.

I watched an FBI agent kill a man who was merely employed to drive Bianca. I was warranted in my grief at Andre's death. But as he fell to the ground, life seeping from his body, my *single* thought was that I wished he'd been quicker in taking aim to kill the agent first.

Then I witnessed dirty cops shoot the same woman, and while the reality of death should make me sick, all I kept thinking was that I wish *I* had been the one to pull the trigger and end her life.

I cower farther into my comforter, ignoring the bristling men standing at the threshold of the elevator. They've been here for the last hour, close enough to watch me but far enough away to ensure they don't further exacerbate my already fragile state.

I'm *infuriated* with myself for not recognizing that psycho bitch sooner. She hounded my mother for years. I was old enough to recognize that her presence caused my mother anxiety but young enough that I never considered her a threat. She was law enforcement, for fuck's sake. I blame myself



wholeheartedly for getting kidnapped. *Kidnapped*. I can't even blame the mob for this shitstorm. They're the ones who fucking saved me.

"Hey, little liar." Leonardo finally approaches. "Need anything?"

*Yeah, for the three of you to stop acting like I'm made of glass.*

"No."

"I've got some shit to take care of, to clean up what happened today. Call me if you need me to come back, yeah?"

I nod, and he leans over me, dropping a kiss on the crown of my head.

"Leo." I sit up. "Thank you. For saving me."

The image of him breaking through the door of that motel is the memory I cling to, the single second when I was able to breathe. I knew I could still die, but at least I stood a fucking chance with them there. I can't let my mind wander to Lorenzo. To the frantic and crazed look in his blue eyes when his gaze settled on me. There was no relief at seeing me alive and breathing. He was trapped in the terror of his thoughts and too weak to hide them from me.

Leonardo winks at me, touching his fist against Vincent's and then Lorenzo's before leaving without speaking.

They're so quiet. Watching me. It's eerie, and I want to scream at them to stop talking about me in their minds. I know that's what they're doing—communicating telepathically to work out how to handle me.

I fall back onto the couch, twisting into the backrest to hide.

One of them leaves, and while I hope with everything it's my brother who remains, I know without looking that it's not.

Lorenzo's footsteps are slow. He approaches with heavy thoughts and a light gait. He sits on the coffee table, and I hold my breath. "Would you be more comfortable in Palisades?"

My jaw shakes, and I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want him to be thoughtful. I don't want him to think about making this easier on me. I want him to fuck off. "Don't do that." I hate that I speak to him. I hate that I couldn't hold my tongue.

"Don't do what?" His voice is so tender, so fucking understanding, and I want to hurt him.

"What are you doing here?" I mumble the words against the backrest of the sofa, but it camouflages the shake in my voice. "Where is Vincent?"

"He went to check on Bianca. I told him you'd be good with me. He wasn't happy about it," he says conversationally. "But he conceded."

I scoff, pulling the blanket over my head.

"Do you need anything? I could—"

"*What I need* is for you to leave."

He stands, and I don't know whether to be relieved or disappointed with how easily he ceded to my request. But instead of leaving, he sits on the couch, moving closer, and I pull my legs into my body, afraid to be too close.

"*Gabbi.*" He sighs.

I hate how easily he makes me want to cry. I hate him in a way that the world doesn't make sense when he's not close, and it's something I *despise* about myself because I don't hate him. Not the way I need to.

“Go. Away.”

His hand lands on my leg, and I kick him off, my feet thrusting frantically to remove his touch. Throwing the comforter away from my body, I sit up, hugging my knees. “I hate you,” I bite out. “You are everything wrong with this world, and I want you to fuck off out of my life.”

*I hate you because I think I love you, and it hurts to admit it.*

*I hate you because loving you makes me feel like I don't love myself.*

*I hate you because you're the only person I want here, and you seem to know it.*

But I don't say any of that. Instead, I stare at him with daggers in my eyes, hoping and fucking praying he can't see past my mask.

His eyes flash with anger. “What happened to you had nothing to do with me.”

“I don't care. You're fucking with my head, and I bet you enjoy that, you sadistic prick.”

He laughs. “I'm fucking with your head. *I'm fucking with your head.* I put you in *danger* today to save you. Do you know that? I pushed you into the line of fucking fire to *save* you,” he bellows. “I can't fucking think straight. You're in here.” He taps his temple. “And...” He moves his hand lower, fisting his hand at his heart before dropping it away.

He stands, walking away from me, only to stalk back seconds later. “You need me. You need my protection, and it could've fucking killed you.”

I shake my head vehemently, unsure what I'm trying to deny, but my lies continue without hesitation. "I need nothing from you, and I need you as a person less. I can get what I need from your brother. Leonardo holds the same name, the same level of protection."

"You think he'll protect you better than I can or will?"

I want to scream in his face. I want to stand on my tiptoes and screech until his ears bleed. Because *he* fucking did this. He suggested I marry his brother just weeks after he buried his cock inside me and called me the light of his life.

"You think him breaking through that door was significant?" His voice has dropped, and he steps closer until he's towering over my position on the sofa. "You think Leonardo was your white fucking knight, lioness?"

No. I don't think that at all. But I don't tell the fraught man above me that. I simply shrug, watching his anger grow.

"I brought the whole fucking family in on searching for you. Everyone. Including the people I know will one day be your biggest fucking threat. I activated all of them, not caring that your existence would be open season because the alternative..." He swallows. "The alternative..." He shakes his head, refusing to finish the sentence.

I watch him through the heavy line of my lashes.

"If I had gone into the room first," he whispers. "If I had breached that threshold before anyone else, there is no fucking way I would've been able to control it."

"Control what?"

"They all would've died, Gabbi. Krista, or whatever-the-fuck her name was, I would've emptied a magazine into her heart, reloaded and then kept on going. Then I would've

turned on the other two assholes in the room. I would've shot them in the face so many fucking times, their families would have had to identify them through dental records."

"They didn't..."

"They left you handcuffed to a goddamn fucking bed while she had a gun pointed at you!" he roars. There is no other word for it. The words roll with thunder, and my head tips back. "She had a gun pointed at you," he repeats, the words lacerated over his stripped vocal cords.

"*Enzo.*"

He's on me before I realize. Hand on my jaw, fingers in my hair, tongue pushing into the surprised gasp of my mouth.

"Enzo, we shouldn't..."

"Let me taste that you're safe, *leonessa.*"

*Let me taste that you're safe.*

My resistance snaps. I crawl up his body, arms over his shoulders, crossed over at the nape of his neck. He lifts me effortlessly, twisting to drop us back onto the sofa, me straddling him.

Kisses aren't meant to be like this. They should be sensuous and lustfully wistful. Shared between two people who are overcome with passion and attraction.

They shouldn't be verging on hysterical because of unmanaged and fractious emotions. Yet here we are, sharing a kiss that may very well destroy us both. We're hedonic and deranged. But he's right. I was fucking kidnapped and held at gunpoint, and he put us *all* in fucking danger to find me.

*Don't settle for a man who won't fight to the death to stand by your side. Destroy the world together if you need to.*

“No,” I bite out, rejecting the memory, my teeth biting into his bottom lip in panic.

“No?” He pulls back, blood staining his mouth, face utterly destroyed by the thought of stopping.

I pull his face back to mine, refusing to let him see into my eyes to read the war waging within. I lick the droplets of blood from his mouth, moaning at the metallic taste on my tongue.

I need this. I need him. And I tell him just that. “Enzo, *amore*, I need you.”

Reaching into his jacket pocket, he retrieves a small knife. Sliding his big hand into my shorts and underwear, he cups the material, stretching it toward him and away from my body before slicing through both layers effortlessly with his blade, exposing my soaked cunt within seconds.

“*Fuck*,” I breathe.

Tucking the knife back into his pocket, he licks his tongue along the line of his knuckles where his skin brushed against my arousal. “So slick.”

“*Jesus*.”

The same knuckles he just licked clean jut under my chin. “I will take that knife back out and hold it to your throat if you say *any* name *but* mine again.”

My eyes close on their own accord, tongue dragging between my lips.

“Fuck, that would turn you on, wouldn’t it? I could spill your blood every time you prayed to God or Jesus, and you’d just come harder.”

I focus on undoing his belt instead of answering, but his knowing chuckle brushes across my cheeks, sending heat their

way and shading them red.

His thumb touches my cheekbone. “Speaking of this pretty blush, I miss your perfect tits and rosy nipples. Take your shirt off, lioness. Let me tongue fuck your nipples.”

My hands pull away from his pants, ripping at my hair in a combination of unleashed arousal and concupiscent frustration.

“You’re fucking seconds away from coming.” He lifts my shirt over my head, freeing my breasts. “And I haven’t even fucking touched you yet. My lioness *missed* me.”

“Missed your cock,” I growl, wishing he’d put me out of my misery and fuck me. “There’s a difference.”

“My little liar.” He drops his head, sucking a nipple into his mouth. *Hard*.

I lurch forward, fisting my hands into his hair and keeping his face hostage against my tits.

“Cock,” he mumbles, shifting his mouth to my other nipple to pay it the same attention. “Take my cock out, lioness.”

I do as he commands, blindly reaching for his pants to unzip them and pull out his rock-fucking-hard cock.

I lift my hips, positioning him at my entrance. Pulling his mouth from my nipple, he grabs my jaw in his big hands. “Don’t fucking come until I give you permission. I need you to break, Gabbi. I need you to break so I can feel how fucking alive you are.”

Sinking down, I swallow his entire length in one swift movement.

My mouth opens in a silent scream.

“*Fuck.*” His voice is as smooth as gravel. “You take my cock so fucking well. All the way,” he praises. “So tight, but so fucking deep.”

Circling my hips, I let my body adjust to the way he opens me up.

He hollows out his abs, eyes trained on the place we meet.

“Fuck, she’s stretched so fucking wide for me.”

It’s a miracle I can hear his filthy narrative, his voice so quiet, merely the exhale of air twisted into words.

Pushing up onto my knees, we simultaneously groan at the way I hug his cock on retreat.

“Such a sweet pussy,” he compliments. “Such a good girl.”

I drop back down.

I repeat the movement faster this time.

And again.

And again, until I’m bouncing on his cock, fucking my way to climax so rough I have no doubt he’ll leave bruises on my cervix.

I’m climbing to a crest I’m ready to fall over. My thighs ache with exertion, and my tits hop with every downward smack. I’m panting. Sweat covers my body.

Lorenzo takes it all. Arms braced along the back of the sofa, he grips the cushions until his knuckles turn white. He wants to take control but senses I need this, and he’s right.

I want to destroy myself.

I want to fight for dominance and shatter at the cliff’s edge when he *lets* me find it.



So he remains still, taking what I give him.

He's also panting.

He's also covered in sweat.

His tongue ducks out every so often to lick a nipple, but for the most part, he just watches me with a mixture of awe and carnal desire swirling in his eyes.

“That’s it, baby. You feel that? You’re fucking *throbbing*.”

My pussy contracts at random intervals, and I know I’m close.

“Remember what I told you,” Lorenzo burrs. “Let me feel how fucking heavy that heart can beat for me.”

I know what he’s saying.

He knows what he’s saying.

*Break, Gabbi. Cry for me, and let me drink your tears.*

He rips one arm away from the sofa, slapping my ass hard enough to make me yelp. Hand *just* touching the cheek, he cups the way it wobbles, nostrils flaring as he sucks in a quick breath of rapture.

I whimper.

Sliding his palm over my ass and across my thigh, he pushes his thumb against the buzzing nerves of my clit.

I choke on my breath.

Then he starts to rub his thumb in gentle circles directly over my engorged clit.

I *need* to come. My body protests in every direction. My muscles coil tight, begging me to let them go. My nerves buzz under my skin. I’m on fire, and I want to fucking *burn*.

“*Shh...*” Lorenzo soothes my cries. “You’re doing so well for me. You know what I need, though, baby.”

I shake my head, afraid of how hard he’ll make me break.

He smiles, teeth dragging over his bottom lip. Eyes hooded, he grabs one of my ass cheeks, rolling his hips while dragging me forward.

I’m in agony. A blissfully overwrought *agony*.

“It hurts.”

“Hurts?” He groans in pleasure at the word.

“So good,” I say, the words stuttered and strangled over the broken sobs he demands from me. “It hurts so good. *You* hurt so good.”

A thick vibration of approval crawls up his throat, and I move my mouth close to his, wanting to taste his paradise.

“You’re already fractured, baby, and I know your secret,” he whispers against my lips. “I know you love the way I tear you apart. You love that I drink up your desperation.” He licks along my jawline. “Because you know a part of you is with me always. I drink your tears, and you claim my fucking insides.”

I splinter, his name the broken sob he’d been longing for.

Lips on my eyes, he takes my surrender before it falls, praising me the entire time.

My orgasm rips me to pieces, and I’ve never felt more at home, broken, at Lorenzo’s feet.

He follows me mere seconds later, head tipped back, my name a shout that tells me more than his cautious lips ever would.

Our breathing subsides, our bodies accepting the carnality we just wrecked them with. I lean forward, and Lorenzo welcomes my mouth. Our kiss is much calmer in our post-orgasm trance.

Pulling back, Lorenzo tucks my hair behind my ear, curling the lock around his finger over and over again.

“You think by refusing to marry or getting too close to someone that you’ll be free from the pain of love.” He lifts his gaze to my face, eyes locking on mine. “You still have a heart, Lorenzo.” I place my palm over it, letting the steady rhythm thump against my hand. “Whether you’re married or open to the belief of love has zero to do with what you feel in here. You can claim you’ll never be tied to another, but news fucking flash, *amore*, your heart has already lost that battle. Your mind is just too stubborn to catch up.”

I expect him to deny me. To shut me out and shun me for even contemplating the thought he could feel as heavily for me as I do him, but he surprises me when he finally speaks. “*Luce della mia vita*. Light of my life.”

The endearment doesn’t hurt like it did last time. It sounds right on his tongue, but my chin wobbles for a different reason.

“If the world knows what I feel for you, you become my greatest liability. You are the only way this world can destroy me, Gabbi. Without you, my light is fucking gone. So I’ll openly live in a purgatory of heartache for the rest of my life to know you’re safe. The way my heart aches now, knowing you’ll belong to someone else, is nothing to how it would bleed if you were taken from this earth. I’d want to die. I’ve asked you not to hate me in the past. I’m doing it again. Don’t hate me for saving you the only way I know how.”

I never imagined I'd hold sympathy in my heart for someone so dead set on rejecting me, on rejecting *us*, but here I am, heart open, but bleeding, for how beautifully poetic and thoughtful his reasoning stands.

“You're afraid—”

He cuts me off. “I won't do it, Gabbi. I watched my mom die because of who she was married to. Nothing more. Nothing less. The ring on her finger and the vows she made with my father ended her life. If she hadn't married Giorgio, she'd still be alive. That's a certainty. That's how I'll protect you, by never tying you to me.”

“What if I'm already tied to you?”

He lifts my hand from his chest, turning it to rest over my heart and holding it there. “In there is different to out here.”

I drop my gaze to watch his hand pull away from mine.

“You think I'm safer with Leo?”

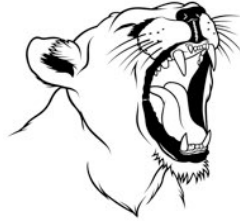
He takes a long while to answer, but eventually, he nods, the gesture as reluctant as his words. “Leonardo only acts on my orders. The underworld knows that. If anyone has an issue with something he does, they know their issue is with me, with a directive I've ordered. *Everything* comes back to me. *Everything*. I won't add your death to that.”

I open my mouth to speak just as the elevator chimes, announcing someone's arrival. Leonardo steps into the penthouse before I have a chance to cover myself. “Shit, sorry, guys.” He turns his back, hitting the call button on the already disappearing lift.

Lorenzo picks up my blanket, wrapping it around my body and kissing my cheek. “Don't be sorry,” he speaks to his brother, his eyes on me. “We were just saying goodbye.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## LORENZO



I fall into my office chair. Palms pushing into my eye sockets, I groan outwardly as I slide my hands down my face. My eyes water with fatigue, and I blink to clear the moisture. I let the taste of whiskey dance on my tongue as I take a heavy sip. I breathe a sigh of relief at the impenetrable silence this space offers me.

*I can get what I need from your brother.*

Fuck, her snarky comment should bring me peace. It was what we wanted. Gabriella married to someone with clout. It's what *Vincent* wanted. It's what I wanted. Her to be happy. But I know that she won't be, and so does she. Leonardo and Gabriella might share a friendship that's important to them both, but she deserves more than what my brother will be willing to offer her. He doesn't love her. She'll spend her life tied to a man who will resent their union and spend most of his nights in the bed of others.

I lift my drink again, slowly sipping the amber liquid to savor the taste.

*News fucking flash, amore, your heart's already lost that battle. Your mind is just too stubborn to catch up.*

My mind has been acutely aware of the error of my heart from the get-go.

Like any point in time when my mindset wavers, my subconscious takes it upon itself to shower me with memories I'd prefer to forget. Specifically, the day I vowed I would never marry. Although, I've never teetered on the edge of breaking my own vows so significantly as I have since Gabriella Ferrari stormed into my life in denim shorts and scuffed Doc Martens. There's been business relationships that would have secured the family hundreds of millions if I would've agreed to stand at a fucking altar and have some daughter of another crime syndicate walk toward me in a stupid white dress. I'd considered those agreements for mere seconds before rejecting them. My selfish fucking fears outweighing any benefits for the outfit. I wouldn't ever succumb to the naïve notion of marriage.

While Leonardo was walking around declaring his love for every female family member who gushed over his cheeky smile, I was nine years old and had just killed my first man. My father was at war with the Irish. It was a conflict that my father should have resolved immediately. One of his soldiers had assaulted a daughter of the Irish mob. The man responsible for her attack deserved to die. He deserved to die *painfully* at the hand of the family of the young woman he'd harmed. But my father was too busy throwing his weight around to think logically. He refused to hand his soldier over, and a battle ensued that had hideous ramifications across the underworld.

My mother and I were on our way to the dentist. I'd chipped my front tooth fighting with one of my cousins. The dentist was dead when we arrived, as were the receptionist and three other patients. A man waited for us and for having killed

five people, not a drop of blood marred the clean line of his appearance. I remember wondering, even at nine, how he managed that. So artfully experienced in his occupation, he killed without mess to his person. I was impressed. And scared. I was fucking petrified.

My mother begged for my life. She pleaded, and she cried, and he smirked as he watched her appeal to his decent side. I often wonder if she knew it was pointless. Even as a child, it was obvious he had no humanity. But she prayed to him for mercy, and maybe by sparing my life, my mother felt her prayers were answered, but I think *he* knew leaving me alive wasn't a blessing. He did worse than kill me that day. He turned me into someone afraid of love and at peace in loneliness.

When her pleas had subsided, and only her wretched sobs remained, he took hold of her hair and pulled her into the room I was supposed to have my chipped front tooth fixed in. The room that housed an already dead dentist and his previous patient.

And then he raped her.

I screamed, and I yelled, and I beat at the door, trying to save her. But I couldn't. I couldn't even break into the fucking room. When he was finished, he welcomed me inside, and I stared at the woman I loved with my whole heart as she was naked, on her knees, and begged me to run.

I didn't. I stood there, and I sobbed.

The Irishman laughed at me for crying and then shot my mother in the heart. I watched her die, standing frozen on the spot, too weak to do anything.



He muttered, *ye oul fella's a right gobsheen, kid. This is on 'im*, his Irish accent thick. My body was shaking with grief and shock, and *rage*. He pushed past me, his swagger slow as he left me in the pit of death he had created.

My mother always carried a gun at my father's insistence. She had no intention of ever using it, but I knew it was there. Reaching into her bag, I retrieved the weapon, and without a beat of hesitation, I shot Martina Caruso's rapist and murderer in the back.

When I took my first life, I realized something I've carried with me ever since. Love is a weakness in the underworld. Your sins demand a payment of retribution that will incapacitate you without killing you. Death is easy, living with the consequences of your own failure is a form of hell that men in my field force you to endure if you cross them.

I didn't want to be weak. Women and children were beacons to those who longed to immobilize me. I didn't want a woman hurt in my name. My evildoings would only ever be paid for through my own pain. I made that vow at nine years old, hand shaking as I pulled the trigger on a weapon that had never been fired. I killed a man and knew from that moment his family would one day come for me, and I wouldn't give them a way to kill me while keeping me alive.

I empty my whiskey glass down my throat and pour another.

When I asked Gabriella not to hate me after I took her virginity, she promised me she never would. She looked me in the eye and vowed to never regret me.

When I asked her today not to hate me for saving her, the only way I know how I realize she never conceded. She never gave me that promise.

The bite of something sharp touches my throat, and I pause, crystal tumbler balancing on my lips.

I've watched Vincent kill many men like this. The barbed wire he keeps in his pocket, held securely in his gloved hands as he decorates their necks with the barbs of metal that choke them to a bloody and painful end.

"Kinky," I muse, and he tightens his grip, the metal pinching my skin in a way that will leave marks.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought this *might* happen. Vincent is no idiot, and only a fool could ignore what happened today. I all but gave Vincent a detailed illustration of what went down between his sister and me. He wouldn't be who I thought he was if he didn't take one look at those graphic images and decide I deserved to die. Painfully. Yet even looking death in the eye, I won't regret it. I won't be repentant for claiming Gabriella the way I did. Should my life be extinguished here and now, at least I was ballsy enough to dip my toes in heaven before being welcomed back as the rightful ruler of purgatory.

"I'm so tempted to let you die this way," my best friend murmurs. "But I'm sick enough that I need you to explain it to me."

Instinctively, I pull back, pressing the back of my head as far as I can manage, the scent of his sister's climax and what we had shared only an hour ago still clinging to my skin.

"Tell me," he pushes, giving me time to breathe.

"Tell you what?" I clear my throat.

"Tell me that you haven't been fucking my sister. My *underage* sister."

My eyes close on their own accord, a whispered curse falling from my lips.

He tightens the wire, and I slide two fingers up against the skin of my neck, attempting to free myself from the chokehold of barbed wire against my jugular. The skin of my middle and index finger tears away. Blood trickles down my neck.

Vincent loosens his hold enough that I can speak. “I’m not fucking your underage sister.”

That gives him pause. “Don’t fucking lie to me.”

“I’m not fucking lying,” I spit. “Now get that fucking wire off my neck before I’m forced to kill you.”

He hesitates for only a second before removing the wire. “It’s amusing that you think you *could* kill me,” he says, his footsteps the only other sound in the dark.

I lean forward, flicking the light on my desk lamp. The room casts itself in a low hum of warm light, and I exhale heavily. Vincent stands opposite my desk, his face twisted in brutality. His humanity has taken a back seat to whatever storms inside him.

“Look me in the fucking eye and tell me you’re not fucking my sister.”

I wipe at my neck, pulling my palm back to take in the smears of blood now decorating my hand.

“People are gonna ask why I have the kiss of barbed wire scratched into my skin.”

“I could give a fuck. I asked you a fucking question.”

I stand. “Know your fucking place,” I spit. “We might be friends, but don’t forget who you’re dealing with. Threatening

a boss leaves Bianca a widow. Best you fucking remember that.” I slam my fist down on my desk.

He steps closer, unfazed by my outburst. Fists clenched, he pushes them against the desk, leaning forward. “Don’t make threats you can’t keep. Are you fucking my sister?”

I stand to full height, crossing my arms over my chest. “*Fucked*. Past tense.”

He storms toward the door, turning back with a gun raised in my direction.

“Don’t cheapen yourself with your choice of weapon, Necktie.”

He smiles, the gesture twisted in malevolence. “Never imagined you to be a coward.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You could have died with dignity, owning up to the error of your ways. Instead, you choose to lie to save yourself the pain.”

I laugh. “Vincent, the day I go, I fucking hope it’s done with your artistic flair. But I’m no coward, and I sure as shit am no liar.”

“I asked you—”

“I know what you asked me. You asked me if I was fucking your *underage* sister.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

I move toward the door of my desk. Vincent’s finger taps the trigger in warning.

I roll my eyes. “If you want an explanation, lower your fucking gun, asshole.”

He drops his arm, switching the safety back on. He sits across from me and lays the gun on his knee.

I retrieve Gabriella's birth certificate, cursing myself for not putting it somewhere more secure. The paper is still slightly crumpled from when Gabriella found it. Laying it on the desk, I turn it with a single finger before sliding it toward my consigliere.

“What is that?”

I don't answer.

He sighs, reaching forward to retrieve the paper. His eyes turn from disinterested to confused. “What is this?”

Vincent isn't like my younger brother, so I don't need to spell out Gabriella's lie to him. Vincent's eye to detail is as immaculate as mine.

“That doesn't make sense. This puts her at—”

“Nineteen.” I sit down, confident the threat of death has subsided. “Almost twenty.”

“She lied.” His tone borders on disbelief, and I want to laugh at how absurd this whole fucking situation is. Vincent kept secrets from his fucking wife to remain as vigilant as he could be. Yet he now sits before me, completely blindsided by the fact that his sister has done the same.

“How long have you known?” He puts the birth certificate back on my desk, and I lift it, sliding it back into the drawer for safekeeping.

I don't answer.

“When I was at the cabin,” he assumes correctly. “When did you start keeping secrets from me?”

“It wasn’t my secret to share.”

He puts his gun away. “Bullshit, and just so we’re clear, I haven’t decided *not* to kill you yet. Regardless of her age, you still fucked my sister.”

“She’s a consenting adult, Vin.”

“Was she, though?” he asks me quietly. “She was locked away in this house with you. *Alone.*”

I laugh to stop myself from shooting him. “You think she has some bout of Stockholm syndrome or something? Let’s not forget it was *you* who all but locked her away here. Not me. I kept my distance. Until I couldn’t.”

“You should have tried harder.”

“Yeah?” I ask. “Like you tried so hard to keep away from Bianca.”

“That’s different,” he argues. “I knew she would be mine and only mine. Enzo...” He trails off.

“You don’t need to worry anymore,” I tell him. “It’s done. We’re done.” He moves to speak, and I hold up a hand. “She’s marrying Leonardo. She knows I can’t be who she needs me to be.”

“They could marry immediately since she’s of age.”

“No,” I cut him off. “She’s eighteen in a month or so by her lies. Give her that. But we need to introduce her to the family.”

He sits up straighter.

“I’ve been thinking we’ll leave Rita out of the equation completely.”

His eyes narrow.

“She’s Carlo’s daughter, your long-lost half sister. Mother?” I raise my hands, palms turned upward. “A nobody.”

“It’s risky.”

“Riskier than pretending I activated an entire fucking army to save her? If she’s no relation, I must have heavy fucking feelings for her to go to the lengths I went to get her back. She becomes a target straightaway. This way is easier. The cavalry was activated because of who she is to *you*.”

“Not who she is to you?”

I don’t answer him, my throat thicker than I’d like. I cough. “You were saying recently your wife is bored. Let’s get her planning a party to introduce your little sister to the family.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



## GABRIELLA



*B*ianca knows how to throw a party, I'll give her that.

People are everywhere. People who kiss my cheeks and hold my face and tell me I'm beautiful and how pleased they are to meet me. People who keep trying to make me eat and ask me next to nothing about my upbringing and tell me how sad it is that I've missed out on being a part of their family for so long. No one speaks ill of Carlo, their assumption moving straight to the fact that he never knew I existed. How I wish I could correct them. I long to ask the women if they were friends with my mother. If they miss her, if they could tell me stories about her. But I don't. I play the role carefully laid out to me by Vincent. Rita doesn't exist in this scenario. Just Carlo and a woman no one cares to ask me about.

"It gets overwhelming."

I startle at the window, turning to face the man standing at the door. I'm hiding in the bedroom Lorenzo gave me when I lived here. The room with the ladder at the window he hasn't bothered to remove.

The man, who has just invaded my solitude, leans against the frame with a relaxed energy that causes a smile to grow on my face.

I've come to learn that you meet people in life that bring you peace immediately. It's an arcane feeling. You know *nothing* about them, but your mind and body make the decision to feel at ease in a stranger's presence. There's no rhyme or reason for the contentment, but it's there, as though something deeper within you is communicating with the same part inside them. A familiarity that neither of you can explain, but you accept without resistance because it feels nice.

I've only felt it twice in my life before now. First, sitting beside a homeless woman named Mallory at a Denver bus depot as she encouraged me to seek more than what I had accepted in life. Second, staring at Vincent across the table at a restaurant right after he threatened to kill me.

"When Vincent and Bianca said family, I think I envisaged ten, maybe twenty people," I confess. "There are at least sixty people here." I glance out the window again, staring down at the crowd around the pool.

Kids are swimming. There's an abundance of food and drink. Laughter and voices rise to be heard over one another until everyone sounds like they're yelling. But they're happy, and it makes my heart hurt. Because a long time ago, my mom used to belong here. She was a part of all of this and gave it away for me.

"Lorenzo rarely, if ever, holds parties at his home," the stranger tells me, pushing off the doorframe and coming to stand beside me.

He smells nice. Like fresh soap and an intoxicating mix of wood and something spicy. He's handsome too. His dark hair is combed back, a prominent part shaved into the right side of his crown. His dark eyes watch me with interest and a little bit of mischief that makes my cheeks warm.

I laugh when he stares a little too long, averting my gaze to look back down at the pool.

“I wonder what the deal is with the ladder?” he murmurs beside me, his voice close enough to brush along the nape of my neck.

Overwhelmed and uncomfortable, I take a small step to the left.

“Sorry,” he says. “I’m crowding you.”

I wave a hand dismissively in front of me, contradicting the gesture by taking a generous step back to let myself look at him without the pressure of his penetrating stare. “Not at all,” I assure him. “I’ve just been alone for a really long time, and getting used to people in my immediate personal space is proving a little more difficult than I imagined.”

“This crowd will change that.” He lifts his chin toward the window and the view of people I was staring at. “What is privacy?”

I laugh.

“You have a nice laugh,” he compliments.

“Thank you.”

A throat clearing has us both turning our heads to the door.

“Boss,” the man says.

“Lorenzo, hey,” I speak at the same time.

“Could you go help Leonardo with the barbecue?” While everyone else has donned casual attire for the party, Lorenzo has remained in his dark bespoke suit. I find it peculiar, considering he never once wore one when I lived here.

I nod, taking a step forward. “Of course.”

Lorenzo smiles, and the stranger laughs. “I think he was talking to me.”

I close my eyes and purse my lips. “Of course.”

“Hope I see you downstairs, Gabriella.” He winks at me before walking from the room with a slight dip of his chin in Lorenzo’s direction.

Lorenzo watches his retreat, keeping his silence as the man disappears down the stairs.

“The family is yet to be made aware, but you’re marrying Leonardo.” He finally turns his attention to me, and I shake my head in confusion.

He moves into the room, glances at the bed, then reconsiders, his step moving back onto the landing between my bedroom and his.

“I’m trying to enjoy myself here.” I lift my shoulders. “If you could refrain from ruining the moment, I’d appreciate it.”

“It looks bad to be caught alone in a room with a man, Gabriella.” The prominent roll of my name along his tongue again. I scowl. “People will talk.”

“I’m with you,” I bite back. “*Alone.*”

“I’m the boss. It’s different.”

He’s lying. That much is obvious. His eyes continue to scan the space, making certain no one sees us.

“You’re a terrible liar.”

He lifts his shoulders. “Fine. I thought I’d save you the humiliation of what you were doing.”

“And what was I doing?” My hands find my hips.

“*Flirting.*” I open my mouth to speak, but he cuts me off.  
“With your brother.”

*Brother.*

I glance at the door, then back at Lorenzo. “That was...?”

A cocksure grin slides onto his face, and I want to slap him. “Dante.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” he murmurs, eyes widening in mirth. “Oh.”

Something heavy slides into my stomach, and it must show on my face because the teasing in Lorenzo’s smile drops away. He steps into the room, coming up close.

“I felt easy around him right away,” I confess quietly. “I wasn’t flirting. *He* was, but then, he doesn’t know who I am. He didn’t put me on edge like most other people. My mother aside, Vincent and Mallory are the only two people with whom I’ve felt entirely comfortable being myself. I felt like that around him,” I whisper, confusion coiling around my words.

He doesn’t seem hurt at not being included in my list of people I immediately trusted. Lorenzo knows he puts me on edge. He purposely fucking places me there for his enjoyment.

“Who is Mallory?”

“Huh? Oh, a friend of mine from Denver.”

“I thought you didn’t have friends,” he pushes.

“Mallory is different,” I snap. “Dante made me feel like they did,” I tell him again, trying to make sense of the situation. “He made me feel like a friend. He settled something inside me I didn’t know was tangled.”

“Family can have that effect.”

“Sorry to break up your little tête-à-tête, but Vincent has noticed you’re both missing, and I reckon the family is about to see the true nature of his nickname if one or both of you don’t make an appearance soon enough. *Separately,*” Leonardo bites when we both move to step from the bedroom at the same time.

“I’ve got some work to do.” Lorenzo speaks first. “I’ll be in my office.”

He disappears, leaving Leonardo and me alone for the first time since he walked in on Lorenzo and me in a state of undress.

I open my mouth to speak, but he turns away and disappears as quickly as his brother.

He’s uncomfortable. Not because we’re due to marry, and he caught me fucking someone else. He’s weary that he caught me fucking his *brother*, and now he has to marry me. Totally different. And completely understandable. Which is why I’ve accepted his distance even though I miss him.

I’m engulfed by people the moment I step out onto the patio. In the midst of a conversation with a man of small stature and white-grayed hair, Dante excuses himself and wanders over. “I was wondering if you were ever going to come back down. I was afraid you’d escaped without saying goodbye.”

I smile at him. “We weren’t formally introduced. I’m Gabriella.” I extend my hand.

Dante slides his hand into mine, leaning forward to kiss one of my cheeks and the other. “Dante Romano.”

“It’s really nice to meet you, Dante.” My voice shakes as I say the words, the meaning morphing into something uncertain

and impassioned.

He takes it with a broad smile, refusing to let go of my hand.

*Flirting. With your brother.*

I pull my hand back with more force, and he lets go reluctantly. “Come.” He holds my elbow. “Let’s get a drink.”

People stop us and gush over Dante as much as they do me. They preen over his handsomeness and tell him to seek out their daughters, assuring him that they’d *love* to speak with him.

“Hot commodity,” I tease.

“It’s fucked,” he whispers. “I feel like a prize fucking bull being walked around a grazing yard for people to bet on.”

I laugh. “Welcome to *our* world.”

Regret hoods his eyes. “Shit, that was insensitive. You have it harder than we do. It’s rough. All we have to hope is that when our matches are made, they’re something we’re both interested in.” He winks at me, and I blink away my shock.

“Dante.” A woman approaches us.

She’s stunning. Her short dark hair sits at her shoulders, styled into casual waves. Understated peachy-colored lipstick stains her lips, and her eyelashes look almost too long to be real on her heart-shaped face. She’s tiny. Even standing in strappy high heels, she stands just at my chin.

They hug in greeting, and she turns to me. “You must be the guest of honor,” she says. “I’m Luna. Nice to meet you.”

“Gabriella.” I swallow. “You too.”

*If you find yourself in the presence of Luna and Dante in this life, tell them I loved them until the very end and that I'm sorry.*

Fuck if that memory had to steamroll over me like a freight train. I pull my sunglasses from my head, placing them over my eyes to hide the way they water.

“You must be pretty important for Lorenzo to open his home to everyone.” The long-sleeve linen shirt that sits open over her two-piece swimsuit flies around her in the breeze.

I shake my head. “Not important. Just something shiny and new.”

Luna laughs. “Fuck, if that ain't the truth. Have you seen Bruno?” She turns back to her brother.

“Yeah, he's sitting with Cosimo and Diego by the pool.”

Something dangerous crosses her face, and she adjusts her already impeccably placed swimsuit before waving us off and moving farther into the party.

“She's dead set on making her husband fall in love with her,” Dante tells me quietly, his voice communicating the rest of what he won't say. That it's useless; Bruno isn't capable of the feeling.

We watch her retreat, and my heart aches. She's living her mother's life. I only hope their endings aren't the same.

“Tell me about you.” Dante changes the subject, grabbing himself a beer and me a soda. He gestures to the closest seat.

I sit. “I think most people already know what there is to tell.”

“Where did you grow up?”



“Unalaska.”

His eyes widen. “That’s random.”

I nod. “Yeah, my mom liked to keep to herself.”

“She passed?”

I keep my head trained downward and nod.

Dante reaches out to touch my hand. “Sorry to hear that. I lost my mom pretty young.”

My head lifts immediately, eager for any scraps of information he can offer about our mother. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugs. “It was a long time ago. I’ve come to terms with it.”

I stare at him, waiting for him to continue, but he remains silent, letting our eyes connect.

“Son.”

The connection lost, our attention turns to the man standing beside us. The same man Dante was speaking to earlier.

“Dad, have you met Gabriella?”

*Dad.*

“No.” He smiles at me, grinning wide enough to show all his teeth, including a gold one that shines against the sun. “Joseph Romano,” he introduces himself. “But the family calls me Big Joey.”

He couldn’t be taller than five foot. A little rotund, very gray, and sneery as all fuck.

“Nice to meet you.” I hold my hand out.

“Ah.” He waves my hand away. “Let me hug you.”

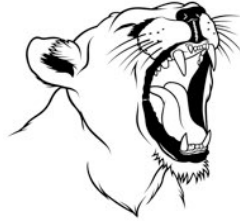
I almost choke on my spit, laughing to cover it up. Standing, I move close, and he wraps himself around me. His head just scrapes the bottom of my nose. He holds me a little too tight and with a little too much familiarity.

“You’re a pretty little thing,” he tells me, finally stepping back and letting me go. “Nice that you and Dante could sneak away and get to know one another.”

I want to bleach my skin with acid. Instead, I smile.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## LORENZO



“*D*id Joey give any indication as to why he needed to speak with us?”

Vincent shakes his head. “Just that it was important, and we both needed to be here.”

Leonardo sighs, drawing our attention. “You can’t be that fucking stupid.”

I clench my fist, and Vincent curses under his breath.

“It’ll be about G,” he finally speaks, exasperated by our ignorance.

“*Who?*” Vincent and I say at the same time.

“Gabriella.” Leonardo gestures the server over, ordering another vodka soda. His fifth since we sat down.

We’re sitting in my restaurant in downtown Manhattan, and I have a million and one other things I’d like to do with my day. More pressing fucking things than to sit around and wait for the vertically challenged prick who demanded my audience on a Sunday fucking morning.

“If he takes any longer, he can wait until I’m back from the cabin with Bianca.”

“Since when are you going to the cabin?” I turn to him.

“Since I decided I wanted some alone time with my wife. All this drama with Gabriella is starting to wear on her. Throwing parties and keeping secrets, and dealing with my foul-ass mood after finding out my best friend was fucking my sister is all too much. Bianca deserves a break.”

My top lip curls up, and Leonardo laughs, the sound not in the least bit humored. “I thought you were taking her to Italy after Christmas,” I grit.

“I am,” he answers but says nothing more.

“What the fuck would Joey want with Gabriella?” I bite out, irritated at the fucking world for existing.

Vincent scowls at me.

Leonardo, shaking his head, downs his vodka and calls the server over again. “Just keep them coming and hold the soda.”

The server bows his head and moves away.

“And you think I’m fucking thick. Big Joey is looking to match Gabriella with his son. You know, her brother?” He starts laughing, his fist coming up to rest against his lips, shoulders shaking with mirth.

“*What?*” Vincent and I bellow at the same time.

He schools his laughter only to start again once his drink is delivered. He takes a sip.

Leaning across the table, I knock the glass out of his hand.

He sobers immediately. “Don’t be a fuckwit.”

“Speak before I shoot you.”

Hand to his chest, he smirks. “Shoot *me*? Who would you have marry Gabriella, then?” He stands. “Excuse me.” He throws his napkin onto the table, and I lift from my chair,

ready to follow him but pause when he moves toward the bar and not the exit. The bartender hands him a bottle of vodka, and he makes his way back toward us, gait lazy.

Vincent tenses at my side. “I’m gonna kill him.”

“Get in fucking line,” I mumble.

Taking his seat once again, Leonardo picks up the glass I hit from his hand and pours himself a sizable shot. He drinks it. “Dante and G have become *good* friends.” He smiles at us both. “Awkwardly, our young cousin’s feelings are romantic, and while our charming little liar is very much aware of the inappropriate thoughts her brother is conjuring up, she’s enjoying getting to know him. She’s friend zoning him, but he’s not taking the hint. Or he is, and now he’s asking Daddy for help to seal the deal.”

“Who told you this?”

He rolls his eyes. “I watch things. I see things. Sometimes”—he leans in closer, whispering so loud that spit flies from his mouth—“I see things I don’t want or shouldn’t have to see.” He’s slurring his words.

“Gentlemen.” Joey decides to arrive at that very moment, his son in tow, catching me off guard.

“Sit down,” I snap. “Don’t disrespect me again by being late.”

Undoing the button of his suit jacket, Joey doesn’t hesitate to take his seat. “Our apologies. You know New York traffic.”

Dante lifts his chin in greeting, taking the closest seat to his father.

“I have somewhere else to be, so if we could make this fast,” Vincent says, not showing anyone the courtesy of

looking at them.

“Certainly.” Joey grins. “Your sister. I want to discuss her upcoming eighteenth birthday and her potential suitors.”

Leonardo clears his throat in victory, and it takes everything within me not to reach over and slam the stupid vodka bottle over his head.

“Whatever do you mean?” I ask serenely.

“Dante and Gabriella have become quite close.”

The absurdity of this whole conversation has me on edge. I want to take Gabriella by the shoulders and shake her. I know she wants to get to know her brother, but shit, couldn't she have waited until *after* she was married so I could save my cousin's humiliation.

“Have you now?” I turn to Dante.

He straightens his posture. “I like her a lot. She's fun, and she's beautiful and kind. Vincent, I swear to you I'd be good to her.”

Vincent holds up his hand, and Dante's words die in his throat. “I don't doubt it, Dante. But Gabriella is already promised to another.”

“What?” my cousin breathes, shock sending him back in his seat. “She hasn't said anything.”

“Have you asked her outright?”

“Well, no.”

“Who?” Joey barges into the conversation, his cheeks reddened in anger.

“Oh, that would be me,” Leonardo slurs beside us, body tipping to the side in inebriation.

“What?” Dante looks fucking heartbroken, and I’m juvenile enough to admit that his misery pleases me.

“She’s not even *full* family,” Joey barks. “Why would you make such a stupid decision to marry her to an underboss?”

The temperature drops by at least five degrees. Even Leonardo sobers, sitting up in shock.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” I say.

“You heard what I said.”

“Dad,” Dante warns.

“Don’t take that tone with me, boy,” he spits.

My cousin drops his eyes, and I want to scream at him that this is why, even if they weren’t fucking related, Gabriella would never be his. She deserves a man with a backbone made of fucking steel. His father all but spit on her worth, and instead of defending her, he shunned his eyes in reprimand.

Standing on unsteady feet, Leonardo saunters around the table to where our uncle sits. Leaning over his shoulder, my brother retrieves the knife he keeps hidden against his calf and drags it up Joey’s suit jacket in an intimate caress.

I smile. Vincent smiles. Dante keeps his head downturned, and Joey eyeballs me.

To onlookers, it would look like nothing more than one man leaning over another. But as my brother’s knife meets Joey’s neck, I could have forty-five witnesses to a murder they would never actually *see*.

“Who Vincent decides his sister will marry is *none* of your concern. We appreciate your proposal, but the answer is no. Gabriella will be a Caruso.” Something significant thrums inside me at that sentence, but I ignore it. “If you ever insult



her again, to me, to anyone in the family, to your dog. If you *think* that same fucking thought you were stupid enough to speak out loud, it won't be Vincent's or Leonardo's wrath that you will feel. It will be mine. I will parade your death in front of the entire outfit in celebration. You will die painfully, and you will die publicly, and then I'll piss on your naked body while everyone laughs at how tiny your dick is."

Leonardo's knife presses a little harder into his jugular.

Vincent shifts in a way that I would swear he's hard. Bloodshed does something to that motherfucker.

Still, Dante keeps his eyes averted.

"Am I understood?"

"Yes"—Joey waits for a beat, forcing the next word from his throat like a shit he's been harboring for days—"boss."

"Thatta boy." Leonardo slaps the side of Joey's face with his knife before standing and making his way back to his vodka bottle.

"Leave," I tell Joey.

Dante stands.

"You sit." He doesn't hesitate.

Joey waddles off with indignation on his shoulders, and I'm half tempted to kill him for being a pretentious prick. Instead, I turn back to his son on a heavy exhale.

"If you cared for Gabriella the way I, *Vincent*," I correct, "needed you to, to even consider your proposal"—which would also be never, based on DNA, but he doesn't need to know that right now—"you would have *never* let a man insult her without consequence."

“I know he’s your father,” I explain before he can speak to contradict me. “I know he’s a mean motherfucker too. But the women in our family who take a vow in front of God to be ours are a gift. If you want any relationship to work with your future wife, you need to show her you are worthy of what she might be willing to give you. A simple exchange of vows cannot demand love, care, and intimacy, Dante. She protects you if you do the same for her. She fights for you if you do the same for her. No man, no matter who the fuck he is, has the right to insult a woman because he thinks he is superior. In the future, don’t ever let me see the weakness I witnessed in you today. I’ve told you repeatedly that you will be a capo one day, but I won’t give you that honor unless you prove to me that you are worthy. Today, you failed.”

He takes in what I say with keen focus and eager ears. “Yes, boss.”

“Another thing, just because you and Gabriella are friends doesn’t mean she wants to marry you. If she hears about this conversation from anyone other than you, you may find yourself without that friendship. Vincent’s sister is a lioness. She has a mighty roar, and I can tell you from experience that it’s not just noise. She deserves the courtesy of your honesty.”

He nods.

I lift my hand, waving him off. “Go.”



GABRIELLA

Dante texted me and asked me to meet him at the café downstairs. I'm not going to lie. I was reluctant.

We've been spending more and more time together, and while I love that I'm getting to know my brother, shit is starting to get uncomfortable.

Dante has a crush on me.

Me, being Gabriella Ferrari. *Vincent's* sister.

Also me, *his* sister.

I'm a terrible person. I should've avoided all contact from that first day at Lorenzo's home when he made his interest obvious. Yet I gave in to the temptation of knowing *him*, hoping if I friend-zoned him hard enough, he'd realize there would never be anything between us.

That hasn't worked out too well for me of late. So much so that Leonardo has been helping me out by playing interference. Whenever Dante texts or calls me to make plans, I bring Leonardo. If Leonardo didn't hate me enough based on our forced nuptials, he'd have every right to now. He's my human flirt shield. Every time Dante *hints* at his attraction, Leo's job is to change the trajectory of our conversation. Dante allows it to happen because Leo's his uncle, and he respects him. Leo is also the fucking underboss, and he has no choice but to respect him.

But Leo won't answer my call, and Dante said it was urgent.

He smiles when he sees me approach, and I can't help but return the gesture.

My caramel macchiato sits ready and waiting, and I love how thoughtful he is. I see it in him always. With his sister, Luna. With me. With his nephew. He's a kind and generous human, and I long to tell him how proud our mother would be of him. I long to tell him that I see so much of who she was in him. I long to tell him that he makes me feel safe because, in some ways, when I'm spending time with him, I'm with her, and it makes me feel at peace.

He's quiet for a long time, and I drink my coffee silently.

"You're being awfully quiet." I cave, giving in to the silence and all but begging him to speak.

"When I first saw you at Lorenzo's, I felt something inside me that I'd never felt before. It was strange, like this peace had settled over me. I felt like I knew you, which sounds stupid because we'd never met before."

"It's not silly," I rush out. "Meeting new people makes me incredibly uncomfortable. I didn't feel that with you."

"Over the past few weeks, I've attempted to be pretty open with my feelings."

*Oh god.*

"You seem to bring Leonardo everywhere you go, though."

"He's my friend," I say defensively.

"I wondered whether it was Vincent being overprotective."

I shake my head. "Well, he is over the top in some aspects, but Leo was all me."

"Which then brings me to my very awkward next question. Is there anything here on your end?" He gestures back and forth between us.

“I care about you, Dante—”

“No.” He cuts me off. “Not that. I don’t want to beat around the bush, Gabriella. I want to know if you have feelings for me. At all. Romantically.”

I want to cry because I’m afraid my rejection will be the end. But he’s asked me, and I don’t want to lie. “No,” I whisper.

“Ouch.” He sits back in his chair, hands braced behind his head. “Am I that oblivious? I thought you wanted to hang out all the time because—”

“I’m so sorry, Dante. I like you as a friend. I don’t have many friends, and I enjoy your company so much, and I know I should’ve kept my distance when I realized you had feelings for me. I just... I couldn’t.”

He leans forward. “I like you too. Isn’t that how great relationships start?” he implores. “We enjoy one another’s company. I think you’re beautiful. I’d treat you so well, Gabriella. I’d give you whatever you wanted. Big house? Yours. Kids? Yours. White picket fence? Yours. You don’t want any of that, and you want to throw on backpacks and travel the world? Yours.”

“Dante,” I whisper.

“Why not me?” he asks, hurt in his voice.

“Because you’re family.”

“And Leo’s not?” he snaps.

“Leo?”

“Yeah. Lorenzo told me that you and Leo were getting married.”

I swallow. “He told you that?”

“Today. When my dad and I approached him, asking if he would let me marry you.”

My regret morphs into something different. “You went to Lorenzo before speaking to me? Even though you knew I didn’t have feelings for you?”

He’s just like his dad. Like all of them.

“I know it was wrong.”

“Of course, it was wrong, Dante. What the hell? You and I talk about this all the time. The prized bull being paraded around a fucking circus, remember? I thought you were different.”

“I am different.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t think you are. I’ve tried to show you in every way that I wasn’t interested in you romantically. I didn’t engage when you’d flirt. I started taking Leo with me when we hung out because you hadn’t quite picked up my friend zone vibes. I’m sorry for that. I should’ve been outright with my thoughts and feelings. I was afraid you might not want to hang out with me if I rejected you so openly. So here it is. I like you, Dante. You are my friend. You will only ever be my friend, and you hurt me by trying to take that choice away from me.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY

## GABRIELLA



*T*his day didn't come about without issue.

The same day Dante threw his truth bomb of feelings at me, Leo disappeared. Fucking *ghosted*. Lorenzo came to the penthouse spitting fire and acting like *I* had something to do with his brother's vanishing act. I was just as surprised as he was. I was in damage control, and my brother had asked for my hand in marriage.

It took days of searching and countless conversations for Leo and me to come to an agreement. Our marriage was merely smoke and mirrors. It was a farce. We both knew that. I needed his name, nothing more, nothing less. I didn't need his love or his affection. I assured him that he would be free to live his life as he does now. The only difference in our friendship would be on paper. He'd be a married man. Why *I* was tasked with convincing *him* of the importance of our union, I don't know. But the more I forced Leonardo to believe, the more it made sense to me. *Leonardo and I* made sense. He was safe, and all I've ever wanted to feel was safe.

"Do you think they'll let me talk to Leonardo before the ceremony?"

Bianca shakes her head. "No, honey."



We're standing in one of the back rooms at the church, Bianca fixing my veil into place and throwing it back over my head to keep my face free for the time being.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," I confess. "It's not like it's a *real* wedding. Like it's real because I'll be married, but it's also kind of fake because..."

"I know what you mean," she says quietly.

"Yeah." I suddenly feel awkward, turning my face away to hide my embarrassment.

Bianca walks behind me, adjusting the veil to make it sit nicely. I don't know why since she'll have to move it back over my face, and all her fussing will have been for nothing. "I was nervous when I married Vincent," she tells my back. "Granted, your nerves are far more warranted. I only had my family, Lorenzo, and Leonardo at my wedding, if you could call it that."

I turn. "That sounds better. Why couldn't I have that?"

She smiles. "Because I shamed my family. It was a rush to save face. Your wedding is a celebration."

"Woo-hoo." I lift a fist lifelessly into the air.

Bianca smacks it. "Stop it. You're all ready to go." She stands back, admiring her handiwork, and suddenly, everything I had convinced myself was right feels wrong.

Pushing my nails into the palms of my hands, I concentrate on the pain. "Do you think you could give me a minute?" I ask Bianca quietly.

She agrees readily. "Of course. I'll be right outside. Let me know if you need anything."

I nod, but she's already turned away, moving out of the room to give me the privacy I asked for. I wait until the door closes softly behind her before letting go of a shaky breath and moving toward the mirror. I inhale forcibly through my nose and shake my shoulders before lifting my chin to look at myself.

I hardly recognize the woman in the reflection. Poised to be only a girl of eighteen, the sheer terror in my eyes helps me hold that lie comfortably to my audience. In the family's eye, I came of age only weeks ago. My mother was right, Vincent's solution to secure my protection was marriage. Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday, here, have a husband. It was the *only* solution he put forth, and as reluctant as I was to agree, I can't deny his reasoning.

Big Joey and Dante have been swarming around me, eager to set a match in motion that would see me marry my brother. Bile rushes up my throat, and I force it back down, grimacing at my reflection. Poor, sweet Dante. We've become friends. He accepted me without question. It was nice building a relationship with my brother, even if he was oblivious to the connection. Shit was only weird when he'd make his attraction known and when he'd flirt. My heart aches for him. If only he knew. He'd be mortified. He begged and pleaded for me to be his. He told me his fantasies of our life planned out, one of intimacy, marriage, and children.

Truth be told, had Vincent and Lorenzo not pushed this union with Leonardo, I likely would have begged the younger Caruso brother to marry me anyway. My rejection of Dante was bruising his ego in a way I didn't like. I loved him, just not in the way he imagined I would with his understandable ignorance. The more I pushed back against his advances, the more irritated he became. He begged me to see reason. Why

would I settle for an underboss who would never love me when I could have him, a man who would devote himself to me? My reluctant agreement to a union with Leonardo was more about cutting off Dante's temptation and desire for someone he shouldn't want than protecting myself against Big Joey's wrath.

I wonder what my mother would think if she saw me now. In the exact position she warned me against. My only saving grace is that I *like* Leonardo. He's my friend. I don't think I could ever *love* him, but I'm not entirely sure I believe in love. It's nice in your thoughts, but feelings are messy. They're unpredictable and volatile, and altogether untrustworthy.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I whisper, dragging a hand over my stomach to calm my nerves. "It's the best of a shitty situation. I have people I love here," I tell her truthfully. "I have people who love me. Marrying a man I don't love is hardly a burden. Leo is a good man." I don't know who I'm trying to convince, myself or my dead mother. "He won't hurt me."

*So pretty when you cry.*

I shake the image of Lorenzo from my mind. He'll be here somewhere. Sitting in the pews, he'll likely be up front where everyone would expect. I texted him a week ago and asked him not to stand beside his brother when we said our vows. I know I should've called him like an adult and had the conversation, but talking to him right now hurts a little more than I care to admit. I couldn't stomach the thought of standing with Leonardo, pledging my life to him, with the temptation of Lorenzo's eyes just a blink away. Lorenzo didn't respond to my text, but the next time I saw Leo, he assured me that it would only be the two of us standing at the altar.

A soft tap on the door, and I inflate my lungs fully one last time before expelling my doubts from my body.

“Come in,” I say.

Vincent pops his head through the door. “Ready?” He stands upright, pushing his way into the room. “You look beautiful, Gabriella. Like an angel.”

I feel a blush crawl onto my cheeks. “Thank you, and thank you for walking me down the aisle.”

He moves toward me, kissing one cheek and then the other. “It’s an honor, Gabriella. You’re my sister, and I love you.”

My chin wobbles.

“Shit, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“You chose a really shitty time to tell me you loved me for the first time, brother. Of course, I’m going to get emotional.”

Regret washes over his face. “I should’ve told you sooner. I’m sorry it has to be this way. I’m sorry you have to pretend your mother doesn’t exist to all these people. I don’t know how to keep you safe otherwise. I need you to know that I’ve considered killing Big Joey to eliminate any threat he can cause, but I don’t think he will be our only problem.”

I place my hand on his heart over his tailor-made tuxedo. “It’s fine. I’ve come to terms with it. Sacrifices are made for family; I’m slowly learning that. It’s not like I could fall in love and marry some random guy from an online dating app. At least this way, I know my husband.”

“Leonardo is a good man,” he assures me.

“You don’t need to tell me that. I already know.”

He nods. “If he ever does anything wrong by you—”

“Hey.” I cut him off. “You know Leo. You know he’s not capable of hurting me.”

He swallows audibly. “I know, I know. I don’t want to make a mistake here. I don’t want to do wrong by you.”

“I’m reassuring you when you should be reassuring me,” I scold. “Let me finish up here, and let’s get this over and done with.”

He squeezes my hands and leaves without another word.

I wish I could look Leo in the eye before I have to walk between hundreds of people. I want his stupid boyish smile to calm the storm swirling in my gut.

“You’re beautiful.”

I spin at the sound of Lorenzo’s voice, grabbing hold of the table beside me to steady my feet when they falter.

He leans lazily against the doorframe he’s standing on the threshold of. Different from the one Vincent poked his head through only seconds prior.

He looks a picture. Dressed in a custom-made tuxedo as black as his heart. His white dress shirt is pressed impeccably, the color almost too bright against the midnight backdrop of the suit. His hands sit comfortably in his pockets, jacket open and brushed back to accommodate the passive bearing of his arms.

I roll my shoulders, suddenly self-conscious of the tight lace dress I’ve poured my curvy frame into.

I don’t let the sincerity or affection in his compliment alter the unforgiving glare I’ve plastered on my face. Even though it makes me want to cry in his arms.

“What do you want?”

He stands to full height, and I take a step back.

“Why so hostile?”

Fury seeps from my pores. “I hate you.”

He steps into the room, and I glance back at the other door, calculating how many steps it would take me to reach it.

“You hate to love me, lioness. There’s a difference.”

I shake my head, denying him, but afraid to speak, fearing my voice will betray me.

He steps closer.

“Please.” A single broken word that doesn’t stop his approach, no matter how pathetic it is.

“Please, what?”

My chin wobbles, and I clench my teeth. “Leave.”

His eyes close, and his head tilts to the side with a pained sigh. “I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to talk to you.”

“You can talk to me after the ceremony.”

He makes an impatient noise. “I’m afraid it’s rather pressing.”

“More pressing than you marrying me off to your fucking brother,” I snap, unable to stop myself.

“Yes. In fact, it has everything to do with what’s about to happen.”

So caught up in my own panic, I hadn't noticed the same emotion in Lorenzo's eyes. I was admiring how beautifully toxic he was instead of reading the imminent threat at the simple reality of his presence.

I breathe deeply, and the couture gown closes in, making it difficult to fill my lungs.

"Leonardo," he starts but stops, rubbing a knuckle against the rigid set of his jaw. "Leonardo..." He trails off as he tries again.

"He's not here," I whisper, realization dawning on me. "*Fuck.*" I turn away from Lorenzo but turn straight back when I come face-to-face with my reflection in the mirror.

I bite my thumbnail. "Call him. Get him here."

That *fucking* fucker.

"I've tried."

"Try harder," I yell.

His nostrils flare. "He's gone, Gabbi. He's not going to do it."

I rush at him. "He has to. What's the alternative? I marry my fucking brother," I spit, stabbing a finger toward the door. "Give me your phone."

"He won't answer."

I nod, moving toward my bag of belongings and rummaging through it. "He did this before," I say. "Remember?" I glance over my shoulder. "He did this before. He's just nervous. Shit, I'm fucking nervous."

Lorenzo's big palms land on my shoulders.

A sob breaks from my lips, but I shake my head, refusing to give in to the tears threatening to spill.

I dial Leonardo. It rings out, and his voicemail picks up. “Listen here, you fucker. You get your ass to the church, and you do it right fucking now. We made a deal, Leo. We made a fucking deal,” I screech into the line.

I end the call and inhale, cracking my neck to one side and then the other just as a text comes through.

LEONARDO

You're both asking too much of me.

“That weak piece of shit,” I fume. I whirl on Lorenzo. “*I’m* asking too much of him. He can’t do this. *He* can’t do this!”

He takes my phone from my hands and places it on the table. He takes my hands in his. “*Shh.*”

“Don’t tell me to shush,” I murmur, both calmed and irritated by his ability to make me find my center. “What do I do, Lorenzo? Apart from being humiliatingly left at the altar?”

He smiles, brushing his thumb and forefinger down a lock of hair at my face. “Don’t be humiliated by someone else’s cowardice.”

Easy for him to say. He’s not standing in a couture fucking gown, against his better judgment, with no fucking groom.

I feel sick. I press my hand against my stomach to quell the urge to bring up my breakfast all over Lorenzo’s polished loafers.

“I have two options for you.” He drops my hands and takes a step back. He pauses briefly, and I swear I see a flash of fear in his eyes. But he blinks it away and reaches into his jacket



pocket. He pulls out a thick envelope and places it carefully beside my phone. “There is one-hundred thousand dollars in this envelope. I also know that Vincent is in the process of having the entirety of his father’s estate transferred into your name.”

“What?”

“It’s enough to get you where you need to go. Once you’ve found somewhere you would like to settle, I’ll find a way to wire you your money, and any more you need to ensure no one can trace you. You will never have to worry about surviving day-to-day again.”

My eyes are like saucers in my face, wide and unblinking.

“Without the protection of a boss, I can’t guarantee your safety.” He whispers his words. “Not without killing a large number of the outfit. That will decimate the family... beyond repair. It will also make New York open slather for enemies. There are women, children...”

“Lorenzo.”

His brow furrows, and he dips his chin. “You know that. I don’t need to explain that to you. I would do it, though,” he tells me. “I’d do it for you, but I’ve thought about it long enough to know you wouldn’t want that.”

“You’re right.”

He nods, squeezing his bottom lip between his thumb and forefinger. “If it looks as though you’ve both run, I won’t be forced to kill my brother for insubordination.” His voice is tight when he speaks, and the pain that courses through him at the mere thought of harming Leonardo has his hand moving up to cup my face to hide the quiver in my jaw. “You will never have to look over your shoulder ever again. You have

my word. I've told you time and time again, Gabbi. You are *not* a captive. You are free to leave." He stops talking, closing his lips tightly before speaking again. "I will help you."

I look at the money, considering how far I could get with his offer. A new life, all with the assistance of the most powerful man in New York. I trust that he'd keep his word and I'd be safe. He has no reason to lie. He could drag me, kicking and screaming, down that aisle, and not one single person would bat an eyelash—not the guests, not the priest, not him.

"What's option two?"

He looks away for a beat, composing himself before looking back. "I'm going to walk out of this room—after I kiss you because you're so fucking beautiful, and I can't find it in me to deny myself—and I'm going to take my brother's position at the altar. I should never have asked Leonardo to take this on. Your safety is only guaranteed under my protection. All they will know"—he rubs his forehead, unable to look at me—"is that I couldn't stand the thought of you marrying another."

His words wrap around me in a relieved embrace. One I didn't think I cared for. "What are you saying?"

He clears his throat. "I will stand at the altar beside the priest, and the 'Wedding March' will play," he explains, not answering my question. "My car is parked at the back of the church." He takes his key from his pocket and places it on the envelope of money. "You can leave. Caught up in waiting for your arrival, no one will see you exit. By the time anyone knows you're missing, you'll be far enough away that you can breathe easy."

I blink, waiting for him to continue.

“If you choose to stay,” he says a little too loudly. “If you choose to stay...” He lowers his voice. “When you walk down the aisle, you will be walking toward me.”

“You?” The single syllable catches in my throat, but I don’t need to repeat myself.

“You will marry me.”

“You?”

“Correct,” he confirms. “We will say our vows and be pronounced husband and wife.” He pauses, looking at my lips. “We’ll kiss. I don’t know what happens beyond that point. All you need to know, lioness, is that from that moment, you will hold my name.”

“Caruso.”

“Gabriella Caruso,” he whispers, and those two names said together, like they belong, cause an unexpected flutter in my chest. “No one fucks with what’s mine. Make no mistake, lioness, if anyone threatens you after we’ve vowed forever, I will take it as a direct threat to my life. The carnage I spoke of earlier, the decimation of the outfit, and the collateral damage that will ensue will mean nothing to me. I will stand by your side, and I’ll destroy everything I have ever held sacred, and I’ll do it fucking proudly.”

He’s before me within seconds, my face in his hands. He kisses me softly, holding his mouth against mine for seconds longer than I anticipated.

“You now have a choice.”

He moves toward the door, pausing as his hand meets the doorknob. “*Luce della mia vita*, if this is goodbye...”

Our eyes hold, and mine fill with tears. I can't pull my gaze away, and something I can't even begin to contemplate passes silently between us. He leaves the room before finishing his sentence, but some things are too painful to say out loud.

Seconds pass, then minutes, and the only sound I hear is the pounding of my heart.

*You now have a choice.*

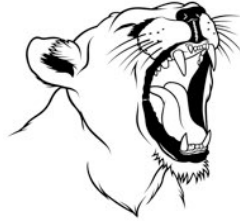
But then it starts, the slow and solemn tempo that echoes into every crevice of my soul and makes me want to throw up.

The "Wedding March."

I glance at the door and then at the table. Lorenzo's cash and car key shine like a beacon, and my heart in my throat, I reach out to grab them.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

## LORENZO



Vincent waits outside the room I just left, oblivious to the conversation I just shared with his sister, back against the wall as he checks his watch. “Vin,” I greet.

“Enzo.” He still hasn’t completely forgiven me for sleeping with his sister. He also hasn’t tried to kill me again, which is a bonus. Having to put my closest friend and most trusted adviser down for a *second* attempt on my life would prove a somewhat troublesome and regrettable task. Still, he has kept his distance more than usual, and I see him only when business necessitates it. I never imagined I would wish for his company more, yet I miss his easy silence. I only have myself to blame, though. Vincent is protective of those he cares about. He’s one of the very few people who know the truth behind my reluctance to take a wife. He knows the limits of my emotional range. He knows the sheer quantity of the lives I’ve taken and how brutal my kills have been. I’d be the last person on earth he’d want his sister to tie herself to.

I can only imagine the carnage that will unravel when either of the two options I left Gabriella with becomes our reality. Either I’ve assisted his sister in running *away* from him, or he becomes my brother-in-law. He’ll kill me either way, I have no doubt.

I stare at him.

“Everything good?”

An opportunity to come clean. I could tell him right here and now. I can confess that after seeing that tattoo on my ribs, Leonardo threw a shitfit and fucking ran. *Again.*

But I don't. I nod my head, tap his shoulder, and fucking lie. “All good. See you in there.”

His eyes narrow, but he lifts his chin, accepting my dishonesty without argument.

White and red roses, soft music from the organ player, and at least two hundred people fill the nave. The pews overflow with family, friends, business associates, and hangers-on. I make my way down the aisle, ignoring their curious glances and faint greetings.

A priest stands in the chancel alone, and I step up to him, shake his hand, whisper the change of name in the ceremony, and take my place beside him.

A hush of concerned voices trails through the church. Shock and curious eyes watch me, and I stare each pair down, daring any of the fuckers before me to challenge the one-eighty they've witnessed. They came to share in a wedding. A union of souls. Leonardo's and Gabriella's souls, to be precise. Yet here their leader stands, younger brother MI-fucking-A.

It's just what every wedding needs, a missing groom. Honestly, I don't know what I expected after this morning's clusterfuck. I guess the wad of cash I just handed to the bride maybe hints at the fact that I knew this was coming.

“Mr. Caruso, shall we begin?” the priest murmurs.

“One more minute,” I tell him quietly. But with the room stunned into silence, my words carry across like the echo of a cave, bouncing off the brick walls and forcing everyone to listen.

Heads ducked, the entire church has developed a keen interest in their shoes.

I can't blame them. What a turn of fucking events, the boss of the fucking family, the man who has made it crystal-fucking-clear that he would never marry, now stands on a pedestal before God, ready to contradict his most painful belief.

Most people crammed into this building know my story. I'm sure they've all come to their own version as to why I refused to marry up until this point. They would have built some sob story in their head, poor Lorenzo Caruso forced to watch his mother die and compelled to kill at such a tender age. I had no problem killing that asshole. My only regret is what my father punished me for in front of the entire guard, that I didn't look the cunt in the eye when I did it. My father whipped me, and I took the punishment because I believed he was right. I took the slap of his leather belt, and I turned it into my greatest weapon. *Me.*

Sixty seconds pass by in a blink, and I dip my chin to the priest, knowing I've given Gabriella enough head start if that is her wish.

The slow thrum of the “Wedding March” begins, and the guests shuffle to their feet. They wait, eyes trained on the door Gabriella should've stepped through by now.

They wait...

And wait...



*And fucking wait...*

The murmurs begin, the suppressed gossip of shock as our reluctant bride seemingly abandons me at the altar.

*Me.* Lorenzo fucking Caruso. Boss of Cosa Nostra.

I smile despite the circumstances.

My lioness.

I can't say I'm surprised.

"Sir." The priest touches my elbow.

I hold up a hand. "Just a little longer."

He gestures to the pianist, and she begins the melody once again.

Not surprised, but the hollow part of my chest begins to make itself known, twisting in a feeling only Gabriella seems to bring out in me.

I drop my head, a sigh of acceptance cast toward my shoes as a bang echoes through the church. I look up, and Gabriella stands there, her eyes frazzled and cheeks red. She looks like a fucking deer in headlights instead of the formidable lioness I'm used to, but she's here, and all of a sudden, I can't fucking breathe.

"Sorry I'm late," she whispers.

Vincent rushes in behind her, moving next to her, and stares at me in shock. He throws a quick glance around the room, acceptance shaking the clench from his jaw. He knows without confirmation that Leonardo was a no-show.

Gabriella steps forward, but he stops her, palm on her forearm. Something murderous fires through me, and I move down the altar's steps. How fucking dare he stop her.

She holds up a finger in my direction, her gaze pleading as she silently asks for only a second. Then she breaks our gaze and looks up at her brother. The affection on her face as she speaks softly enough that no one else can hear tells me all I need to know. She's not here for me; she's here to stay with him.

Vincent leans down, his mouth at her ear. I watch as she listens, my feet itching to storm down the fucking aisle and claim her. He might be protective, but he has no say here. I made my decision, as did Gabriella. When they pull back from the tight huddle of their bodies, she nods her head at Vincent. Reluctantly, he straightens his jacket, and they begin the painstakingly slow walk toward me.

The gray glint in his eyes doesn't move from me, and if I wasn't who I am, I'd fear for my life. In truth, who I am likely has no bearing on the matter to him.

Boss.

Best friend.

I'm marrying his sister without the decency of a conversation first.

If he killed me, I couldn't cry wrongdoing.

I pull my eyes from the visions of my murder in his eyes and let them fall on Gabriella.

She's breathtaking. Her thick curves are painted in white lace, her dress clinging to every inch of her temptatious body from her feet up to her chest. A modest dip cups her pretty fucking tits, and thick straps wrap over her shoulders, leaving her arms bare. A veil meant to cover her face cascades down her back, leaving her face free from disguise. Her long ebony-

colored curls frame her face, her dark eyes not even bothering to blink as she moves closer and closer.

Everything inside me pounds with the fucked-up chant of *mine*. I've never wanted to claim ownership over something so fucking pure before. But here I stand, in a church of all places, knowing that Gabriella Ferrari was always meant to be mine.

My mind uses everything within its arsenal to immortalize this moment. This snippet of time is one I wish was forever our reality. Because as she walks toward me, it dawns on me that she chose me. *She. Chose. Me.* And her face lets me believe that that choice fulfills her. There's no hesitation in her smile. There's no animosity in the touch of color that dots along the apple of her cheeks. She looks almost happy, and it's a fucking miracle because I feel that way too.

When they finally reach me, Gabriella moves toward me, but Vincent's hold on her arm halts her movement.

A growl sounds in my throat. Vincent smirks. "I'd like to see you try," he murmurs, low enough that only Gabbi and I can hear.

"Vincent," Gabbi whispers.

He looks at her, leaning down to kiss her cheek before finally placing her palm in my outstretched hand. He takes his seat beside Bianca.

The ceremony is quick. Vows are exchanged, rings are swapped, and the priest pronounces us man and wife. Something within me snaps. I pull her into my body, look her in the eyes, and slam my mouth against hers.

The noise of the church disappears, the applause and cheers fading away as my tongue slides into my new wife's mouth and finds fucking reason once again.



HOURS LATER, reception in full swing, my patience is wearing thin. Gabriella looks ready to break but holds her counterfeit smile as people steal her attention from me time and time again. She's drowning, and I can see her resolution falter with every passing second. She's second-guessing, and I'm caught between understanding enough to assure her that everything will be okay and an obsessive streak that demands I grab her by the jaw, stare into her eyes and make her see that running is no longer an option. I gave her that freedom once, and she rejected it, choosing to stay by my side, where she'll forever fucking remain.

I check my watch for the hundredth time, deciding that we've wasted too many hours around people who are only interested in free booze and free food. I move toward Gabbi, who has been seated at a table with a drunk Luna and a tipsy Bianca for the last forty-five minutes.

"Considering you're only eighteen, I'm assuming you're a virgin," Luna slurs.

Surprised by the turn in the conversation, Gabriella chokes on the water in her mouth.

"Do you watch porn?" Luna continues.

My ears perk up, and Gabriella shrugs. "Sure."

*Interesting.*

Gabbi, finally sensing my approach, adjusts her hair to avoid my eyes.

“It’s not like that.” Luna places a palm on her arm. “Especially your first time. It’ll be awful. Whatever shit you’ve seen where some bitch *comes* when some selfish fuck shoves his cock into her for the first time.” She lifts her hands in surrender. “Lies. No woman in the history of *ever* has come their first time.”

I raise a single eyebrow at my wife. She ducks her head.

*Enzo.*

*Like that.*

Fuck, I remember how hard we *both* came when I took fucking claim of her body.

“Ladies.” I save her from more of Luna’s drunken rambles. My cousin winks at Gabbi, kissing her cheek and walking away on unsteady feet.

“What was she saying?” I whisper into Gabbi’s ear, and she shifts away from me, refusing to show me the rosy touch of her cheeks. “Are you ready to go?”

She nods.

“There will be a fanfare of commotion if we announce our departure. I want you to walk toward the bathroom. I’ll meet you there, and we’ll head off.”

Reaching between her breasts, she pulls out the key to my Lamborghini and hands it to me. “Safekeeping?” I ask.

“Fail-safe if I decided to run anytime during the ceremony or reception.”

“Tempted?” I take the key and slide it into my pocket. “Because you need to know, lioness, now that you are *officially* mine, if you run, I’ll chase you, and I won’t stop until I catch you.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

## GABRIELLA



I stand in the foyer of his house. A place at one time I thought of as a sanctuary. As a home. But the walls close in, and my skin itches. It burns with the way the lace of my dress presses into my skin. My breathing quickens, my breaths coming on shallower and shallower.

*If you run, I'll chase you, and I won't stop until I catch you.*

The past six hours have passed in a haze of twists and congratulations I haven't even begun to unwrap. My mind made it through the day through zig-zags and roundabouts. I was twisted and flipped and launched off a cliff of *what-the-ever-loving-fuck* and have landed inside a mafia boss's home as his wife.

*Wife.*

Leonardo abandoned me. Lorenzo offered me a chance to run, and I was going to take it. I held the money in my hands and had his car key ready. I was steps away from freedom. But freedom meant no Lorenzo, and something inside me is broken because that reality hurt more than I imagined. In fact, it didn't feel like freedom at all. It felt like a prison of longing and regret I didn't want to die in.

*If you run, I'll chase you, and I won't stop until I catch you.*

What if I'm falling? I wanted to scream. Would you catch me then? Because I'm plummeting, and I feel as though he's smiling down at me, content in my tumble.

I all but blinked, and I was married. *Married*. To a man who pitied me enough to go against his very firm beliefs.

*If it looks as though you've both run, I won't be forced to kill my brother for insubordination.*

*All they will know is that I couldn't stand the thought of you marrying another.*

Now in the cold snap of reality, everything sets into place.

Lorenzo, feared and callous, is also dutiful. He's honorable, and he *loves* his brother. He'd do anything to protect him. *Anything*.

Massaging my neck, I struggle to swallow. The house is cast in darkness with the exception of the entrance light that Lorenzo switches on, a spotlight of warm light shining down on us like we're in a public arena. While the cold reality of loneliness creeps into the fabric of a wedding dress I never wanted, my skin begins to burn.

"Get it off me," I croak out.

"Huh?" Lorenzo steps up behind me, the heavy weight of his hand resting on my shoulder.

I yank at the dress again. "Get it off me," I repeat, more desperate.

His hand slides off my shoulder, and I'm both relieved and saddened by the absence of his touch.



“*Enzo*,” I beg, ripping at the material that seems to be melting into my skin. “Please. I’m suffocating.”

“*Gabriella*,” he murmurs, his voice coated with a sadness I want to shove back down his throat.

“Help me!” I scream.

Hands touching the nape of my neck, Lorenzo slides his hands down, tearing at the dress. The pearl buttons trailing up my spine and over my backside pop apart and fall to the ground in a chorus of spilled marbles.

I suck in a desperate breath.

“Gabbi.”

I hold up a hand, struggling to breathe.

Lorenzo moves in front of me, lifting my face with his hands. “Look at my eyes, lioness, and *breathe*.”

“I...” I gulp in air at a rate that only suffocates me more. “Can’t.”

Lifting one of my hands, he slides it into his shirt, pushing it against his sternum. “In,” he instructs. His chest expands, demonstrating the full-bodied breathing he wants me to emulate. “Out.” He releases his breath, his body relaxing. “Again.”

We stand like that until my feet begin to ache, and my chest feels as though I’ve run a marathon with the weight of the world on my shoulders.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. “Okay?”

“I need to shower.” I drop my eyes, embarrassed by my outburst.

He slides our entwined hands out of his shirt and turns, walking us up the stairs by pulling me behind him. I trudge up aimlessly, following his lead.

I move to turn right at the top of the stairs, and he pulls me left. We pause. I step toward the room I'd claimed as my own last time, but Lorenzo holds me in place. "Where are you going?"

I swallow against the lump in my throat. "To my room."

He looks at the closed door, then back toward the main bedroom. "This is our room."

*Our room.*

I shake my head, a silent way of denying him, too afraid to vocalize my rejection.

"Gabriella," he warns, my name rolling off his tongue effortlessly, even in his anger.

"I can't do this tonight," I whisper.

"Do what?"

"Argue," I tell him. "I'm on the verge of shattering. Don't force me to break."

"I like it when you break for me."

Nights of soul-shattering orgasms and Lorenzo pushing me to the brink of climax only to pull me back repeatedly until I was writhing, crying, and begging for his permission to explode, spark behind my eyes.

I look away. "Not like this. This is different."

I step back, but his hand holds mine still. "Lorenzo." His fingers hold on until the very last second, reaching to stay

connected. Finally, the connection breaks, and he sighs in defeat.

“You’re wrong,” he says as I reach my room, and I glance over my shoulder, waiting for him to elaborate. “Watching you break emotionally shows me that I still mean something to you. Complacency would crack me open. Your impartiality is something I couldn’t stomach. Knowing you’d moved on, knowing that you’d forgotten what we shared would break me in a way I don’t think I’d ever recover from.”

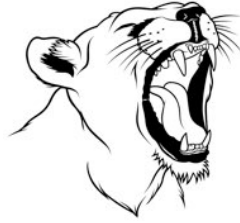
I want to laugh in his face. Move on from him? Forget the nights he broke me only to kiss me back together? That’s the problem. That’s why this is different. A few intimate nights shared, and I’d found myself tumbling into the horrible depths of love. What will be left of me after a lifetime of the same?

“What if I want to break because I regret everything we shared?” I ask. “What if I’m coming apart at the seams because the thought of living with you forever is my worst nightmare?”

“*Luce della mia vita.*” He sighs. “Hate and regret I can work with. They’re emotions I can twist and play with. You’ll be certain you despise me until one day you blink and finally admit that the nightmare that crushes your dreams is the realization you can’t live without me.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

## GABRIELLA



*H*e didn't force me to sleep in *our* bedroom.

He also didn't sleep in the armchair that he hadn't removed from my room since the night he claimed my virginity.

In fact, he didn't sleep at all. He kept vigil outside my open bedroom door as I sat on the windowsill, feet on my emotional support ladder, and stared into the night. I felt safer that way. Half in. Half out.

I've never had a panic attack before. I was convinced I was about to die. I couldn't breathe. My vision blurred, and I was rocky on my feet. I was shaking. My heart didn't just hurt emotionally, it ached with how hard it was working to keep me alive. My body was waiting for permission to die. Permission I couldn't give. Lorenzo was the only thing that kept my feet firmly planted on the ground. My hand at his heart, my eyes fixed on his. He was Earth, and I was just orbiting him, trying to land.

I sat on that windowsill, and I longed to invite him in. I knew he'd say yes, but I was so confused by my feelings *and* by his that, in the end, I didn't know how to ask.

Staring at the scattering of stars, I finally accepted that I had married Lorenzo because I wanted to. It was the only

option that made sense to me. I could tell myself that it was just that I didn't want to run. I could pretend that my relationship with Vincent was too important to let go. But those fabrications would be just that—lies. I married Lorenzo because I love him, and now I'm afraid I've promised forever to a man who can never love me back. Worse, I'm ashamed that I'm content with that being enough.

I have my assumptions as to why he married me. First and foremost, to protect his brother, he all but confirmed that in the church, but I'm scared he'll confirm that if I ask point blank. So I've let my nightmares manifest instead.

The sun has only just begun to rise, the dawn of a new day. Lorenzo disappeared only minutes ago, telling me he would make coffee and be back. I felt his hesitation in leaving, the beat of time where he second-guessed himself, dubious about whether I'd be here when he got back.

“Hey, G.”

I almost fall out of the window trying to twist around too fast. Hands on the window frame to save myself, I clamber down from the sill, my whole body alight with fury. “You have a lot of nerve coming here.”

Leonardo looks as rested as Lorenzo and I do. He stinks like the remnants of too much alcohol and the drowning of one's misery. His clothes are rumpled. The suit he was supposed to marry me in is creased with bad decisions and heavy regrets. Hair slovenly, he rips at it in discomfort. The whites of his eyes are stained red, and he blinks so rapidly I'm surprised he can see at all.

“Why are you here?”

“To check that you're okay.”

He says it like it's obvious, and something inside me snaps. Months and months of pent-up anger and confusion boil to the surface and explode in a tirade I don't even attempt to control. "Okay?" I screech. "Okay? You left me at the altar, Leonardo. I was wearing a dress, and there were people. I was in a church, and you left me there. *Alone.*" I'm blubbering. My nose is running, and spit flies from my mouth in a desperate need for him to understand how discarded he made me feel.

"You weren't alone," he argues poignantly. "I knew you wouldn't be alone."

*He knew I wouldn't be alone. He knew I wasn't alone.*

"G, I'm so fucking sorry." He steps forward.

"Stop!" I scream, panic claiming me. "Don't you come any closer."

He listens, feet halting.

"You blindsided me." I hiccup. "I thought we were friends. How could you do that to me?"

He has the audacity to look confused. "He didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

He laughs, the sound devoid of humor and dripping with disbelief. "You two are fucking unbelievable," he murmurs. "Why are you so insistent on living in fucking denial? If you knew the truth..." he implores.

"Tell me the truth!" I scream, my arms fisting at my sides and the cords in my neck straining under the pressure of my voice box.

"I can't," he bellows, the vein in his temple protruding, his face turning red. "I can't," he repeats, calmer this time, his words no less stressing. "*You need to work that part out, G.*"

“I trusted you,” I tell him. “I’d accepted what my life would be. *With you*. You made me believe you’d accepted it too. You could’ve had whatever life you wanted. You’re my friend, Leo. *Were* my friend. But you betrayed me. All you had to do was *talk* to me. I can’t trust you anymore.”

“Yes, you can,” he pleads with me to believe him, stepping closer.

I step back, lifting a hand in a silent request that he stop.

He hears me, fists clenching as he forces himself to step back. “This isn’t all on me,” he accuses. “Look me in the eye and tell me you could’ve gone through with it.” He swallows, and pain etches itself around his eyes. “Look me in the eye, Gabriella, and tell me you didn’t ask Lorenzo *not* to stand beside me because you were afraid you wouldn’t be able to keep your eyes away from *him* when you said your vows to *me*. Tell me you’re not in love with my fucking brother, and I will drop to my fucking knees right here and now, and I’ll beg for your forgiveness.”

I open my mouth but close it again because I can’t. I can’t do any of that, and he knows it. “I hate you,” I tell him instead, and I’m a little sad to know that it’s true. Right here and now, staring at one of the few friends I have, I hate him.

“That’s not fair.” He laughs sadly. “All this shit”—he gestures around him—“you’re both asking too much of me when I love you both too much. I don’t hate *you* for putting me in this double bind, yet you hate me because I’m trying to make sure you don’t live your life unhappy and spend it regretting your decisions by wishing I was someone else.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”



“You do know. You just don’t *want* to see it. But when you finally accept it, G, maybe you’ll hate me a little less, and I’ll be here, ready to accept your fucking apology.”

I turn my head, not allowing him to see my tears. “Get out.”

“G.”

“I said get out,” I bite out.

“You two are fucking insufferable,” he grits through his teeth, storming from the house and slamming the door.

My eyes close at the way the house shakes with his farewell.

“Here.” Lorenzo stands at the threshold of my room, and I know he heard it all. How could he not have? Arm extended, he holds a steaming mug of coffee in his hand. I take it, still reeling from the audacity of his younger brother.

“What did he mean by *he* didn’t tell you?”

He denies me, bottom lip tipped out as he shakes his head. “Vincent and Bianca are on their way to Italy.”

I turn away, disappointed in his cowardice. Leaning against the window frame, I stare out at the Hudson River. “Why didn’t you remove the ladder?”

“In case you ever decided to run back home.”

I close my eyes. “I need you to stop saying stuff like that, Lorenzo. You’re messing with my head.”

“Why do you think I married you, Gabriella?” he asks my back.

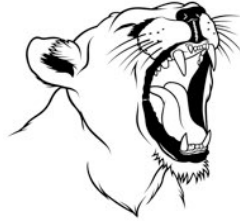
“I know why you married me,” I tell him. “Because you love your brother. Leonardo ran for his own reasons.” I refuse

to divulge that *maybe* he was afraid of marrying a woman who was in love with someone else. That's my business, not his. "You said so yourself. Either we both run, so you don't have to kill him, or you pretend you were *so* in love with me you couldn't stomach the idea of me marrying your brother. The family thinks *you* sent Leonardo away. You married me to protect the person you love most in this world."

He turns around and walks out of the room without another word, and I surmise that my worst fear has been confirmed. I was right. Why stay to argue something we both know to be true?

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

## LORENZO



*You married me to protect the person you love most in this world.*

I almost spat my coffee all over the floor. She can't be that fucking blind. Is she that fucking damaged that she can't see *she's* the person I love most in the world? Or am I really that shitty at showing my feelings?

She left her room shortly after I did. She's walking around the property in an eerie quiet. After I left that stupid guest room that she's tried to claim once again as hers, she hasn't spoken a single word to me. She walked down the stairs and out the front door. I can see her from most viewpoints in the house. Traipsing in and out of the brush. Strolling along the river's edge. Sitting on the rocks staring out at the water, transfixed on nothing and everything.

*Tell me you're not in love with my fucking brother, and I will drop to my fucking knees right here and now, and I'll beg for your forgiveness.*

Fuck. She didn't even deny it. She all but conceded to her feelings for me, to my brother, but not to me. I'd become so blinded by my insecurities that I let myself believe she'd only stayed for Vincent. But her silence with Leonardo told me everything I needed to know. She stayed for me. I've become

so fucking obsessed with that thought that I haven't been able to think of anything else. My wife loves me. My wife fucking loves me, but she's too afraid to admit it.

An argument that may have severed a friendship valuable to Gabriella and Leonardo gave me the clarity I could only have wished for. Now I have the advantage of knowing that Gabriella and I are so fucking stubborn neither one of us wanted to be the first to break. Neither one of us wants to admit our feelings for fear of rejection.

I *know* the truth, and she needs to hear it. She needs to fucking see it. I have no intention of living in a marriage where my wife doesn't *feel* the obsession I have for her. I have no intention of living out my days with my wife convinced that I claimed her out of obligation. Every wall I had secured over the years to protect myself from love was no match to the energy and depth of the complicated affliction. My armor crumbled like the piece of stale bread I served her in torment. I didn't stand a chance against the brave little liar and her mighty roar.

I've moved the ladder from the guest room. It seems redundant since she never uses it anyway, always choosing to leave through the front door. I surmise that the ladder has a specific purpose for her. It serves only as an additional point of escape if she feels the overwhelming need to run. But she's never wanted to run away from me, and now, I'll never let her.

I've been moving furniture all day while she contemplates life by the riverside. I've rearranged the entire house to better suit my needs. Hers as well. She just might take a little convincing of that reality.

Sweat covers my body, and my house looks almost vacant. I need a fucking shower.

I glance out our bedroom window, and she still sits, throwing rocks onto sleets of ice as they bob past with the flow of the river. The hair not contained by her beanie blows around her ruddy face, the cold turning her cheeks red. She pulls her jacket around her body more significantly. I inhale in predetermined victory, knowing she'll make her way inside soon enough. She's going to find out the hard way how dirty I play when my heart's involved.

My dick is hard, but I refuse to touch it. It bobs between my legs as I wash, jerking when I have no choice but to stroke my hands over it and my balls as I clean away the remnants of the day. I refuse to waste an orgasm on my hand when I'll be enjoying one buried inside Gabriella's tight cunt soon enough.

Tucking a towel around my waist as I step from the shower, I grab another, rubbing it over my damp hair.

I step into my bedroom, and Gabriella storms in not thirty seconds later. "Where's my bed?"

Towel held at my shoulder, I raise an eyebrow. "Sorry?"

"My bed." She points back in the general direction of the guest room. "Where is it?"

"The guest bed?" I correct. "I decided we wouldn't want guests for some time, being newlyweds and all, so I removed it."

Her tongue sucks at her teeth, her body heaving with unrestrained anger. "You removed it."

"Hm."

"That was *my* fucking bed."

I shake my head. "This is your bed. This is your bedroom. I am your husband."

“Just because we’re married”—she steps closer, pointing a finger directly in my face—“doesn’t mean I’m going to fuck you.”

Normally, I’d be incensed by her complete lack of disrespect, but she’s eating out of the palm of my hand.

My sweet, predictable lioness.

I smirk, and her cheeks shade red in anger. “I don’t expect you to fuck me.”

She frowns. “You don’t?”

“No, baby. But you *should* expect that *I* plan on fucking *you*.”

Her eyes narrow.

“Why did you marry me, Gabriella?”

She scowls. “I made the best of a shitty situation. I have my reasons for marrying you, none of which are your fucking business.”

She’s panicking.

My sweet little liar.

*All* her reasons concern me.

“You’d like a divorce, then?” I step closer.

“Maybe.” She lifts her chin indignantly.

“Never,” I whisper. “I’d prefer you take a gun and shoot me through the heart than sever that connection.”

Her eyes widen.

“You might tell yourself that you don’t want me, but I won’t ever let anyone else have you. My lioness. *La mia*

*leone*. You need to know that. You're mine. Always. I'll kill any other man who thinks you're an option."

She swallows my words down, unsure what to do with them.

"I assume you removed every spare bed in the house with your stupid little game." Her voice cracks.

"Correct. As I said, no guests are welcome while we're becoming reacquainted." I smirk.

She inhales deeply through her nose. Her cheeks are still red from the cold, but a touch of sweat glistens on her upper lip, and she rips her beanie from her head, scrunching it in her hand. "I'll sleep on the couch," she tells me.

"Okay," I reply easily, rubbing my towel—the one not currently struggling to contain my hard-on—over my chest to dry myself.

She nods at my acquiescence, moving toward the door before stopping. "You've taken the couch too."

I hum in affirmation. "I've removed every piece of furniture that could double as a bed from this house except, of course, *our* bed."

She turns slowly on her heel.

She's so fucking beautiful. Even plotting my death, she's my favorite view.

"My ladder," she argues.

I glance at the window to her left, and she stands on her tiptoes to see.

It was the first thing I moved, unsure when she'd venture back from her walk.



“You moved it. Why?”

“Because it’s a comfort for you and belongs in your bedroom.”

Hands to her face, she groans. “I told you to stop saying things like that.”

“Like what?”

“Thoughtful things. Loving things. Things that make me believe you care.”

Draping the second towel over my neck, I move toward her and step up behind her, placing my hands on her shoulders. I rub at the tension, kneading my thumbs into her soft skin. “I do care.”

“Lorenzo.”

“Why did you marry me, lioness?”

“Because I hate you,” she murmurs, no fight left to bite along her words. “And I want to make the rest of your life miserable.”

I laugh and kiss her neck. “My little liar.”

Her breathing has settled, and she moves her neck, allowing me greater access to the delicate touch of skin. I drag my tongue and lips up and down the column, biting the place where her shoulder and neck meet in a tender pull of teeth.

She moans, and my already hard cock jerks beneath my towel.

“Most marriages need to be consummated to make it real. You know that, right?”

“I’m surprised there wasn’t a bed in the middle of the reception hall where your archaic family could watch you take

my virginity. Oops,” she says. “You already did that *before* you married me.”

“I could just do a presenting of the sheets and show them your innocence stained into the silk.”

She whirls on me. “You kept those sheets?”

I laugh.

She pushes at my chest, her eyes falling over my naked pecs. But then her smile catches, and she steps closer, ripping the towel I had draped over my shoulder and throwing it on the floor.

“What is that?” She looks closer at the fine lines inked into my rib cage and oblique.

I choose silence.

“Lorenzo”—she gulps—“what the fuck is that?”

“A tattoo.”

“I can see that.” Her fingers drift over the image. “*Luce della mia vita*,” she murmurs, reading the script dancing under my left pectoral muscle and around my side.

“*Light of my life*,” I whisper.

She drops to her knees, her hand running over the left side of my abdomen. Over the face of a lioness, mouth stretched open in a roar aimed right at my heart.

“My lioness.”

She looks up at me, tears blinking from her eyes.

“He saw me getting dressed,” I explain. “Leonardo saw this and told me he would never concede to my stubbornness.”

“Your stubbornness?”

I keep my arms loose at my sides, letting her hands explore the ink.

“He said I couldn’t expect him to marry someone his brother was in love with.”

Pretty much the same thing he said to her.

“Why did you offer me a chance to run?” she asks.

“Because I love you, and I want you to be happy.”

“Why did you marry me?”

“Because I love you, Gabriella, and I want to be the reason for your happiness.”

Her forehead drops to my stomach, and a small sob breaks from her lips.

“Gabbi, baby, stand up.”

“I can’t.”

I drop to my knees instead, taking her face in my hands.

“None of this makes sense.” She avoids my eyes.

“Look at me,” I demand.

She shakes her head.

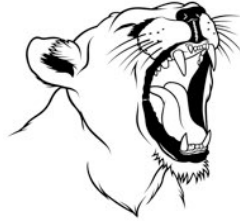
My hands hold her face tighter. “Look at me.”

Her eyes meet mine, and I let everything I feel stare back at her. “I think, once upon a time, you had this notion that one day you’d find a hero to love you. The thing is, you’ve never been looking for Prince Charming, baby. But if you want to pretend that’s what you want, in your mind, you can pretend I’m that fairy tale for you. But deep down, we both know I’m more dangerous than charming, and I’m no prince; I’m a fucking boss. I’ll give you the life you want, anything your

fucking heart desires. But if anyone causes you hurt; physical or emotional, I'll fix it the only way I know how. With bloodstained hands and a smile on my face. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. I reign without regard for rules or consequences, and I've learned that I love the same way. We're chaotic, but loving you is easier than breathing. My past... all that pain and suffering hurts less when you're with me. You drown out the noise I've been unable to mute until now. You were made for me, *luce della mia vita*, and I for you."

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

## GABRIELLA



*H*e loves me.

Lorenzo Caruso loves me.

My husband fucking loves me.

And I love him, not that I've said as much to his face. But the second he told me I was made for him after that epic fucking declaration of love, I threw myself into his arms, and I kissed him.

And kissed him.

And kissed him.

And he kissed me right the fuck back.

Hands still pressed on my cheeks, he tilts my face, gifting himself greater access to my mouth. I welcome the presence of his tongue and match his fervor with my own.

"I need you, Gabbi. I fucking *need* you."

I cry out, my arms reaching over his shoulders to bring me closer to him still. Dropping his hands from my face, he maneuvers in a way that he stands and lifts me all at once, one hand behind my back, the other under my knees. Carrying me over to the only bed he left in the house, *our* bed, he places me down gently.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I watch as he discards the towel he had draped around his hips, revealing the long, hard line of his cock. A thick bead of cum sits at his crown, decorating the space between the two balls of his barbell, and I long to reach out and taste it on my tongue. But before I can move, he begins the slow task of shedding the numerous layers of clothing from my body. He takes his time, kissing my lips between the removal of each item.

Jacket undone and discarded. A kiss that begins at the line of my jaw and continues until he finishes with a chaste kiss on my lips.

Sweater pulled up and over my head. A flurry of kisses pressed over the line of my cleavage, never delving lower than the line of my bra but enough to make my nipples hard.

Bra undone, he painstakingly drags my straps down my arms, his eyes watching on in hooded anticipation as my pebbled nipples come into view. “There’s my pretty fucking tits.” He sucks one nipple and then the other, groaning with a sound that can only be described as relief.

My socks are next, slipped off before his palms slide up the outside of my thighs, his lips trailing the inside until he reaches the waistband of my tights. He removes my tights and underwear in one fell swoop, leaving me naked and at his mercy—my favorite place to be.

“Thoughts of my face in your pussy wake me up at night.” He speaks directly to that part of my body. “Fuck, sometimes the dreams were so real, I’d swear I could taste you on my tongue.”

My stomach hollows, and I whimper.

Palms biting into my thighs, he slides them as far apart as they will go, pinning them violently to the bed. “Don’t come until I give you permission, lioness.”

I exhale through my nostrils, the endearment fucking with the rhythm of my already unsteady heart. *Lioness. Leonessa.*

Face a breath away from my pussy, his hot breath dances over the oversensitive flesh, causing me to weep with need. He inhales deeply. “*Fuck*, I’ve missed the way you smell.”

A sound I can’t attribute to any one emotion breaks from my lips, but so caught up in my body, Lorenzo doesn’t hear it.

“Have you missed me, Gabbi?” My hands find his hair, and I look down at him from my seated position. “Tell me you’ve missed this. Tell me you’ve missed *me*,” he growls, the desperation in his plea so poignant, tears spring to my eyes.

Because I have. I’ve missed him even though I hate him when I love him. I’ve missed what we share even though I promised myself he’d never have my heart. I’ve missed the way he makes me feel, cherished in a way that lets me believe he cares. I’ve missed the connection our bodies make and the way he forces me to believe that he’s as obsessed with me as I am with him.

“Say it,” he demands, when I can’t find my voice to speak. “Say you want me, Gabriella. Make me believe it.”

“I want you,” I whisper, afraid of my voice.

Three simple words that hold *so* much weight, he swallows them eagerly.

He rewards me with his tongue against my clit. The soft touch of a french kiss against the most sacred part of my body. The part of me only he’s ever been granted access to. The part



of me that will only ever know him. The part of me that craves him in a way that I can't deny.

“So wet,” he groans, bringing my internal turmoil to life. “*For me,*” he adds. “*So wet for me.*”

“Only you,” I agree.

My body quakes in pleasure, his attention almost too much after being starved for months.

“Already so close to exploding against my tongue.” He sucks on my clit. “Don't forget, sweet wife, you only come when I say you can.”

I whimper. He's right, my stomach pulls in its very depths, my muscles already tensing in preparation to detonate.

“*Enzo,*” I beg.

“Not yet.”

I bite my lip, unable to stop the way my hips lift in an attempt to grind more forcefully against his face.

He hums in approval but tightens his grip on my thighs, keeping me in place. “Don't be greedy.”

I choke on my moan.

He laps at my clit, his tongue caressing the swollen bud in tender but insistent strokes.

My pussy throbs and I stifle a groan.

Lorenzo slides two fingers inside me without warning, my mouth opening on a silent breath at the biting intrusion. My body relaxes against his fingers almost immediately, clamping around them as he gently curls them over and over with expert precision.

“*Enzo,*” I plead. “*Amore, I...*”

“You’re doing so well, baby,” he praises. “Hold it off for me. Take it, but don’t come.”

Tears leak from my eyes.

Glancing up at me through the midnight touch of his lashes, he groans when I blink, letting the salty droplets track down my cheeks and onto my lips.

“*Come*,” he finally commands, and the roughly thundered directive sets something alight in my stomach.

My entire body erupts; back arched, hands ripping at his hair, eyes pinched closed. My breath caught in my throat, I come apart as he instructed.

My climax overwhelms me, and as reality dawns, a thick sob is the first sound that breaks from my lips.

“Gabriella?”

Another one follows, more broken than the first. Still trembling with the pleasure Lorenzo brought to my body, I roll onto my side, curling myself into a ball.

“Baby,” he whispers, pushing me onto my back.

I attempt to flip back to my side, but he holds me still, crawling up my body and pulling my hand away from my mouth.

I turn my face, my cries louder with the absence of my hand.

“*Luce della mia vita*.”

“Stop it,” I beg through my tears.

“Hey.” He grips my jaw, turning my face back toward him.

I clench my eyes shut, a river of tears falling across my temples and onto the sheets beneath me.

“Open your eyes.”

I shake my head, hating the grief in the stuttered whimper that escapes my lips.

“Lioness,” he urges tenderly, but I ignore him still.

My chin trembles and his grasp on my jaw tightens.

“Gabriella,” he warns, but I continue to ignore him.

Seconds pass, long enough that I’m certain he’s given up, but then the wet touch of his tongue drags along my temple slowly, tracing my tears up to my eyes. He kisses one lid softly before moving to the next. He licks away the tears on the other side of my face. “You did such a good job, baby,” he praises. “I know it was hard, but you’re such a good fucking girl. *My good girl.*”

I cry harder, no longer able to hold it all in.

“Shhh.” He presses soft kisses over my face. “You’re okay.”

“No,” I combat.

“Yes,” he argues with a gentle kiss on my lips.

“I’m not,” I say.

“Look at me.”

“I can’t.”

I feel his smile against my lips. “Yes, you can. *For me*, you can. Open your eyes.”

I take a steadying breath and do as he says.

“There’s my lioness.”

I want so badly to drop my lids again, to cut myself off from the admiration in his eyes.

“Why did you marry me, Gabbi?” His gaze stops scanning my face.

I shake my head.

“You can tell me,” he says. “I promise I’ll never tell anyone else.”

“But you’re the only one who matters,” I whisper.

“I know, so tell me. Say the words for me, lioness.”

I’m stripped down and bare. Everything within me is his for the taking, and it’s the one thing I have left to hold on to. The tiny bit of power in three little words.

He kisses me. “I want to hear it. Just once. You never have to say it again if you don’t want to.”

My chin trembles.

“Why did you marry me?”

“Because I love you.”

His eyes close, and his head falls back on his neck, a growl of pleasure so disturbingly passionate thundering through his chest and out of his smiling lips.

When he rights his head, something changes in his eyes. He’s possessed. Lids downcast, grin wicked. “You make me feel like a fucking king.”

“My king.”

I reach for him, and he comes willingly, falling over me.

“I feel like I’ve waited forever to fuck you again.”

“I was afraid we’d never be here again.”

Pain slices over his face, and he shakes his head. “I couldn’t have stayed away. I would have tried. But...” His

head shakes again.

I press my fingers to his lips. “Fuck me, baby. Claim me and make our marriage real.”

He lifts one of my legs, hand under my knee, pushing it up so he can hook it over his shoulder.

“*Oh.*”

Moving to the next leg, he slides it around his waist. “I’m gonna fill your tight cunt so full of my dick, baby, you won’t be able to move or sit without feeling me inside you tomorrow. You’re gonna be so full of my cum, it’ll leak out of you and dampen your flimsy little thong until you’re begging me for more.”

“Is that a threat?”

He smiles. “No, lioness, a promise.”

Reaching between us, he grabs his monster fucking cock, caressing my slit with his pierced crown. I whimper every time he slides over my clit.

“*Enzo.*”

Tip at my entrance, he leans down, kisses me once softly, and all but impales me with one powerful thrust.

I scream out his name, my back arching in a twist of blissful agony.

“You take me so well.” His neck is corded with prominent veins, and without thinking, I lift my head off the bed, dragging my tongue against the pulsating threads.

He pushes his body more prominently onto mine, my leg over his shoulder stretching to accommodate more of him. Lower body glued to my apex, the deep undulation of his hips

creates a constant and gentle friction against my clit as his cock sinks back and forth in low but no less pleasurable drives.

“Open your eyes.”

I hadn't realized they were closed. The intense sapphire of his eyes stares down at me. One of his hands finds mine, and he entwines our fingers, squeezing tightly. His other hand tangles itself in my hair, and he uses that hold to pull my body down to meet every forward thrust.

The intensity of his gaze should have me shying away, but the intimacy only heightens my pleasure.

“Enzo. You feel so good.”

“*We*, baby. *We* feel so good.”

I moan.

He licks his tongue into my mouth to taste it.

Our lips are so close, and our breathing has created a rhythm. I breathe out; he swallows it in. He breathes out, and I welcome the desperate exhale like my own form of oxygen.

“I love you,” I whisper.

He closes the gap between us, greedily taking the words from my lips and tattooing them onto his.

“I love you,” he echoes between his kisses.

We're panting. We're sweating. Every line of his body presses against mine. We couldn't get closer if we tried. Still, it's not enough. Face in my neck, Lorenzo inhales, his cock twitching when his teeth drag over the delicate skin under my ear.

My hand finds his back, nails scoring along his skin and making him growl out in pleasure. Sliding my grip down farther, I grab a muscular ass cheek, curling my leg around his waist more significantly.

I want to come. I never want it to end. I need to come. I want to hold off forever. Because I know, I know the longer I stave off my impending orgasm, the greater my fall into oblivion, and right now, I want to feel nothing but him, nothing but *us*.

“I’m so fucking close.” His voice is tender, the words guttural, and everything within me clenches. “Fuck,” he snarls. “Do that again.”

I clamp down, and his hips stumble in their fluidity. I hold it.

“Fuck, lioness. Like that.”

“Like that,” I moan.

My body begins to shake, and his muscles tense under my touch.

“Kiss me,” I beg, and he doesn’t hesitate in yielding to my desperate demand.

Our lips smash together, and the second our tongues collide, our worlds break apart and reform as one.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



## GABRIELLA



Lorenzo and I have spent the past week in bed and wrapped up in one another. There hasn't been a period longer than thirty minutes in which we haven't been touching, kissing, cuddling, or fucking in some way. I thought I'd grow tired of the constant contact, but the more we touch, the more I need. It's a never-ending cycle that I was reluctant to get off. But Lorenzo had work to do, and I decided I would take the opportunity to visit Dante. Bianca and Vincent are still in Italy and won't return for another week or two, and Leonardo is still MIA. I need to call him, but I'm ashamed of what I put him through, what we put him through. Lorenzo assures me that he'll get over it, but I'm sick with worry that he won't. He was right. Lorenzo and I forced him into an impossible situation. He would've been forced into a marriage that included three people, and he, our savior, would have been the unwanted occupant.

"Why are you so quiet?" Lorenzo places his hand on my knee, squeezing softly.

I sigh, placing my hand over his. "I need to call Leo."

"I'll call Leonardo," he assures me. "I'll sort it out."

"I need to apologize."

“Did you tell Leonardo he was marrying you even though he knew I was in love with you?”

“No.”

“Then you don’t need to apologize. He was innocent in this fucked-up situation just as much as you were.”

I lift his hand and kiss his knuckles. “You’re sweet, but I said some pretty horrible things to him.”

“He’ll get over it.”

I’m not so sure, but I smile at him, accepting his assurance.

“Why are you pulling in here?” I look around the deserted street. “Dante’s place is back that way.”

He insisted on taking me to Dante’s. He had work to do, but he told me he could do that anywhere. He didn’t want to be away from me, and considering I felt the same way, I eagerly agreed.

He cuts the engine of his car off and unbuckles his seat belt. Adjusting his seat, it moves backward, and he stretches his legs out, lifting his hips to shift his position. The thick line of his cock is visible through his dress pants, and unclicking my seat belt, it takes everything in me not to reach out and squeeze it.

He doesn’t speak, but he unbuckles the leather of his belt and slowly undoes the button of his pants, and pulls down the zipper.

I watch on, transfixed by his hands’ methodical and lazy movements. He reaches into his dark boxers, his lids closing the moment his palm wraps around his length with a satisfied groan.

“*Enzo.*”

“Slide your panties down your legs and come perch yourself on my lap, lioness.”

I look around.

“No one is gonna see us, and if they do, if they’re stupid enough to think they can stay and watch my wife come, I’ll kill them.”

The relaxed way he talks about killing people in my name shouldn’t turn me on. But it does something immoral to my body, and I’m too afraid to explore it mentally, so I accept it’s just a really fucked game of foreplay.

“We could’ve fucked before we left the house.” I reach underneath my dress, lifting my hips to drag the lace of my thong over my ass and down my thighs.

“We did fuck this morning, but then you showered.”

Panties in hand, I lean over, tucking them into the pocket of my husband’s suit jacket for safekeeping. “So?”

“Don’t make me wait any longer. Come here.”

“Show it to me first.”

He grins, pulling his cock from his underwear, and my chest expands with an anticipatory breath.

“Come.” He pumps it once. “Here.” He pumps it again.

Knee to my seat, I slide my right leg over the center console, my left leg following until my bare ass is perched upon Lorenzo’s lap.

“You showered.” He taps the head of his dick against my clit. “Which means you washed away my smell, or more, *our* smell.”

“Our smell?” I pull my dress up higher, watching the way his pierced crown kisses my clit.

“Dante had feelings for you.”

I scowl at him, annoyed that he’d bring that up.

Fingers to my lips, he shakes his head. “Up,” he instructs, and I move without delay, pushing up on my knees so he can feed his cock into my pussy. “He also likely believes that you are unhappily married to me and that he is still a better suitor.”

My nose scrunches up in disgust but smooths out when his hands fix themselves to my hips, pulling me down on his cock.

“You’re gonna visit your brother, baby, and you’re going to do it so thoroughly fucked that he can’t make eye contact with you without thinking about you screaming my name.”

“You’re sick,” I moan, the full weight of his cock buried inside me to the hilt. “And I still don’t know how your giant fucking dick fits inside me.”

I slide back and forth on his lap.

“Your pussy’s wet, which means you’re just as fucked up as I am. And my giant dick fits inside you because you have a greedy little cunt.”

I smile, picking up speed.

Yanking the top of my dress down, Lorenzo sucks a nipple into his mouth.

I scream out, hands grabbing onto his seat to offer me greater stability as I grind myself over him again and again.

“*Fuck.*” He rips his lips from my nipple, his hand fisting my hair to yank my head back. Neck exposed, he attacks the delicate skin.

“*Enzo, amore.*” I move my hands to his shoulders, dropping my head. “Lips. Kiss me.”

He doesn't delay. He moves his lips seamlessly from my neck to my mouth, devouring me in a kiss that makes my body quake.

“Can I? I'm close.”

He groans, loving the way it's ingrained in me to ask for permission. I won't come without his say-so, and it speaks to the purely selfish and predatory nature of his being that the knowledge only makes his cock harder. “Yeah, baby, you can come.”

I push my hips down harder, grinding myself against him faster. My body is begging for release.

“Like that, baby.”

“Yes.” I'm panting. I'm moaning. I'm shaking.

“Fuck, the way she fucking strangles me.”

“Enzo, baby, I'm...”

*Coming.*

Back arched, tits in his face, I come apart at the seams.

“Come forward.” He yanks me to his body, arms wrapped around me. “Lift your hips.”

I follow his instructions in a climactic fog.

He thrusts into me over and over again. Slamming inside only to drop his hips and do it again and again and again.

“*Gabbi,*” he roars as he comes, holding me tightly to him as he comes in a flurry of hot spurts deep inside me.

We stay like that, wrapped up tightly until our breathing evens out. When I pull back, our gaze falls to where we're connected, and Lorenzo pulls himself from my body. He's not hard but not soft, and I'm still dying for a fucking taste. In every way we've fucked, I still haven't tasted his cock on my tongue.

Tucking himself into his boxers, he runs his palm over my pussy, cupping me before sliding two fingers inside.

“What are you doing?”

“Feeling us.” He curls his fingers, rubbing my inner wall.

I whimper.

When he pulls his fingers out of me, a soft sound of possession pushes from his lips. Our release clings to his fingers, and he rubs it over my right inner thigh.

“What are you doing?”

He smirks to himself. “Signing my name into my handiwork.”

I slap his chest just as he slides his fingers back inside me.

“Fuck,” I cry out.

Pulling them out, he pays the same homage to my left inner thigh.

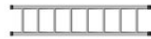
“I have our cum all over me.”

“Mmm.”

“Are you...? Oh my god... you're marking your territory!”

Without warning, he slides his fingers into my slack mouth, our climax exploding on my tongue. “It's *Enzo*. Not fucking God. Now suck.”

My lips close around his fingers, and I suck and lick, cleaning the remnants of *us* from his skin. “That’s my good girl.”



“JESUS, Gabriella, you look like you’ve been attacked by a rabid dog.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment, and I run a hand through my hair, trying to tame the wayward curls.

I feel Lorenzo at my back before he announces himself, sliding a hand around my waist and placing his lips against my temple. “I think she’s beautiful.”

“Lorenzo, hey.”

“I’ll use your spare room to make some calls while you two catch up. I’ll take a coffee when you make my wife one, thanks.”

I bite my tongue to stop a gasp of shock from making itself heard. I want to remind my husband that he’s talking to my brother—a *blood* relation—so he needs to check his jealousy. But I don’t think it would make a difference.

I expect Dante’s animosity, but a grin slides onto his face. “Sure thing, boss.”

“Might wanna get a start on that. I’m about to kiss my wife, and I’m guessing you won’t want to stand by and watch.”

Dante makes himself scarce.

“Enzo,” I scold, but he does as he promised, leaning forward to kiss me so thoroughly I’m panting by the time he’s through.

Smiling at his handiwork, he moves through Dante’s apartment like a king who has just claimed his throne.

“Dante, I’m just going to use the bathroom,” I call out.

I’ve only just locked the door when my cell beeps in my hand.

LORENZO

If you clean away my cum from your thighs, I’ll know, and I’ll be forced to fuck you in front of him to punish you for defying me.

I read the message over and over again, unsure as to whether I’m shocked, pissed off, or completely fucked up because I’m turned on. I switch my phone off to avoid thinking about it too heavily.

Glancing in the mirror, I gasp at the mess Lorenzo left me in. Dante was right—I do look as though I’ve been attacked. But then, Lorenzo isn’t wrong, either—I look fucking phenomenal. My hair is in disarray, but in that freshly fucked look that you couldn’t replicate, no matter how much time and money you spent. My lips are plump and bruised, courtesy of the endless attack on my mouth. My lips have been kissed, licked, bitten, and sucked, and I want them to look like this always. Small and *just* visible reddish bruises brush the column of my neck, the pressure from Lorenzo’s mouth leaving a lasting reminder of who I belong to. But my eyes, bright and happy and glowing with satisfaction, complete the look. I look thoroughly fucked, and Lorenzo all but pat himself on the back when Dante answered the door.



*Men.*

I wash my hands and make my way toward the open-plan kitchen and living area in search of my brother. Dante walks in at the same time I do, likely having just delivered Lorenzo his coffee.

“He doesn’t let you go anywhere without him now?” He hands me my coffee.

I frown. “It’s not like that. We’re newlyweds. We don’t want to be apart. He had some work to do, and I wanted to come and see you. Now I’m wondering whether that was a mistake.”

He lets go of an apologetic sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m just worried about you.”

“You don’t need to be, Dante. I’m happy. This is what I want. *He* is who I want.”

He moves toward the couch, and I follow him. “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

I sit on his sofa, sliding my shoes off and tucking my feet under me.

He turns the TV volume down but keeps it on, positioning himself in a chair that allows him to watch the screen and give me his attention simultaneously. “Something about him was different when my dad and I mentioned you. Something in him changed at the mention of your name. I now get it.”

I smile.

“You’re happy?” he asks me. “That’s all that’s important to me.”

“I’m happy.”

“Good.”

Something within me clicks back into place, and while I don't outwardly show it, my body relaxes.

I finish my coffee and place the empty cup beside me. “Dante,” I test.

He turns his head in my direction, but his eyes remain focused on the television. “Mm?”

“What was your mom like?”

“My mom like?” he repeats absently, his hand moving into a fist as he silently cheers at whatever happens on the football field cast across his giant TV. He turns his focus on me completely. “Why do you want to know that?”

I shrug. “I miss my mom. I want someone to talk to me about theirs.”

He accepts my lie easily enough, picking up the remote to mute the TV. “I was only three and a bit when she died.”

*Died.*

He must see the shock in my eyes but shrugs it off. “Luna says she went missing, but I say she died. It's easier for me to stomach thinking of her as dead. What's the alternative? She was kidnapped and is still alive, living in captivity?” He grimaces. “I can't think of my mom in that way. Or she left on her own accord, which she would never have done.”

I remain silent.

“I was so young. I barely remember anything, to be honest. Snippets pop into my mind here or there. Her hair, the way it was always in her face.” His eyes close as he recalls the memory. “She always wore it down, and the wind forever

blew it over her face. She was constantly tucking it behind her ears.”

That never changed.

“I remember her love.” He smiles this time. “My mom and dad lived a loveless marriage, that’s no secret, but her world began and ended with Luna and me. Everything she had to give was ours. The time she spent with us, she was *free*. That probably sounds cheesy.” He ducks his head in embarrassment.

“Not at all,” I whisper, hoping and praying he’ll continue.

“I obviously don’t remember that, but I have photos, and there’s a difference in her expression in the pictures of her with Luna or me.”

“Photos?” I repeat before I’ve realized I’ve spoken. I clear my throat. “May I see them?”

“Umm... yeah, sure. Wait here.”

He moves out of the room, and my heart beats faster. He’s back within a minute, bringing a small box and two beers. “Do you think Lorenzo will have my head if I let his underage wife drink?”

I take the beer bottle from his hands. “Twelve months is hardly a call for death.”

“Twelve months?” He laughs. “I think your math is off.”

I choke on my beer. “I spent some time in Toronto. Canadians have different laws.”

“Do you know in Italy, serving alcohol to a person sixteen or over is only a minor offense?” he asks, swallowing my lie without hesitation. “Some countries in the world have a legal drinking age of only *fifteen*.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say.

“Anyway.” He sits on the floor and pats the spot next to him. “Come, sit. Let me show you my mother.”

*Our mother*, I wish I could tell him. I wish we could compare the versions of our mother that we were both gifted. I want to share stories about who she became, and I want to hear about who she was.

I settle in beside him.

“Dad tried to throw all these away a few years after she was gone. He tried to erase her. Luna and I each had to hide a small box of pictures away.”

“Dante,” I whisper, my heart hurting for the way she was erased from his life.

He ignores me, opening the lid and picking up a handful of photos.

“She was beautiful.” There’s a wistful longing in his voice, and I consider for a moment that I’ve made a mistake. That this is too much. I’m playing with fire, and I’m not the only one who will come out burned.

My throat itches, and I clench my jaw. “She was.” I don’t need a photo to tell me that.

I trace the line of her jaw and the line of her hair on the faded photo that Dante hands me first. “Luna looks a lot like her.”

He nods. “Only a shame she didn’t inherit Mom’s nature as well. She’s pretty as a picture on the outside, but she can be fucking poison inside.”

“She lost her mom at a young age and was raised by a family of men who see women as commodities. She grew up

with her worth determined by how her beauty could be used as an asset. Shit like that leaves scars, Dante.”

“You’re good at that.”

I look at him, reaching for the next photo he passes me. “Good at what?”

“Making people have perspective.”

I push my shoulder against his.

We flick through photos, laughing at images of a miniature Dante.

“You were so cute.” I laugh.

“Were?” he balks. “*Ouch*. I’m still just as handsome as this guy.” He holds up a photo of himself with sunglasses on upside down, and chocolate smeared all over his face.

A quiet contemplation hits me as he passes me a photo of just our mom. She’s looking off into the distance, a sadness in her eyes but a smile on her lips. I stare at it for a long while, and Dante doesn’t even seem to mind that I’m crying while looking at photos of *his* mom.

“You miss your mom a lot.”

I sniff, an emotional bark of laughter almost choking me. “Is it obvious?”

He smiles, throws an arm over my shoulder, and kisses the top of my head. Curled up in my brother’s embrace, I want to stay there, but he takes his arm back, flicking through photos nostalgically.

“Here,” he says quietly. “This one has always hit me hardest.” He hands me the image. It’s flimsy at the edges, eaten away at the corners from having been held so many

times. “This is the last photo we have. Date marked in early two thousand and two, just days before she was gone.”

Before she ran away to save me. I can’t help but think that in this photo of Luna, Dante, and Rita, I’m in there too. Not visible, of course, but you can see the pain in my mother’s eyes. That’s me. I’m the pain. I’m the shadow of grief in this otherwise happy snapshot.

I place the pictures back into the box, unable to look at any more. Dante reads that well enough and secures the lid in place.

“Can I see your mom?”

“Sorry?” My mind is foggy, overcome with a grief I wasn’t expecting.

“Do you have photos of your mom on your phone? Any embarrassing baby photos you can show me?”

“No,” I rush out, holding my phone protectively against my stomach. “No,” I repeat, more gently this time. “I lost my phone with all the memories I had of my mother. I was mugged when I lived in Denver. Asshole stole my bag and my memories.”

“Shit,” he murmurs. “That’s heavy, G.”

“What was her name?”

“What?”

“Your mom? What was her name?”

My mind goes fucking blank.

*Rita. Rita. Rita.*

I blink, and Dante frowns. “Gabriella?”

“What?”

“Are you okay?”

Just pick a fucking name, Gabriella. Any fucking name.

*Rita. Rita. Rita.*

“Lioness.” I look up at Lorenzo. “Come here, baby.”

I hurry to my feet and rush toward him.

Dante follows quickly. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I…”

“It’s all good.” Lorenzo wraps his arm around me, pulling me into his body. I push my face into his chest. “She doesn’t like talking about her mom. It’s all still pretty fresh.”

Dante’s hand touches my back. “I’m really sorry, G.”

I sniff, pulling my face away from Lorenzo. “I’m being silly, overly emotional. It’s been a week.”

Lorenzo squeezes me.

“Dante, I’ll be heading to Chicago this afternoon. Leonardo is there. Bianchi’s people are... *uncomfortable* with his presence. I need to calm shit down. I should only be gone for two days, maximum.”

“We’re going to Chicago?” I ask.

Lorenzo tips his head at Dante, who makes himself scarce.

Sliding his hands over my face, Lorenzo leans forward, kissing each of my cheeks. “You okay?”

“He just caught me off guard.”

He nods in understanding. “I can’t have you in Chicago, Gabbi. It’s...”

“Work,” I answer for him.

“I need my focus to be solely on Leonardo.”

I nod. "Is he okay?"

"He's always okay. It's the fuckers in his path who I'm worried about."

I drop my head to his chest. "This is our fault. He wouldn't be there if we didn't hurt him the way we did."

He shrugs. "He'll get himself into trouble anywhere. I'm going to ask Dante to check in on you while I'm gone."

"You said you'll only be gone for a day or two."

"What's your point?"

I wrap my arms around his neck. "You're too much."

"I want you at the penthouse while I'm gone."

I groan. "Why?"

"Because it's more secure."

"Reminder, I was kidnapped from the penthouse. Yet to have had the same thing happen at home."

He smiles.

"What?"

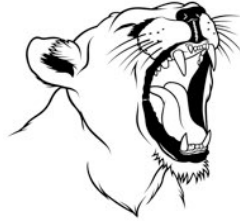
"You said home."

I fall against him, pushing my lips against his. "You're such a sap."



# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

## LORENZO



I went from massaging my cum into Gabbi's thigh to ripping my hair out while sitting on a plane for two and a half hours on my way to Chicago.

I know this is my doing. I fucking *know* it. But it doesn't make me less angry.

I dial Vincent for the sixth time since I took off, my anger heightening with every ring he leaves unanswered. His voicemail picks up, and I end the call, only to call back again.

"I'm eating."

"I'm on a plane to Chicago. Congratulations, you win."

"*Fuck,*" Vincent spits down the line. "Give me a second."

I hear him murmur to Bianca before a door opens and then closes.

"I thought you were out to dinner."

"I said I was eating."

I laugh.

"And you interrupted me."

"Her pussy'll be there when you get back."

He curses me under his breath. “Don’t talk about my wife’s pussy.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

“Talk to me.”

“Leonardo and one of Bianchi’s capos have become tight.” I sigh. “And they’ve gotten themselves into trouble with the Irish.”

“What are the Irish doing in Chicago?”

“Bianchi’s gripe,” I tell him. “He’s losing his mind trying to calm shit down from an eight-by-six box. His second called me.”

“What the fuck is with Leonardo right now? Fuck, Lorenzo!”

“We tried to force him into a marriage with a woman his brother is in love with.”

Silence engulfs the other side.

“What do you know about love?” he finally snarls.

“I know that it feels like Gabriella. She feels it, too.”

“So what? The two of you were sneaking around behind my back planning this all along?”

“Of course not. What kind of asshole do you take me for?”

“One who fucks my sister.”

I growl. “What would you say if Tony started in on you about fucking his sister? Tell me how much you’d tolerate it before you put a bullet in his skull.”

“Tony isn’t my best friend.”

Well, if that didn't hurt like barbed wire to the neck. "Touchè. Vin, I'm sorry. I'm fucking sorry. Wait. No. I'm not sorry. I love your sister. I'm not sorry about that. I fucked her before I married her. Also not gonna lie, not sorry about that. I didn't tell you about it because, as you so eloquently put it, my woman's pussy is none of your concern. Also, you would've fucking killed me. Oh wait, that's right, you almost fucking did. I'm not going to apologize for falling in love with your sister. I'm also not going to apologize for making her love me back. If you can't accept Gabriella and me, that's on you. But you have a fucking job to do as my consigliere, so pull your righteous stick outta your ass and fucking do it."

The line is so quiet that I'm certain he's hung up, but then he speaks, and if I didn't know him better, I'd say the asshole was smiling. "Okay."

*Okay.*

"Just so you're aware, when I'm home, I'm going to sneak into your brother's bedroom and wake him up with barbed wire around his most favored appendage. I'm going to remind him that he fucks around, he fucks with the family, which fucks with me, which fucks with my wife, and *no one* fucks with my wife."

"You're fucking psychotic, but okay."

"Who is with you?" He changes the subject back to business.

"Diego."

"Good choice," he murmurs.

Diego has been passed out since the moment the plane took off. He asked me if I needed him to do anything, and

when I waved him off, he laid down and promptly fell asleep. Like a psychopath.

“After all that shit with the Irish years ago, you and Oisín came to a truce. Is it bad enough to undo all that?”

All that shit meaning the Irish finally seeking revenge for me murdering one of their hierarchy before I’d hit puberty.

“I won’t know until I’m on the ground. Oisín and I agreed that neither of us would step foot in one another’s territory. That included each outfit.”

“Chicago *technically* isn’t our territory.”

This is why I don’t trust anyone other than Vincent. He thinks like me. “Technically. But Caterina is promised to Bianchi.”

“And our families will be united.”

“Which means the soldier Leonardo and Amadeo have in their grips broke the treaty.” It’s a long shot, but it has to work. I can’t have an all-out war with the Irish right now.

“Keep me posted,” Vincent says. “And if you need me, I’ll be home.”

“Enjoy your dinner.”

“Fuck you.” He hangs up, and although a storm cloud in the shape of a shamrock follows me into the Windy City, I breathe a little easier knowing Vincent no longer harbors murderous thoughts toward me.



I STARE at the Irishman tied to a chair in Bianchi's warehouse by the river. He's older than Oisín, and I consider for a second that the leader of the Irish might have a similar problem to me with his old guard refusing to conform to the boundaries set by the new.

“What the fuck were you thinking?”

“He came into Bianchi's club,” Amadeo spits. “He was fucking taunting me. I should've killed him.”

The young soldier paces in front of his prisoner, who only smiles.

Amadeo's right. He should've just killed the asshole.

I keep quiet, letting Bianchi's men take the lead. I am, after all, currently with two feet planted in their world.

Bianchi and I had a quick conversation while I was in the air. It was a fucking nightmare trying to reach him. I had to reach out to his second, Narciso, who made contact with his connection in prison and had Bianchi call me from his burner cell. Incarceration is the fucking pits. I assured him my presence was only to ensure that Leonardo allowed his outfit to take the lead. That Leonardo is a little stab happy with a knife when it involves those he deems a threat and based on our history, the Irish are a fucking threat.

“Why were you there?” Narciso asks.

Irish spits at his feet.

Gunshot wound. For sure. I would have emptied an entire clip into his crotch and shot his eyeballs out of his face for shits and giggles.

“Oisín knows the fucking rules,” I say casually from my position at the back. “Don't cross into a territory that isn't his

without prearranged approval. Which means either your boss is looking to start a war or you have a death wish.”

He smiles, his bloodstained teeth taunting me to the point that I want to remove them one at a time with a pair of fucking pliers.

Oisín would likely know he has a missing man by now. I’m caught between a rock and a fucking war as to whether I call him and ask point blank whether this is his doing.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

GABRIELLA

You must have lost your phone. Unless your plane crashed. I have searched the internet for private jets crashing anywhere between here and Chicago, though, and funnily enough, nothing...

Fuck, I told her I’d call her when I landed, but then Leonardo started blowing up my phone, and I haven’t been able to scratch my balls since.

GABRIELLA

Oh no, definitely haven’t lost your phone, considering that I just went from delivered to read. You’re an asshole. But I love you.

I smile.

“Something amusing?” Amadeo snipes.

I raise an eyebrow. “You may be Bianchi’s favorite little soldier, but you mean nothing to me. Watch your fucking mouth, or you’ll lose an eye.”

He drops his face, and Diego grins at me. Shifting, he stands with his legs shoulder-width apart and hands crossed over his crotch. He’s so fucking quiet, and I never see him

smile unless bloodshed is involved. Right now, the kid is bored out of his fucking brain.

“Be back,” I tell him.

He lifts his chin.

I step to the back of the warehouse, positioning myself in the back corner to keep an eye on the events unfolding.

“Lioness,” I murmur, quietly enough to ensure I’m not heard by the fuckwits less than six hundred feet away.

She moans into the line, and I stand up straight.

“Gabbi?”

She gasps, and I clench my fist. “What are you doing, baby?”

“I missed you.” A soft whimper.

Pulling my cell from my ear, I hit the FaceTime button, waiting impatiently for her to accept the request.

She doesn’t.

“Accept the fucking video call, wife, or…” I try again.

This time, she accepts it immediately, and I almost come in my pants at the vision before me.

Lying on our bed completely naked, she’s propped her cell up on a cushion, the camera pointed directly at her cunt, two fingers pushed *deep* inside.

“Gabbi,” I growl.

“Enzo,” she whispers, pulling her fingers out to rub them over her clit in wide, wet circles.

Even through the phone camera, her fingers shine with her arousal. Without even thinking, I screenshot the image.



I have four gangsters and a hostage close enough that if I farted, they'd hear me, yet it doesn't stop me from speaking when I say, "Put your fingers back in your cunt."

I'm a madman.

"Curl 'em up for me, lioness."

Her ass dips into the pillowy white comforter, and I know she's listened.

"Now, rub that spot for me. Not too hard. Not too light."

She moans out my name, and Diego's head turns slightly, ears pricking at the sound. I turn my volume down, and he turns back to the other men.

"Lioness, you're killing me."

Her nipples are hard, pebbled up and begging for my tongue. I can't see her face, but the way her body moves tells me everything I need it to. Most importantly, she'd been at this for a good few minutes before I called her. She texted me to bait me into this very moment.

"You're dangerous," I tell her. "You know I'm working, and you make my dick hard for your own sick pleasure."

Her throaty laughter dances over the line, morphing into a loud cry when she pushes her palm against her clit.

She begins grinding against her palm, her cries becoming more desperate.

"You know the rules, Gabbi. Don't you dare fucking come," I grit through my teeth.

"What?" she pants. "You're in another fucking state." She groans, pulling her fingers out of her pussy, only to push them back in deeper on an upward thrust of her hips. "*Enzo.*"

“That’s your first fucking punishment. Do not test me on this, wife. Your orgasms belong to me. You do not come without me there.”

She pinches a nipple, and I growl deep in my throat. She’s not fucking listening. She’s balancing on a very tight edge, and I know she will not be able to stop herself soon enough.

“Enzo,” she moans.

“Don’t. You. Fucking. Dare.”

“I’m so wet. Enzo, baby, I can feel it dripping over my ass.”

I grind my teeth. “Stop.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“Okay,” she agrees on a broken whimper. “I don’t want to.”

“You’re disobeying me.”

“God, you’re so angry,” she muses. “It makes my pussy throb. I’m throbbing. Fuck, baby, I wish you could feel it.”

“Enzo!” I correct her with a roar, and every one of the men in the building turns to me. “Fuck off,” I scream in their general direction, and they turn back to their prisoner.

“Mm,” she agrees. “*Enzo.*” And then she splinters into a million pieces.

Without. Me. There.

I’m seething. I’m hard. And I’m so fucking in love with my wife, I can’t see fucking straight.

She sits up, removes her fingers from her pussy, and picks up her phone. “Oops,” she says, biting her bottom lip.

I struggle to swallow. “I’m going to be home as soon as I can manage it. Be warned, when I see you, I’m not going to be nice to you.”

Without missing a beat, she licks her fingers, slides them into her mouth, and moans. “Call me later.” She hangs up.

“FUCK!” I bellow.

My voice echoes off the empty rafters of the warehouse, thrumming through the cavernous space and screaming back at me. I stalk toward the small group of men, picking up a discarded metal pole. The corroded material bites into my palm, and Diego steps aside. My stride doesn’t falter as I lift the pole and slam it across the Irishman’s face. The teeth I fantasized about removing with a pair of pliers sound like marbles as they scatter over the discolored concrete floor.

“Someone give me their fucking belt.” I throw the pole to the ground.

Everyone takes a sizable step backward except for Diego, who places the thick leather line of his belt in my hand.

“I’ve decided I don’t give a flying fuck where Oisín stands with this cunt.”

Irish groans in pain, the sound muffled by the shattered hang of his jaw.

“You came into Bianchi’s territory, which means you trespassed into mine.” The first flick of Diego’s belt splits across the bridge of his nose and his left eye socket, tearing the skin open in a river of red.

The fury sitting on my chest eases. This fuckwit deserves to die. He knew what he was doing. He was taunting a power greater than him, with or without his boss's command. I couldn't give a fuck.

The next whip of the belt hits his eye, and I almost groan in satisfaction.

I step forward, grabbing his crushed jaw in my hand. My fingers are wet with blood, and I squeeze harder. His head bounces limply on his neck, and I throw it back.

I hand Diego his belt. Lifting a clean white cloth from his pocket, he wipes the clumps of blood and flesh from the leather before sliding it through the loops on his pants and securing it back in place.

I stare at him in shock.

“What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.” I turn to Narciso. “Tell Bianchi this was on me. Tell him if the Irish bring war to his front yard to send them my way if he feels so inclined.”

“He won't. This asshole disrespected us. He deserved to die.”

I dip my chin once. “We're leaving. Leonardo, call Oisín and tell him his soldier is floating at the bottom of the Chicago River. If he so much as curses under his breath, Narciso, have this asshole's head sent to him in a box.”

I walk from the warehouse with Leonardo and Diego tight on my heels.

“Call the pilot. I want to be on my way back to Palisades within the hour.”

“Uh, boss.”

Breathing through my nostrils, I pause, turning on Diego.  
“What?”

“I’ve just received an alert that your wife has purchased an airline ticket.”

“Excuse me?” I step closer.

“Gabriella, boss. She’s leaving New York.”

“Where to?”

He glances back at his phone. “Denver, Colorado.”

“Then that’s where we’re going.”

“We should beat her there. We’ll pick her up before she steps foot out of the terminal.”

“No,” I say, climbing into the back seat of the SUV Diego is driving. “I want to know what she’s up to. Make sure we’re there in time to follow the little liar.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

## GABRIELLA



*M*y heart is in my throat, my palms sweaty with hopeful anticipation as I move toward the bus depot in Denver.

Lorenzo is still in Chicago sorting out whatever trouble his brother has found himself in, so I took it upon myself to duck away for a quick 24-hour round trip to see someone to whom I owe a great debt. *After* I tormented the fuck out of him for not calling when he said he would, of course.

I know I should've told him what I was doing, but I figured I'd be back before he was home, and I didn't want to worry him unnecessarily. As Leonardo says, shoot first, bury the evidence later. I decided I'd work him up so much about coming without his permission, he'll be too caught up in his need to punish me that this trip won't even register.

"Mallory!" I call as I approach the depot, relief settling inside me at seeing her.

She turns slowly, a broad smile sliding onto her face in recognition. "Gabriella."

I rush over and sit beside her, close enough that our shoulders are touching. "May I hug you?"

"I'm afraid I might smell," she says.

I hug her. “Me too,” I lie. “I’ve been on the go since early this morning.”

She returns the embrace a little stiffly at first, and it hurts my heart to know that the discomfort in the gesture is likely because no one has hugged this woman in a long time. It takes her a moment to settle into the cuddle, and I hold on until she’s ready to pull away.

“What are you doing here?” I ignore the water in her eyes when she finally does, knowing she would prefer it that way.

“I wanted to come and see you. I bought us lunch or, more like, an early dinner.” I reach into one of my bags, pull out a turkey sub, take half, and hand her the other.

She takes it easily enough, sniffing it before taking a bite. Chewing, she looks at me and nods in approval. “It’s good.”

We sit in companionable silence as we eat, staring out at the passersby. Some do a double take at the two of us sitting together, sharing a sandwich, while others ignore us.

“You seem to have fallen on your feet,” she says.

“More my heart.”

She laughs.

“It’s a long story. But I’m safe and happy.”

“I can’t tell you how much that pleases me.”

“You helped me a lot,” I tell her.

“Oh, I told you that money wasn’t mine.”

I shake my head. “Not just the money. Your kindness changed the trajectory of my life, and I’ll forever be grateful for the time and care you showed me.”

“Life is good, then?”



“It’s been rocky,” I tell her honestly. “I’ve been living in Manhattan. In hiding. Out of it. I’ve been kidnapped and almost forced to marry a man I didn’t love. But, as you said, just storms to weather, yes?”

Her eyes are as wide as saucers.

“I promise I’ll fill you in on the whole story one day. Right now, I just want to sit and enjoy your company.”

Sandwich finished, I dust off my hands and reach inside my pocket. “I wanted to give you this.” I hand her a hundred-dollar bill.

She looks offended.

“I’m not paying it back,” I tell her quickly. “You see a lot of people here. A lot of nomads searching for their place in the world. Like me. I wanted to replace it now that I can, so you can do the same kindness for another person one day.”

She remains quiet.

“I’ll do my part in New York. You do yours in Denver, and it’ll link us forever, through acts of kindness, through the small courtesy of a stranger helping someone who might be a little lost.”

She grips the Benjamin Franklin between her middle and forefinger. “I like that.”

I smile wide, relief settling inside me. “Now, you’re not allowed to get angry with me for the next part.”

Her nonexistent brow furrows, two heavy lines forming in the middle of her forehead.

“It’s winter, and it’s fucking cold, and if I believed you would accept my offer, I’d invite you to come and live with me.” I pause. “Do you want to come and live with me?”

“No.”

“Thought so.” I move back to the bag I’d dragged along with me. “But I won’t have a friend of mine freezing her ass off in the cold through the winter. I’m replacing your coat, boots, and mittens, and if you argue with me, you’ll break my heart because I wish I could change all this for you. I wish I could give you a home, warm food, and someplace to call yours. My friendship, a turkey sub, and these items of clothing are what I can do right now.”

“That was a lot of words in a single breath.”

I find the courage to look at her.

“I don’t want—”

“Please don’t say charity because that’s not what this is.”

“I was going to say that I don’t want you to bring me gifts every time you visit me. Turkey sandwiches are okay. But next time, no gifts.” She takes the coat, rubbing the material between her fingers.

“I just want you to be warm.”

She stands on shaky legs. I move to do the same, but she holds up a hand. “Don’t you dare. You let an old woman dress herself.”

“Okay.”

She removes her old coat and slides her arms into the new one. “Cozy,” she murmurs to herself. She does it up and struggles to sit back down, folding her old jacket and placing it in one of her bags. Next, she moves on to her boots. Following the same pattern of removing her old ones and replacing them with the new ones before tucking her used ones into a bag. “If you don’t mind, I’ll keep the mittens for later. Someone gave

these to me a long time ago, and I'm not ready to give them up."

I nod. "Perfect."

"Thank you, Gabriella."

"It's just stuff."

She shakes her head. "No. Not that. You remembered me. You came back to see me." She brushes away two tears and looks down at her hands. "You called me your friend."

"You are my friend."

"I didn't know your mother, but I bet she would be proud of who you've grown to be in her absence."

I reach for her hand. "Thank you."

"You are married." She holds my hand, thumbing the sizable ring perched on my finger. "To a man you do love?"

"To a man I love," I assure her.

"Good." She nudges my shoulder. "I assume it's the man standing across the road there who has been staring at us while we ate our sandwich."

I follow Mallory's finger, waving tentatively at Lorenzo leaning against a black Town Car when I see him.

"*Shit*," I mumble.

He pushes away from the car, walking across the road without a care for the traffic.

"Hi." I squint up at him when he reaches us.

"Hi."

"I thought you were in Chicago."

"Funny, I thought *you* were at home."

“I just had to visit a friend.”

Lorenzo lifts his chin, and I hate that I can't read his neutral expression.

“You found yourself a knight,” Mallory muses.

Lorenzo laughs. “I'm no knight.”

Mallory shrugs. “Knights don't have to be honorable in the eyes of all. Saviors tend to feel most at home in the morally gray shadows. To one, you may be the scum of the earth, but to my friend Gabriella, you are a silver lining.”

He turns his focus back to me. “She might be more my savior than I have ever been hers.”

“Hmm,” Mallory agrees.

“You must be Mallory.” Lorenzo removes his hands from his pockets, extending a hand for her to shake.

“Ten points to the mobster in the bespoke suit.” She slides her hand into his.

I laugh, and Lorenzo shakes his head with a grin. “I'm going to wait in the car. You guys catch up.”

Standing, I kiss his lips. He holds me against him. “Take as long as you need.”

He moves away, and I wait until he's in the car before I sit back down. Leonardo waves to me from the driver's seat, and I smile, pleased he didn't flip me off.

Mallory and I spend another hour chatting and laughing. I buy us each a coffee, but Mallory refuses to eat the chocolate bar I bought for her, telling me she's watching her weight. We laughed, and she tucked it away for another day.

We hug for a long time when we say goodbye, but I promise her I'll be back as soon as I can manage it. I feel a sense of sadness walking away from her, but she smiles when she waves, and I hope my friendship has made a difference in her life like hers has done mine.

Lorenzo is waiting outside the car when I approach. He kisses me, opens the door, and tells me he'll be back. Sitting in the car, I stare out the window, watching him approach Mallory. They talk for ten minutes, and then he's back.

"What did you talk about?"

"Nothing." He slides into the car beside me, grabbing my hand.

"Lorenzo," I push.

"It's not important."

"It is to me."

"He would've offered to buy her an apartment," Leonardo interjects.

"What?"

"Leonardo," Lorenzo chides.

"Is that true?"

"I offered to get her a place to live. She told me to fuck off." He smirks. "So I told her I've set up an ongoing tab at the grocery store down the street. She told me she didn't need a savior and to concentrate on my wife."

"You offered to buy her an apartment?"

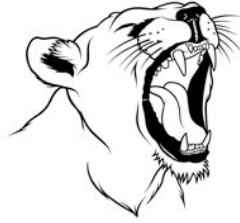
He shrugs. "Why wouldn't I? She's your friend."

I hug him, pushing my face into his neck. "I love you."

“And I haven’t forgotten that you disobeyed me.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

## GABRIELLA



*H*e doesn't hug me back on the entire ride to the hotel. He wants me close based on the way he yanked me back when I went to move, but he won't hug me back, and he doesn't speak.

I want to talk to Leo, but I want Lorenzo to look at me more.

The elevator ride to our room is as silent as the car, and I stare down at my feet, trying to work out what's working behind his silence. He's mad at me; I know that much. I can't work out if it's because of our video call earlier today or the fact that I'm in Denver, or a mixture of both.

Holding my hand as we step from the elevator, he opens the hotel room door, gesturing for me to step inside.

"Why didn't you tell me you were leaving the state?" he says, closing the door behind him and flicking the lock.

I place my bag down. "I..."

"I have fucking enemies, Gabriella." He runs a hand roughly through his hair. "I told you this," he stresses. "Every reason I held on to about keeping you away from me was about keeping you safe, and then you go and do something like this."



“I...”

“Are you trying to kill me?”

“What?”

“I asked if you were trying to kill me.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re being ridiculous.”

Pulling his gun from its holster, he holds it out for me. “Go on.”

I step back.

“Do it. Shoot me now. Right here.” He punches his fist over his heart. “I married you in front of hundreds of people. I kissed you at our wedding like you were breathing life into me for the first fucking time.”

I blink.

“Eighty percent of the people there that day would take any opportunity to hurt me. How did I tell you they would hurt me, Gabriella?” His voice raises with every word he speaks until he’s shouting.

I clench my teeth.

“You left our home *unprotected*. You boarded a flight *unprotected*. You traveled around a city that isn’t mine *without* fucking protection, without *giving* me the opportunity to protect you. I am dangerous, and I am without morals, Gabriella, which means my enemies are dangerous and without morals. You dance in harm’s way whenever you step out of my sight. The *only* way I can sleep at night, the *only* way I can continue breathing, is knowing that if I’m not there to protect you, I have someone I trust doing it for me.”

“*Enzo*,” I breathe.

“And if you can’t accept that as your reality moving forward, then do it.” He shakes his gun at me again. “Shoot me in the fucking heart and be done with it.”

I push the gun away from me, but he brings it back.

“Stop it.”

“You’re forever questioning my motives. You believe I have the worst intentions for you, which is laughable. Everything I do in this life, I do for you, Gabriella. I question my allegiance to the family with the lies I tell for you and the double-crossing I’ve done to keep you safe.”

“I didn’t want to argue with you.” My voice is meek, my words even more so.

“About what?”

“About you not letting me come,” I yell at him, trying to make him understand.

“You’re my wife, not my goddamn fucking prisoner, Gabbi. How many times have I told you that you can have whatever the fuck you want? Anything. If you want to get on a plane to visit your friend in Denver, I’ll buy a fucking jet so you can come and go as you please, *with* fucking protection.”

“I also didn’t want you to be mad at me for spending your money.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He drops his gun to the ground like it’s a fucking gum wrapper and not a weapon that could go off at any time and reaches into his jacket for his wallet. He opens it, throwing hundred-dollar bills out like confetti. Not satisfied, he pulls out his black Amex, throwing it at my feet. “Nothing is *mine*. It’s fucking *ours*. It’s *yours*. I would buy that woman a house in every fucking city if you asked me to. I will send her grandkids to college if she has

them. I don't know how to tell you in a way you'll understand. Tell me what you want, and I'll make it happen."

"I'm sorry." I move forward to grab his jacket. "I'm so sorry. I don't know why I didn't tell you. I was afraid you wouldn't understand."

"Understand what?"

I shrug. "Me."

"You're the *only* fucking thing in this world that makes sense to me."

I kiss him, but he doesn't kiss me back. I pull away from his lips, frowning. "I'm sorry." I lean in again, but still, he remains unmoving. "Why aren't you kissing me?"

He grabs my jaw in his big palm. "What did I say to you on the phone?"

I gulp.

"Tell me what I said to you on the phone."

"That you weren't going to be very nice to me."

He hums deep in his throat. "You remembered."

"It was a threat."

He lifts a shoulder, leaning in to lick my lips. "Or a promise. I'm going to spend the next few hours with my cock buried in holes of yours that my cock has yet to breach."

I lick my lips.

"Mm." He brushes his thumb across my lips. "This sweet mouth." He kisses me, sliding his tongue into my mouth but pulling back before I can taste him the way I long to. "And when your pussy is slick from swallowing my cock, I'm gonna

decorate my dick with the tears your pussy cries for me, feed it into your virgin ass, and *watch* you cry for me.”

My eyes close.

“And through *all* that, I’m not going to let you come. Not once.”

My eyes flash open.

“Take your clothes off.”

I slide my jacket from my shoulders and remove my shirt and bra.

“Keep going.” He moves to the minibar. He pours three miniature bottles of whiskey into a glass and leans against the wall, watching me. I toe off each of my boots and bend down, dragging my pants, underwear, and socks off in one single motion.

Tipping the entire contents of his glass down his throat, he slams the glass onto the table and shuns his thick coat and suit jacket. Uncuffing his shirt, he places the cuff links neatly beside his whiskey glass and folds the arms of his white dress shirt up, revealing the veined line of his forearms.

“Kneel.”

I drop to my knees.

I’m scared. My heart is racing in my chest, and I have no idea what to expect from this unhinged version of my husband. But my fear aside, I’m damp between my thighs. My nipples are hard. My mouth is dry, and I’m all but panting.

Sauntering toward me, he unbuckles his belt, never removing his eyes from mine. The deep-blue color that hypnotizes me every time we’re intimate holds me hostage, and the color expands with his salacious intent.

Next, he moves to the buttons on his shirt, flicking them open one at a time until his chest and abdomen are exposed and free for me to explore with my eyes, hands, and mouth.

I reach for him as he steps up in front of me. “Not yet.”

I look up at him, and he cups my face.

“Do you trust me, lioness?”

I smirk. “Always.”

He rolls his head on his shoulders.

His dick is hard. I can see it pushing against his dress pants, demanding attention.

“Enzo?”

He rights his neck, hooded eyes scanning my face.

“Can I?” I lift my hands.

He nods.

When I shift forward, the carpet scratches my knees, but I ignore the itch, my focus on the button and zipper of Lorenzo’s pants.

I don’t ask for permission when I pull his boxers down the moment I’ve undone his pants. His cock stands out proudly.

“Look at me.”

I lift my eyes.

“When my dick is in your mouth, your eyes are on mine. Understood?”

I nod.

“If I hurt you at any point or it’s too much, pinch my thigh.”

Again, I nod.

“Now, wrap your hand around my cock and beg for forgiveness, lioness.”

Eyes still on him, I spit into my hand.

“Fuck me,” he groans.

Wrapping my palm over the base of his cock, my fingers can't touch, but that doesn't stop me from gliding my slick hand up and down the smooth line.

His crown is wet with the evidence of how turned on he is, and I lean forward, licking my tongue through his slit to taste him. I relish the flavor, the salty drop exploding over my tastebuds, and I moan.

His hand weaves itself into my hair.

When I suck his head between my lips, he growls.

I let my tongue play with his piercing. Circling each ball of his barbell in a caress.

My hand and mouth move simultaneously. Up and down, my tongue massages the throbbing vein on the underside of his cock. It takes him two minutes before he takes over. Hips thrusting forward, he stretches my throat with every indelicate drive.

My eyes water, but I want more. I hum at the way he dominates my mouth. My hand aches, and my jaw twinges with discomfort, but it only builds at the apex between my thighs. My pain feels good for *both* of us. My free hand slides into his boxers, gripping his ass cheek to yank him forward. I gag. Spit runs over my chin. Tears leak from the corners of my eyes.

He fucks my mouth harder.

He's losing his battle. Eyes *blazing* with heat, they watch my mouth. His teeth pierce his bottom lip, and his nostrils flare.

He drives into my throat, and I choke from the force. "Fuck. Why is that sound so hot? Too much?" He's on the verge of snapping.

I shake my head and do it again.

"Feel that?" he asks.

His cock is throbbing, and it jerks in my mouth.

"I'm so fucking close. I'm gonna spray cum all over your tits, baby. I need to see it on your skin."

I kiss his crown one last time, pulling off his dick as he pushes my hand away and replaces it with his own. I watch on, mesmerized by the power in his fist.

"Lean back."

Still on my knees, I lock my arms behind me, palms pushing into the carpet to give him greater access to my tits.

This is what I missed that very first time. The night I stood in his bedroom and listened to him stroke his dick. *This* is what I missed, and fuck, what a sight.

A mob boss with death, destruction, and lust in his eyes. Neck thick with corded muscle. White shirt splayed open, abdominal muscles contracting and expanding with every fired movement of his fist. Blood trickling over his lip, his teeth having broken through the skin. The veins in his forearm look ready to burst, and his cock... his fucking cock, engulfed by the sheer size of his hand, head angry with the need to come, is pointed right at me.

“*Come*,” I whisper, not realizing I’d spoken, and he doesn’t just shout, he doesn’t just bellow, he fucking howls my name with his release. Thick, warm ribbons of cum fire at my chest, splattering my breasts in an orgasm so intense, he can barely stand.

Transfixed by his branding, I lift a hand, rubbing my palm across my tits.

He drops to his knees. “Turn around. Bend over.”

I move without delay.

“Cheek on the carpet.” He pushes my face down, and I yelp in surprise. “Keep that ass up here for me, understood?”

I nod against his palm on my head.

“Good girl.”

His tongue touches the rosy bud between my ass cheeks, and I lift in shock and pleasure.

He pushes me back down. “I’m not fucking kidding, baby. Stay down.”

My arms stretch out in front of me, and I sink my upper body farther into the ground, my ass tilting higher.

“That’s my good girl.”

He tongues my ass until I’m writhing under the touch. Sliding two of his fingers into my pussy, I clench down.

“Don’t you dare fucking come.”

I whimper.

Dragging his digits from my pussy, he runs them up and over my puckered entrance, rubbing smooth circles.



My eyes roll back because I didn't know pleasure like this existed. Everything Lorenzo does to my body makes me certain he's lost me to another realm, but this, *this* is different.

"I'm gonna put my cock inside your cunt just to wet it."

I cry out his name when he enters me, caught between my need for him to fuck me *just* like this and my desperate craving for him to continue what he's doing elsewhere on my body.

He spreads my ass cheeks and lets a large glob of spit fall against my hole. Rubbing his thumb over it, he uses the spit to push it against the tight muscle.

He pumps his cock in and out of my pussy. "Relax."

I moan, and his thumb breaks the threshold.

"Jesus," I choke out in satisfaction.

He growls.

"*Enzo. Enzo. Enzo,*" I chant, and he settles.

"It'll hurt to start, but don't resist. You know I'll never do anything that doesn't feel good for you."

I nod, knowing he's telling the truth.

Cock pulling from my pussy, he removes his thumb from my ass, and I whimper at the loss of both.

Humming in approval, he rubs his thick crown at my back entrance, and I do as he says. I breathe slowly, letting myself enjoy the touch of his body all over mine.

He pushes forward, and my initial repose is lost at the shock and unfamiliar feeling.

The calloused touch of his hand slides over my stomach, reaching down to find my clit. He rubs, and I preen, arching

farther into him and swallowing more of him into my ass unintentionally.

I gasp in surprise, and his laughter trickles through a groan. “That’s it, lioness, back up onto it.”

*Back up onto it.*

I slide forward, waiting a second before pushing back again.

I’m full. At capacity, I’m sure of it. My ass stings in protest but under the wave of pain sits something else. Something unchartered and pleasurable and forbidden. So I do it again. I pull off him only to drive backward.

“If you could see this,” he murmurs. “Ass stretched so wide to take me. You’re doing so well. Ready for more?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.” He takes over for me, thrusting in and out until he slams forward, burying himself completely.

I can feel him in my throat, but I’ve never felt more fulfilled.

“Fuck, Gabbi, you took it all. Your sweet little ass took all of me.”

One hand continues to rub tender circles on my clit while the other sits at the base of my spine, using it as leverage to thrust in and out. Spikes of pain hit me at random intervals, and astonishingly, I find myself moaning more from the pain than I do the pleasure. The conjunction of the paradoxical sensations has me panting for more, begging him to go harder.

“Please.”

“Fuck. Baby, I take it back. Come for me.”

I didn't think it was possible, but once again, claiming my virginity, Lorenzo sends me skyward.

It has to be the unadulterated love I feel for him. I can't put it down to anything else. I trust him implicitly, and because of that faith, my body bends at his mercy. In my heart and mind, I know that the way Lorenzo abuses my body will only ever please me. He would never hurt me, not unless I asked him to, not unless he knew that the bite of pain would only magnify my pleasure.

The carpet scratches my elbows and knees, and the intensity of my orgasm with Lorenzo buried deep in my ass continues longer than I expected. My body quakes with exhaustion, euphoric contentment making me moan and writhe beneath him as he races toward his own orgasm.

He stills behind me, hands ripping at the soft skin of my hips as he groans long and loud. "Fuck. Gabriella." My name rolls over his tongue in drunken pleasure, and my pussy clenches with how much he turns me on.

Having emptied inside me, he withdraws from my body, the retreat painstakingly gentle before he falls to the floor beside me.

"I love you, lioness. I love you so fucking much I struggle to reconcile that you're real."

I lie on my side, my hand reaching up to turn his face to mine.

"Tell me you're real," he whispers. "Even if you're not. Lie to me. My fractured heart couldn't take the truth if I've made you up."

"We're real, baby."

He nods, grabbing my wrist to kiss my open palm. “Don’t make me feel like I want to die again,” he pleads, pushing my hand against his cheek again. “Don’t take away my need to protect you. I need it.”

“I promise.”

His sapphire eyes meet mine, and he watches me for a beat, searching for the sincerity in my words. “Thank you.”

“I love you,” I tell him because I sense he needs it. He’s relaxed in his post-climactic state but on edge with his feelings.

My declaration pulls him back from the edge, and he leans over me, kissing my neck.

“As much as I want to stay like this and spend the night exploring more and more of your body and all the ways I can make you scream my name, we have plans.”

I groan in dissatisfaction.

“I know.” He pulls his face from my neck, smiling down at me. “I’m sorry, it’s important.”

“It’s okay. I’ll go shower.”

He holds me in place. “No. You won’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you’re going anywhere, you’re gonna do it smelling like me with my cum all the fuck over you.”

He’s not lying. He has quite literally covered me in his cum.

I blink at him.

“Do you have anything to wear?”

He helps me up.

“I can make do,” I answer distractedly. “Lorenzo...”

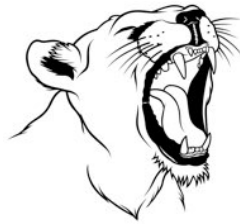
“Look at me and tell me how you feel right now, no external factors. Knowing what we just shared and knowing that all of me is all over you.”

I don't think before I speak. “A queen.”

He leans in to kiss me. “*My* fucking queen. Now go and get dressed. We were supposed to meet Leonardo twenty minutes ago.”

# CHAPTER FORTY

## GABRIELLA



*I* settled on one of Lorenzo's dress shirts and the boots I had arrived in. Lorenzo told me he'd take me shopping, but I was happy with the crisp white shirt. He's tall enough that it sits just above my knee, and I've folded the sleeves up enough that they sit at my elbows. I touched up my makeup and left my hair in its natural state because there was no way I was taming that nest in the minutes Lorenzo gave me to organize myself.

"You gonna let your wife dress like that?" Leonardo's eyes widen as we walk into the lobby of the hotel.

"My wife can wear whatever she wants."

Pulling my hand from Lorenzo's grip, I throw myself at Leo, hugging him so tightly my arms ache. "*Hey.*" He kisses my temple. "We're good, G."

"I'm so sorry for saying I hated you."

He picks me up in a bear hug, placing me back down almost immediately. "Like I said, we're good, and you smell like sex, so I would like you to untangle yourself, considering you smell like sex *with my brother.*"

I laugh and step back directly into Lorenzo's chest. He wraps an arm around my waist. "Where's Diego?"

“Checking last-minute details,” Leonardo says.

I look curiously at my husband. “Details about what?”

“Directions for the club,” Leo lies.

“Business, baby.” Lorenzo corrects, kissing my cheek.

Diego approaches, his walk purposeful. I’ve never formally met the guy, and I track my eyes over him as he moves closer and closer. He’s handsome in a scary kind of way. Hair shorn close to his head, his dark eyes are almost black and a little bit dead. Face void of any actual emotion, save for boredom, he barely looks at me, dipping his chin at Lorenzo and sliding a cell phone into his pocket. “Confirmed.”

“Hi.” I wave. “I’m Gabriella.”

“I know,” he says, voice like gravel. His eyes track up and down my body in a quick sweep.

A black hoop earring sits in his right ear, a tiny black cross hanging from the loop. He’s dressed all in black but not in a suit like the others. He’s opted for more of a casual black tee, black jeans, and black boots. He stands like a soldier, legs shoulder width apart, hands crossed over his crotch.

“It’s nice to meet you, *too*,” I say.

He steps forward, and I shift back. Leaning his head toward me, he sniffs. A slow smile grows on his face, and he moves back again.

My mouth opens wide in shock, and Leonardo laughs. “Told you.”

Stepping from Lorenzo’s embrace, he catches my hand, entwining our fingers and leading me out of the building. Leo and Diego fall in step behind me.



“So,” Leonardo calls from behind us. “You’re gonna be cool with men trying to grope her? She looks like she’s just rolled out of someone’s bed from a hard and fast fuck.”

“I never said that.” Lorenzo opens my car door. “If anyone attempts to touch my wife, they’ll learn very quickly that I’m not afraid of the way a body can bleed a river of blood.”

“Now we’re killing people for hitting on our spouses?” Leo slides into the passenger seat with Diego driving.

“I never said anything about murder.” Lorenzo settles beside me, hand sliding over my thigh and up high enough that if Diego wanted to, he could see my underwear from the reflection in the rearview mirror. “I’ll remove their fingers to teach them a lesson about touching things that are out of their league. Once they’ve watched me destroy their ability to jerk off ever again, I’ll gouge their eyes from their sockets, punishment for letting their eyes wander to something that they know to be mine. It’s about respect, Leonardo.” My husband speaks casually. “Gabriella will arrive with me. Anyone who is of consequence will know she belongs to me. Those who don’t will learn quickly. And anyone slow on the uptake will have to live with the consequences.”

“You’re a fucking psychopath,” I say.

My husband leans in close. “Oh, little lioness, don’t act like it doesn’t make that sweet cunt wet.”

I cross my legs, all but trapping his hand between them, refusing to acknowledge his very offensive and very true remark.

Diego smirks at me in the rearview mirror, and I scowl at him.

The drive is short. Within a few minutes, we're climbing back out of the car and walking into an unstated building. The security guard lets us bypass the line, and Lorenzo doesn't let go of my hand as we weave through the crowd.

"What is this place?" I yell.

"It's called Ruin. The owners have three of them across different states. This one only opened a few months ago."

He leads me up a flight of stairs to a section roped off from the public. Men and women hang from the ceilings on bright-colored ribbons, wrapping the fabric over their limbs before falling and catching themselves gracefully with just their arms. I watch on in awe.

Music thrums through the room, the beat thick under my feet but not as loud up on our secluded perch.

"Where are their other clubs?"

"Seattle and New Orleans."

I nod. "Do you know the owners?"

Lorenzo shakes his head. "No. I'm hoping to meet the owner's brother tonight."

"Last-minute details." It all clicks.

He smiles. "The family is in town in a convenient turn of events."

"Does he know you're coming?"

"No."

A server comes over to our table and takes our drink orders.

"Do you think she knows I'm not twenty-one?"

Lorenzo's lips are at my neck, gentle kisses being scattered at the delicate skin underneath my ear. "Don't be cute."

I smile.

More people move into the VIP section. The four tables are now crowded with occupants, and depressingly, Lorenzo stops the assault of his lips on my neck.

He waves Diego over, whispering in his ear. Diego drops his chin once and then disappears.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, lioness. I just told him to walk around and check out the crowd up here. If he's comfortable there's no threat, I told him to go enjoy himself."

I laugh. "That guy hasn't enjoyed himself in a really long time."

"Diego has his fun. Don't you worry about that."

I raise an eyebrow, and he shakes his head, silently telling me to mind my own business.

I roll my eyes, my gaze catching on two women making their way up the stairs. I freeze, a little taken aback by their beauty. They move in step, smiles on their relaxed faces as they move into the space, stopping just to our right.

The blonde looks like a goddamn angel, and I glance around the room, watching every male in the vicinity draw their gaze in her direction. Shit, the women offer her the same devotion. Her hair sits in a concave bob around her face, sliced along her soft jawline with precision. Her ivory skin glows with fucking serenity; a beacon of peace in an otherwise fractured energy. The lights in the club catch her eyes every so often, and I'd swear her irises are purple. Dressed in a high-

waisted pair of linen pants and a tube top, she tucks her hands in her pockets, watching the crowd with the utmost curiosity.

The brunette beside her, while no less captivating, holds herself differently. There's an armor to her demeanor that screams of past pain and personal victories. She's chaotic in a purposeful way. The perfect messy bun sits atop her head, her face free of makeup. She listens intently as the blonde speaks. Her outfit of choice is black high-waisted jeans that look painted on, and an oversized white tee dwarfs her frame and sits tied at her waist.

I turn my head slightly, looking at Lorenzo.

He's watching me, so engrossed in my profile I don't think he's even noticed their presence.

But Leo has. "Fuck me twice." Fixing his hair, he stands, moving toward the women with a smile only he could wear without screaming predator.

"Fuck's sake," Lorenzo gripes beside me.

"What?"

"Just my idiot brother and his refusal to prepare."

"Prepare?"

"Just wait and watch."

He introduces himself to both women, his lips brushing each of their knuckles in a flirtatious greeting. They roll their eyes but grin, charmed by his schoolboy smile. Lorenzo remains rigid at my back, and I want to tell him to relax, but I know it's futile, so I ignore his discomfort, choosing to become entranced by Leonardo playing the role of the love-sick fool. He makes them laugh. He licks his lips, and Lorenzo sighs against my neck. Interestingly enough, neither woman

seems taken by his charisma. They smile cordially and laugh when warranted but keep a firm distance.

So focused on their blatant rejection, Leonardo doesn't see the man approach from the shadows.

“Uh-oh,” I mumble.

“Hopefully he shoots him.”

I elbow my husband.

The man is hot as hell and just as scary. He'd be taller than even Lorenzo, shoulders wide and waist tapered. He's covered in tattoos from his neck down. Every inch of visible skin has patterns with colors and lines I can't make out in the dark. Jaw wired shut with irritation, he meets his destination with his hands curled into fists. He moves up behind the blonde, pulling her into the wall of his frame before telling Leonardo to fuck off with a lift of his chin.

My brother-in-law doesn't concede to this man's evident fury at his interest in his girlfriend or wife or whatever the fuck is going on.

“Oh god.” I shift along the seat.

“Don't,” Lorenzo warns, but I scowl at him, moving toward the commotion.

It all happens so fast. My ass has barely left my seat, and one second, Leonardo is standing there, eyes blazing with provocation. In the next, he's been dropped to his ass in a punch hefty enough to break his nose. But not even the blood pouring from his nostrils stops him. He's on his feet, knife in his palm and pressed against the neck of the man responsible for the damage to his face.

“Leonardo,” I snap, turning my head in search of Lorenzo.

My husband pulls me back, far enough away to keep me out of immediate harm's way but close enough that I can hear what the fuck is going on. A look of pure annoyance expels through his nostrils.

“Ready to die in front of your pretty piece, fucker?”

The angelic blonde steps closer, whispering to her partner and Leonardo, trying to calm the situation.

The tattooed guy's top lip curls, and he inches forward, pressing his inked neck into Leo's blade. “Call my wife a pretty piece again and see who dies, asshole.”

*Wife*, got it. Leo is a dead man. A dead man with an arrogant smirk on his face.

“That's not good,” I say under my breath. “*Leo!*”

He ignores me.

“Okay, yeah, no, that's worse,” I mumble when a *building* of a man joins the cluster. Muscles barely contained by the material of his shirt, he steps up behind my brother-in-law, gun already cocked, and pushes the barrel against the back of his head.

I take a step forward, but before I can speak, the brunette does.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Rocco? You brought your gun to Codi's goddamn fucking club? Jesus Christ.” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “And you.” She turns on the other guy, droplets of blood dancing down the colorful ink of his neck. “You need to check your temper. He hit on her, Parker. He didn't fucking touch her. You two are insufferable. We can't take you anywhere.” She turns her attention to Leo. “I don't know you, and you look a little too happy with that

knife, so I'm not going to reprimand you, but remove the blade from my brother-in-law's neck immediately."

Leo doesn't move.

Lorenzo says nothing throughout the whole ordeal.

"Leo!" I call out.

"Rocco!" the brunette says at the same time. "Put the fucking gun away."

"When he removes the knife," the building named Rocco says.

"When you remove the gun," Leo snipes back.

"Wow," I comment. "Hi." I speak to the blonde and brunette across from me. I move forward, but Lorenzo has hold of my dress, keeping me a few steps away. "I'm Gabriella. The guy with the knife is Leonardo. I'm so sorry for all of this. He's actually a really good guy. Just a little... *horny*?" I shrug.

That tattooed guy growls.

"Sorry." I grimace. "Wrong choice of word."

"Baby." The blonde touches his arm.

"Leonardo your husband?" the building asks.

"God no," I scoff. "I would ask you to shoot him for me if he hit on another woman if we were married. Mine's holding me back by my shirt like I'm a toddler near a set of stairs." I gesture over my shoulder with my thumb. "He's probably hoping you shoot his brother to save him the hassle later."

The building smiles. Kind of. Maybe.

"I'm Ryn," the brunette introduces herself. "My sister Codi." She points at the blonde, who waves. "My brother-in-

law, Parker.” She points at the guy with Leo’s knife at his neck. “And my husband, Rocco. He’s a little on edge.”

He rolls his eyes.

No one moves. Guns, knives, and fists still drawn as Ryn and I continue to chat around them.

“We’re not from around here. We’ve just dropped our oldest son off at college. Rocco’s a little emotional.” He scowls at her, and I want to laugh at the absurdity of the comment. This guy? Emotional? “Add that to the fact that we’ve left our twins with my dad for the night so that we could have dinner, and it’s the first time we’ve ever left them.” She cups her hand around her mouth. “He’s not coping,” she whispers.

“Fuck’s sake, Cami, stop telling these people our life story.”

“Sure, baby,” she agrees, turning back to me. “Are you local to Denver?”

I shake my head. “No. I was visiting a friend. My husband thought I’d run off. He’s a little dramatic. Next minute, he and his brother gatecrashed my getaway.”

“You traveled interstate without telling your husband?” Rocco finally drops his gun, tucking it into the waistband of his jeans.

“She did.” Lorenzo’s voice hits the nape of my neck, and instinctively, I step back into his body. “And in my line of work, she knows better. Leonardo, lower your knife and apologize to Parker *Shay* for hitting on his woman.”

Leo tucks his knife away, and his face pales at the emphasis on the man’s last name. “Fuck. I didn’t know. No disrespect, man.”



Parker and his wall of tattoos step up, face in Leo's. "Look at my wife again, and I'll gut you."

The blonde slides her hand against his, and his focus moves immediately. I was right, her eyes are purple, and they stare up at him with love so potent it suffocates everyone in the room.

"Can't be a coincidence that you're here the same night I am, Caruso."

"Good, you know who I am," Lorenzo speaks again. "Removes the need for introductions."

"Cami, baby, take Gabriella to our table and buy her a drink."

"Sure, honey."

I glance at Lorenzo, making sure he's comfortable with the turn of events. Placing a soft kiss on my cheek, he whispers, "I'll be right here the whole time. You need me, you come to me."

"Okay."

I follow the girls to a table in the back corner and take a seat. "I'm so sorry about Leonardo," I say. "It doesn't seem like it, but he's actually a sweetheart."

"He was a total sweetheart," Codi assures me. "Parker's just a little possessive."

*If you're going anywhere, you're gonna do it smelling like me with my cum all the fuck over you.*

"I get that," I say conversationally, hoping the vulgarity of Lorenzo's possessiveness isn't as obvious to these women as it was to Diego and Leonardo. "So, how did you meet Parker and Rocco?"

“Oh.” Codi pours us each a glass of champagne from the bottle just delivered to our table, leaning over to sip the overflowing bubbles from the flute. “Parker and Rocco were trying to kill me.”

I spit champagne all over her. “Sorry. What?”

She laughs, and it sounds like the ringing of gentle bells. It’s so freaking sweet. Who would want to kill *her*?

“It’s a long story.” She passes me a napkin, dabbing one over her arms to clean up my shock. “Family rivalry and misplaced blame. It all worked out in the end. He couldn’t help but fall in love with me.”

I think about it for a second and then shrug. “Both my brother and husband threatened to kill me the first time I met them,” I confess. “Lorenzo even almost forced me to marry his brother.”

“No shit?” Ryn gasps. “I thought our story was hectic.”

“You fell in love with Rocco when Codi and Parker got together?” I sip my champagne slowly.

“Yes,” Codi answers.

At the same time, Ryn says, “No.”

I look back and forth between them. “I hated Rocco,” Ryn tells me. “He’s a little intense, as you can tell. He wanted to kill my sister, so of course, I hated him. Then he helped me in a way no one else has ever been able to do.” Her eyes are on him now as she speaks, her voice having lost its edge, softening at the sides with love. “My hate morphed into like, and like steamrolled into love. We’re both a little fucked up,” she says absently, “but we work.”

I glance over my shoulder, watching Rocco. He sits with his thick arms crossed over his expansive chest. The guy is rippling with muscle. Tattooed flames climb up his neck to disappear into the well-maintained beard on his face. He listens intently as Lorenzo speaks, but sensing his wife's stare, he turns his attention, the hardened lines of his face melting when he looks at her.

I move my gaze to Parker, Codi's husband, who has refused to sit down at the table like the other men. He stands, eyes trained on Leonardo with murderous intent.

"Your family is clearly in my husband's line of work?" I ask, turning back.

Ryn speaks first. "Rocco, yes. He works alongside our dad. Parker is a little... cleaner." She smiles.

"Parker and Rocco used to own Ruin," Codi interjects. "When Parker and I married, Rocco started working with our Dad, and Ruin became our baby. We have three clubs now."

"Lorenzo was saying. Seattle and New Orleans?"

Codi nods. "We're based in Seattle," she tells me. "As Ryn mentioned, their son, Jesse, has just started college here. We wanted to see him off, and it was a good excuse to come and check on business."

"I like it here," I tell her.

"Sugar." Parker slides into the booth beside her.

"Hey, baby." She leans her back against his chest, snuggling into him.

"Are they finished?" I look back.

"No," Parker answers. "They're talking shop. I wanted to check in and see if you'd heard from Blake about how the girls

were.”

“Total saps.” Codi laughs. “Menace in human form to look at, but they’re freaking puddles when it comes to their kids. It’s comical.”

Parker leans down, lips to her ear. He moves between speaking and nibbling her ear. When her smile turns from jovial to lustful, I turn away.

“They’re always like that,” Ryn murmurs. “Another drink?”

I shake my head, looking back toward Lorenzo. He’s staring at me, and I breathe easily, feeling his gaze. He beckons me over, and Ryn stands with me. “Looks like they’re finished talking about whatever they needed to, which means Rocco is about one second away from telling me we’re leaving so he can check on the kids.”

When we reach the table, I slide onto Lorenzo’s lap.

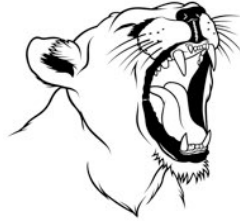
“Ready, Cami?” Rocco asks. “I wanna head back and check on the kids.”

Ryn and I laugh.

The girls and I exchange numbers, and as I settle into bed that night, curled up in Lorenzo, I have to smile at how friendships and love can be found in the most peculiar of situations.

# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

## GABRIELLA



*W*e arrived home from Denver a few days ago. Without giving too much away, Lorenzo conceded that he could use Rocco and Dominic Rein's allegiance with a situation that may unfold with the Irish. Dominic Rein is Ryn and Codi's father. I considered asking a few more prying questions but stopped myself, deciding I was more content in my oblivion.

Both Ryn and Codi have texted me since we met the other night. They're now back in Seattle and have asked me to visit as soon as possible. In addition, they're already planning a trip to New York, which excites me. I have friends wanting to visit *me*. People who I don't have to hide from. People who seemingly understand that life isn't perfect and don't question why it's perfect for me.

"Dante knows you're coming?" Lorenzo pulls up outside my brother's apartment.

I nod, unclicking my seat belt.

Lorenzo is already out and moving toward my door to open it. Hand outstretched, he helps me from the car. He closes the door, only to back me up against it. "I'll be back in about an hour. I have something to check on, and then I have something to show you."

I lay my arms over his shoulders. “Oh, baby, I’ve seen it plenty.”

It still catches me off guard when he smiles so openly. The face I was so certain was carved with deviltry looks more like the work of an angel when his lips spread open in joy. The sharp touch of his canines only entice me closer. The strong laugh lines pushed into his cheeks, a frame of beauty that feels wrong to touch. I do it anyway, caressing his smile with the gentle brush of my thumbs.

“Makes it hard for me to concentrate on work when you look at me like that, lioness.”

Gliding a hand down his chest and stomach, I let my palm graze his crotch. “It does make it hard.”

He inches forward, pushing himself into my open palm. “Keep it up, and it will be hard. Keen for me to fuck you outside Dante’s building?”

“You’re sick.”

“Deranged,” he agrees before crashing his lips to mine. My mouth opens to welcome his tongue, the taste of his obsession so deep that I moan. His cock does begin to swell under my palm, and he groans, slamming a hand against the window of his Lamborghini in frustrated need.

He kisses me so thoroughly that when he eventually pulls away, my lips feel as though they’ve been fucked; used and worshipped, and ruined forever more. Touching them with my fingertips, I look up at him with eyes that swirl with lust.

“You’re an evil woman. The things that you do to me.”

“What do I do to you?”

“You make me believe I’m worthy of something so pure. You know I’ll never be deserving of your love, but you’ve brainwashed me to think I am.”

“You’re the only thing I’ve ever claimed for myself. The only thing I’ve selfishly decided I would never let go because I need nothing else in life. Nothing but you and the obsessive love that only seems to grow between us.”

Forehead to mine, he growls. “How the fuck am I expected to let you go without fucking you after a declaration like that?”

I move my mouth to his ear. “Someone has taught me the impact of deprivation. You’ll cry at how good it feels when you’re made to wait. Maybe I’ll drink your tears for a change.”

When I slide out from his cage, he falls against the car, eyes blazing with heat as they watch me walk away. “I love you.” He doesn’t yell it. He doesn’t raise his voice. But I can read the words on his lips, and they hit me so significantly that I have to gulp to breathe.

Hand to my heart, I mouth it back.

He watches me move toward Dante’s floor-level apartment, not driving away until I’m securely inside. Breaching the threshold, I fall heavily against the closed door, trying to reconcile the way my heart aches in his absence.

Dante is drinking coffee and reading the newspaper when I walk into his kitchen.

“Hey,” I greet. “The nineties called. They asked for their newspaper back.”

“Har har. Coffee is fresh.” He gestures at the freshly brewed coffee in the pot on his counter.

I pour myself a cup.



“How was Denver?”

I haven't had the chance to apologize for skipping out on him when he was tasked with checking in on me. “Did you get in trouble?”

“No.” He shakes his head, not lifting his eyes from whatever he's reading. “I called Diego as soon as I noticed you were gone.”

“Good.” I sit down beside him. “Is that the newspaper with the crossword?”

“Hm?” He lifts his head. “*The Times* crossword?” He flicks through pages. “Yeah. You want?”

“Sure.” I stand, moving around his kitchen in search of a pen. One in hand, I sit back down and take the page he offers.

We sit in silence, the only noise between us the turning of a page and the scratching of a pen against paper.

“Hello!” Luna's voice carries through the apartment.

“In here,” Dante yells back.

“You should've told me Luna was coming,” I whisper. “I wouldn't have intruded on your time.”

He looks at me funny. “She texted me like ten minutes ago saying she was bringing baby Fernando over. I thought you'd want to see him too.”

“Oh, hey, Gabriella,” she greets. “Can we sit in the living area?” She lifts the baby higher on her hip. “And I require caffeine administered through an intravenous drip stat.”

Dante stands. “Yeah, yeah.”

Pen down, I pick up my coffee, following Luna into the large living area. Moments like these still catch me off guard.

I'm sitting in my brother's house with my sister and nephew, and I'm the only one who knows that truth.

Dante and I are friends, but Luna continues to keep her distance, seemingly more comfortable in her impartiality. She's never reached out or responded to my attempts at contact, for that matter. When she can't avoid my company, she doesn't feel the need to fill any space between us with empty conversation. I want to know more about her, but she's cagey.

She hands me the baby unexpectedly and placing my mug on the coffee table, I hold him in my arms, staring down at his tiny face. "He's got your nose," I tell her. *Our mother's nose.*

"You think?" She sits down on the couch. "He looks like a baby to me. Some people tell me that he looks like me. Others say he looks like Bruno. Half the time, I think they just say that to have something to say."

I shrug, not having lifted my head through her mini tirade. "I don't know about anyone else. But I see you."

She doesn't respond, and I lift my gaze, hoping I didn't offend her. She's staring at me curiously. "You look like someone. I can't place it, though."

I avert my face, looking at the baby once again. "I have a familiar face. Lots of people say that."

Dante walks into the room, handing his sister a cup of coffee.

"Oh, you're a godsend, brother. You'll make someone a good husband one day."

A stab at me that I refuse to bite at.

Dante and Luna spend the next half an hour talking around me. Dante attempts to bring me into the conversation, but his sister is quick to shut me back out. Not that I mind, I'm happily lost in staring at little Fernando.

It's surreal to consider that my mom would've been a grandmother. I try to imagine her that way, but every time I think about her, the only image that pops into my head is of her in a hospital bed, coughing and asking me to tell Dante and Luna that she loved them until the end.

Guilt, I guess. My happy memories are being thwarted by the unrelenting reminder that I stole theirs.

Luna finishes her coffee and goes in search of more, complaining about her lack of sleep and useless husbands.

Moving beside me, Dante stares down at his nephew. "He's so tiny."

"So tiny," I echo. "Do you want to hold him?"

I move to hand him to Dante, but he shakes his head. "He's too small. I feel like I'll crush him when I hold him. It gives me anxiety."

I laugh. "Don't be ridiculous. Just hold him like I am."

I pass the baby into his rigid arms when Luna moves back into the room. "I thought you were too young to remember this." I don't bother lifting my head because she's not talking to me. I continue cooing at Fernando, smiling down at him in his uncle's arms as he blinks and looks around.

"Remember what?" Dante asks.

"This." She shakes a piece of paper, and my eyes lift without direction. "*The New York Times* crossword," she pushes.

Dante lifts an eyebrow.

“Mom used to fill it full of random words, making them fit like they belonged just to fuck with Dad.”

I swallow heavily, my hand pausing on Fernando’s stomach. I can’t bring myself to look at Dante. The weight of his gaze touches the crown of my head, but it moves away again almost immediately.

He laughs, the sound forced. “What can I say? It must’ve been a subliminal memory.”

Luna walks away without another word, a small smile touching her lips. My eyes fixated firmly on where she just stood, I’m afraid to move.

Dante says nothing, but he doesn’t need to. A million and one silent questions fire at me from his direction, and I ignore each one.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I text Lorenzo, checking his ETA, and he walks into the apartment less than two minutes later. His eyes drill into me, and I stand, hugging him.

“Everything okay?” he speaks against my ear.

“Yeah.” I smile, the gesture one-hundred-percent forced. “I’m just ready for my surprise now.”

He doesn’t believe me, but he lets me hold on to the lie in front of Dante and Luna.

“Nice to see you, Luna. Dante, I’ll call you.” I can’t meet his eyes.

“See you,” he says softly, the questions in his simple farewell making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

I'm quiet as I climb into Lorenzo's car.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Gabbi," he pushes.

"It's getting harder to keep Mom out of my relationship with Dante."

He can't fix that for me, so he doesn't say anything more. Instead, he picks up my hand, kisses my knuckles, and turns the ignition on.

I don't pay attention to the streets as we drive. My thoughts are on Dante and Luna and how I'm losing touch with how to keep Rita separate from me when I'm with them. I thought by knowing them, I'd feel closer to Mom. But I feel more detached than ever. I have to actively remind myself that she doesn't exist in that circle. My guilt manifests every minute I spend time with either of them, and I'm so close to blurting it all out. The only thing stopping me is their pain. I don't know either of them well enough to know how they will react to the bombshell of our connection. I've only just scratched the surface of my friendship with Dante, and I'm scared I'll lose it when he finds out who I am. I'm deceiving him. I've *been* deceiving him. Our friendship is built on horribly fractured lies, and Lorenzo is right. The truth has a way of seeping into those fractures and forcing us to accept it.

The car stops, and I look around. "Why are we in a cemetery?"

He clears his throat, turns off the ignition, and turns to me. "By American law, a person who has been missing for seven or more years can legally be declared dead. Joseph was happy to accept that reality for Rita and threw up a headstone for his

kids the moment seven years ticked over. Obviously, it has laid empty for the past thirteen years.”

He climbs out of the car and moves to my side. Opening my door, he reaches for my hand, which I give him. Locking the car, he entwines our fingers and walks us across the road. I follow his lead, my hand warm in his as we weave through gravestones, freshly laid flowers, and wilted remnants of blooms being eaten by the elements.

I stop when he does.

Running his fingers over the curls framing my face, he tucks them behind my ears, holding my chin in his thumb and forefinger to lean forward and kiss me.

“Her body remained unclaimed in Juneau following her death. They cremated her,” he murmurs. “And I was able to obtain the urn her ashes have been kept in.”

My chin wobbles and my vision blurs.

“This grave is empty.” He steps back, revealing a white marble headstone. “But I had the headstone replaced. Previously, it held only her name and her date of birth. No one knew her date of death, so it was kept off. Dante, Luna, and Joseph don’t come here. Dante because he feels no connection to an empty grave, Luna because she doesn’t believe her mother is dead, and Joseph is an asshole who couldn’t give two shits either way.”

I move closer, running a hand over the curve of the marble. Dropping to my knees, I reach my fingers out, running them along the tombstone.

*Rita.*

*Mother.*

*Protector.*

*Luce della mia vita.*

“*Enzo.*”

“The urn is waiting for you at our home in Palisades. I assumed you would want to decide what to do with her ashes; if you wanted to keep them or if you wanted to scatter them.”

“I can’t do that without Dante and Luna knowing. It’s not fair.”

“Then she’ll stay with us,” he says.

“Lorenzo, when did you do all this?”

He’s quiet for so long that I turn around, looking up at him from my position on the ground.

“When?” I push.

“When you told me you didn’t get to say goodbye, I put in some calls. You were in so much pain. You were carrying around this burden of shame for a reason out of your control. I wanted to fix that for you.”

“Back then?”

“Huh?” he asks.

“That night I told you that, it was before us, it was before \_\_\_”

“It doesn’t matter.” He cuts me off. “I wanted you to know that your mother had a resting place. One close to you. One close to Dante and Luna. Whether they ever know it or not, *she* knows.”

“I don’t know what to say.” My voice is almost lost to the wind, but he hears it.

“Talk to your mom, lioness. I’ll be back here when you’re ready.”

He walks away, and I can’t help myself. I rush to my feet and run toward him. Hearing my approach, he turns *just* as I throw myself into his arms.

“I love you.”

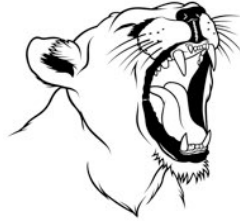
“*Luce della mia vita,*” he whispers into my neck, gripping me tight. “You’re the only peace I’ve ever known.”

I believe him. Wholeheartedly. We were two lonely souls destined to become one.



# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

## DANTE



*H*e'd kill me if he saw me.

It's what I deserve.

My intentions aren't pure. They aren't moral. They're the opposite; scheming and distrustful.

I followed my boss. *The* boss. I trailed him in my car and followed him to a cemetery with his wife. Spying on time that is clearly private for my curiosity. Now I stand, lurking in the shadows between the trees, *watching* them.

At the very least, he'd take my eye as penance for my treachery.

Whatever is happening here in this ode to the dead is emotional. She's crying, and they're hugging, but I'm not close enough to see *why*.

I'm out of my mind. The theories swirling in my skull don't make any fucking sense. But something isn't right, which is why one second I was holding Fernando, and the next, I found myself in my car, following at a safe enough distance so as not to alert Lorenzo of my presence. For sure, I thought he'd notice me. Nothing gets by my cousin. *Nothing*. But he's been distracted and not just by the throes of infatuation with his new wife.

It's not just him. Shit has been getting weirder and weirder with Gabriella.

Luna thought it peculiar enough when she appeared out of nowhere. *Vincent's* sister. A new addition to the family that no one had the guts to ask more about. Shit, I didn't want to ask questions. I believed what they fed me. A long-lost sister all but plucked from the streets.

That's all we know, all we're *allowed* to know.

No one is stupid enough to question *Lorenzo* or Vincent, or Leonardo, for that matter. They fed us a story, and it was our duty as soldiers to accept it as a satisfactory truth.

They sheltered her like all shit. One of them was always there, always watching. She was no freer than a prisoner. They kept her in a shiny cage, and she couldn't breathe without their permission.

Luna called me on our friendship multiple times. My sister told me to dig. She begged me to pry. But it felt wrong. Gabriella is my friend, someone I thought I was certain I had feelings for. I convinced myself that she'd open up when she was ready. But I'm realizing she's not in control of this narrative. Her husband is. My cousin. My *boss*.

I wasn't lying when I told Gabriella that something hit me the moment we met. Something I still can't put my fucking finger on. She felt like a home, the safe place you seek when the noise in your head is too much. I felt I'd known her my whole life and was convinced it was love at first sight. What other explanation could there be? But she'd barely been introduced to the family, and then she was promised to *Leo*. The goddamn fucking *underboss* of Cosa Nostra. Vincent and Lorenzo are close, but fuck, none of it made sense. Leo was unraveling, Vincent was disappearing more often than usual,

and Lorenzo was becoming more unhinged than we'd all seen him in years.

Whispers started. Rumors manifested. Carlo's affair was scandalous enough. A long-lost daughter *outside* of the family. But even that didn't add up. Carlo didn't have a conscience wide enough to spare the life of a whore, which is who we assumed Gabriella's mother was. Why else was she not spoken of? Why were questions about her avoided? Everyone knows there's more to this story. We all value our lives too much to admit it.

If her engagement to Leonardo wasn't obscure enough, she then married Lorenzo. The feared fucking Whip who famously held a gun to his temple to stop his father from forcing him to marry. He repeatedly vowed that he would sooner kill himself than take a bride.

*Except Gabriella.*

I know he loves her, but questions are still fucking there, percolating into something more significant.

She couldn't even tell me her own mother's name. I asked her point fucking blank, and the color drained from her face like I'd siphoned her blood without her knowledge.

She lied about having photos on her phone. She all but swallowed the device when I asked her to see pictures of her life before she arrived in New York.

She stumbles over her age.

She cried over photos of *my* mother. Not wholly because she was sad for me. Something was off. She caressed the worn pictures, sliding her thumb over my mother's face with *familial* knowledge.

And then today, *The New York* fucking *Times*. I wouldn't have thought anything more of it, but she wouldn't look at me. Gabriella whatever-the-fuck-her-real-name-is is a terrible fucking liar. She ducks her eyes on every mistruth she spills, admitting to her deceit without words.

I wait in the trees for over an hour, watching Gabriella sit at a single tombstone, chatting away and catching up like she's on a coffee date with an old friend.

I've refused to step foot in this godforsaken place for thirteen years. It was an absolute farce. My father waited seven years and one day to declare my mother dead. If that wasn't painful enough, he dragged Luna and me to this very hell and told us to say goodbye to an empty fucking grave. He forbade us from speaking of her after that. She was dead. Gone. A distant memory none of us needed to dwell on.

Lorenzo stands less than five feet from Gabriella as she speaks to no one, his eyes never leaving his wife. Fuck. I could walk up behind him and shoot him right now, and he wouldn't stand a chance.

They leave, and I wait another fifteen minutes before breaching the threshold of my hiding place. I move toward where she sat, reading tombstone after tombstone, tasting the finality of death and hating myself for what I'm doing. I'm fucking spying instead of having a conversation.

The white marble headstone she sat by glows in the field, brighter than all the others, and as I reach it, my world turns upside down and inside out.

I think I knew. I didn't want to believe it, but I *knew*.

I had to.

I told my sister she was crazy every day for the past twenty years. I looked into her pleading eyes, so much like our mother's, and I told her to let it go.

I told her our mother was dead.

I spewed the same poison our father had time and time again.

I guess now we're right.

But we weren't then. Not for those twenty years when she *begged* me to help her look.

Luna needed our mom, and I told her she was dead. I told her to give up and move on.

I hate the way my jaw aches with emotion. Guilt and rejection manifested into something so ugly I clench my fists at my sides and scream as loud as I can to wake the dead.

She was living another life, raising another daughter who meant more to her than Luna and I did.

*Rita.*

*Mother.*

*Protector.*

*Luce della mia vita.*

*Luce della mia vita.* That bitch. She used to whisper that to us before we'd go to sleep. Light of my life. I scoff. She became the shadow of our lives. A darkness my sister could never escape.

Pulling my keys from my pocket, I drop to my knees.

I stare at my mother's new tombstone, reading the lies laid out for the rest of the world to see.

I shake my head, rejecting each one.

I lean forward.

“Mother,” I read out, digging my key into the marble next to the word to spell out *liar*.

“Protector.” I have to stop myself from hurtling my fist into the stone. “Cheater,” I correct, scratching the marble with my sloppy writing, ignoring the way my vision falters at the water collecting in my eyes.

I won’t even let myself say the last endearment. Luna and I kept that as a memory that we needed in our darkest moments. Now it’s meaningless. Most lies are, though. We were no light to her. We were flames she snuffed with the unremorseful turn of her back.

“Deserter.” I correct with my key.

I stare at her gravestone and ignore the salt on my lips and the tremor in my jaw. It takes everything within me not to spit on her newfound resting place.

She left *me*.

She left *Luna*.

She abandoned us and never once looked back.

“Fuck you,” I whisper.

Walking away, I reach into my pocket for my cell, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. Luna answers on the second ring. “Meet me at Dad’s. I have news about Mom.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



## GABRIELLA



“*H*ave you been back to the cemetery since Lorenzo took you there?”

I open the front door, holding it wide for Bianca to step inside. “No. Not yet. He’s taking me back tomorrow.”

“It’s so thoughtful. You make generalizations about people without realizing it, don’t you think? Never once would I imagine that Lorenzo Caruso could be that... is it weird for me to say romantic? Is having your mother’s gravestone replaced and ashes retrieved *romantic*?”

I laugh. “I think it’s romantic—in a boss of the underworld kind of way.”

Removing her jacket, Bianca’s face screws up in a silent laugh.

We’ve just returned from a walk, Panda in tow, and Tony, Bianca’s brother, following at a not-far-enough distance.

“Is it weird having your brother as your new bodyguard?” I ask quietly. I don’t know why I feel the need to lower my voice. He doesn’t follow us into the house, choosing to remain outside to light a cigarette.

“Vincent has some stupid notion that anyone else will try to hit on me, and I don’t need that on my conscience after this

past year. Plus, he's still punishing Tony for letting me throw myself into the lion's den with his brother. He says he needs to build Tony's character."

"I'm surprised your brother hasn't just shot you to save himself the humiliation."

We both turn back and look at him on the front lawn. "What?" he asks.

"I guarantee he's thought about it a time or two," Bianca whispers, and we laugh.

Panda starts barking, and I yell out to Tony. "It's cold. I'm closing the door. Are you in or out?"

"Out." He holds up his smoke.

"That'll kill you."

"I haven't been that lucky yet."

I laugh, and he smiles.

He's not so bad. A little broody and put out by life in general, but he seems nice enough. I do have to agree with Vincent, though. His and Bianca's plan to save Caterina from Roberto was definitely positioned to be a suicide task for Bianca and a victory lap for Tony. The guy needs to be taught a lesson or twelve.

"I guess I would find it more uncomfortable having Diego," Bianca comments as I shut the door, cutting her brother off from our conversation.

I stop, my eyes widening at her. "Right? The guy is so quiet. It's like Lorenzo has warned him not to speak to me, or he'll cut out his tongue."

“Ew.” She frowns. “Honestly, Diego has always been quiet, even when we were kids. Where is he, anyway?”

“Running an errand for Lorenzo.” I shrug. “Considering he and Vincent are only going to be gone for an hour, I guess they put all their trust in your disgruntled older brother.”

Panda’s back leg begins kicking out behind him, his bark growing louder and more incessant.

“Panda!” Bianca picks him up, pushing her face into his. “He never does this. What’s wrong, baby?”

“Maybe he can see a squirrel or something.” I remove my beanie and scarf, throwing them on the closest hook. “Coffee?”

“Please,” she answers, putting Panda down.

He legs it toward Lorenzo’s office, and she chases after him. “Imagine if he shits in Lorenzo’s office. Pan—”

Her voice cuts off abruptly, and I pause on the threshold to the kitchen, turning back. “Bianca?”

“Gabriella,” she calls hesitantly. “Go get Tony.”

I step toward the front door, the caution in her tone enough to make the hairs along my arms stand on end.

“Or don’t,” Big Joey says. Stepping from the office, he stops me in my tracks. “Come in here, Gabriella. We’re having a little family reunion. It seems wrong to do it without you.” He holds a gun loosely at his side, the weapon no less imposing unaimed.

“*We?*” I move closer.

I could easily reach the front door and Tony before Joey could raise his gun, but I’m not worried about myself.

Bianca's in my husband's office. Alone and unarmed.

I swallow down my nerves.

"Mm," Joey confirms. "Me. Dante. Luna."

Unease settles itself around my spine, and my legs tremble as I walk. But I keep my head held high, refusing to let him see my nerves. Joey stands at the door, gesturing me inside, waiting until I've crossed through the doorway before following me in.

Dante won't meet my eyes, choosing to stare at his shoes. I don't like it. I don't like that I can't see his intention or reassurance. Luna looks right at me, but like always, I can't read her. She stares without actually *seeing*. Her eyes are empty, and her body is lax in grief.

"Don't mind Bruno." Joey waves his gun in his son-in-law's direction. "He's just here for moral support."

I don't spare Luna's husband a glance.

Taking the seat at Lorenzo's desk, Joey sits back, the picture of ease and triumph.

When I see my husband at this desk, he exudes an energy that engulfs the whole room. He's formidable and powerful, and I want to fall to my knees to obey him without a single command.

Joseph Romano looks like a child playing dress-up, and I would bet the entire inheritance Vincent transferred into my name that his feet don't even reach the ground.

I glance at Bianca, who holds Panda protectively against her, face an impassive mask.

"Bianca has nothing to do with this. Please let her leave."

Joey looks at Bruno, and they both laugh. “Let Necktie’s wife leave. That’s funny.”

“Dad,” Dante interjects.

“Shut your mouth,” his dad spits, his easy laughter lost to his crippling temper.

Luna grabs her brother’s hand. A show of unity between siblings that excludes me.

“Bruno, do me a favor and read that interesting tidbit of information for us again. Gabriella here missed it earlier.”

My eyes finally move to Bruno. He leans casually against my husband’s desk. He’s a creepy man, and I wonder what Luna ever saw in him. I won’t deny that, at an initial glance, you’d be forgiven for believing he was attractive. He’s tall, a little skinny, but well put together. His eyes put me on edge—something in the light-blue pools that doesn’t sit right when you look at them directly.

“Sure, Joey.” He clears his throat for effect, straightening the paper in his hand. My gaze falls to his right hand, his middle finger notably absent. “Gabriella Rita Smith. Born in two thousand and two, December twenty-fifth.”

“What a nice Christmas gift for her mother,” Joey interrupts. “What did you say her name was again?”

“Oh, my bad.” Bruno smirks. “Rita Smith.”

They laugh again.

“Father unknown, though,” Bruno hums, glancing over his shoulder at his father-in-law.

“I have to give it to her. I didn’t think my docile bag of shit ex-wife had it in her.”

My jaw clenches. “Don’t speak about her like that.”

“Excuse me?” Joey leans forward, holding the gun threateningly between us. “What did you just say to me, you little bastard child?”

“I said don’t speak about her like that.” I lift my voice, making sure everyone in the room can hear me.

Joey’s cheeks turn red, and his eyes form into slits on his face.

“She abandoned us.” Luna speaks before her father can. “She left us.” Her voice sounds like she looks; vacant and more than a little disorientated.

I’m cautious about turning my attention away from Joey, but I do so reluctantly, turning my attention to Luna and Dante. The pain radiating from them sears itself into my heart, and I shake my head, rejecting her words and stepping closer.

“What do you call it then, Gabriella?” She blinks, and a touch of life sparks inside her. “She wasn’t here for us, not like she was for you.”

The lump in my throat is too large to swallow past. “She didn’t have a choice. He would’ve killed her.”

“You’re damn fucking right I would’ve,” Joey yells, and my eyes flinch shut. “That whoring piece of shit.”

“Don’t talk about her like that.” My teeth are clenched.

Bianca’s hand touches my back, and I let go of a shaky breath, regretful she’s been pulled into this mess but grateful for her presence all the same.

I try to ignore my mother’s ex-husband, focusing on my siblings instead. “She was forced to marry your father. You know that. Dante, you told me that they had a loveless

marriage,” I implore him to see reason. “She found solace in another man’s bed. Fuck, can you blame her?” I stare at Luna, begging her to see. *She* is my mom, *our* mom. She’s married to a man who buries his dick in every available orifice he finds. “She thought Carlo loved her, and maybe he did a little bit, but not enough, not the way she deserved.”

Luna’s focus is on Bruno, and hope fires in my gut.

“I would never leave my child, no matter how unhappy my marriage was,” she tells the room, her gaze ignored by her husband, who chooses to leer at Bianca.

“Even if that meant you and your unborn child would die?” I beg her to see reason. “If you knew Fernando would be cared for, but an innocent baby in your stomach needed you to flee to survive, what would you do?”

She’s crying now, quiet tears falling down her face that she doesn’t bother to erase. “I looked for her.”

I nod. “I know.” My chin wobbles.

“She could’ve come back for us.”

“If she took you, he wouldn’t have stopped until he found her.”

Having had enough, Joey cuts in. “Don’t try to brainwash my children against me. Their mother abandoned them for you. A bastard. A no one.”

“He would have killed her.” I push harder.

“It’s what she deserved,” Joey bellows loud enough that Panda yelps.

I scowl. “You’re hideous. How can you admit that to your children? How can you stand there and talk about killing their mother so easily?”

I'm surprised he hasn't killed me yet. I can only assume he wanted to taunt me first.

"Our mother died of cancer," I tell my siblings, knowing that if I do die today, they deserve to know the truth. The whole truth. "One of the last things she said to me was that if I ever found myself in the presence of the two of you..." My voice cracks, but I don't clear it. "She asked me to tell you that she loved you until the very end. And that she was sorry."

Dante wipes at his face, standing abruptly. "No," he denies me. "She doesn't get to do that. She doesn't get to ask for forgiveness in death."

Joey's smile grows in delight with his son's denial and rejection.

"She would never ask for forgiveness."

"I wouldn't know." Dante whirls on me, and I flinch at the uncharacteristic show of aggression. "Because I didn't have the fucking chance to know her. She stole that from me. *You* stole that from me. "

"You can hate me," I tell him. "You can hate her. It doesn't change any of this, Dante."

"What is your plan?" Bianca speaks, interrupting the festering anger. "You've broken into Lorenzo's home. You're holding his wife and his consigliere's wife at gunpoint. Whether you kill us is irrelevant. Your death will be long, and it will be painful."

"No one is dying," Dante says, his head shaking with confusion and dismissal. "This wasn't supposed to go this way. It was supposed to be a conversation."

"Between who, Dante?" I ask. "*You* called your dad. You could've spoken to me. I would have told you everything."



He looks as though I've slapped him. "*You* would've told me everything?" He laughs, stalking toward the door and back again. "You had ample opportunity, Gabriella. We were fucking *friends*. Fuck, not even friends. I tried to get you to *marry* me." He's yelling again, the upheaval in his memories and beliefs fucking with his head. "*My sister*," he stresses. "How fucking amusing that must have been for you all?"

"She humiliated you, son," Joey agrees.

"No," I protest, taking a step toward my brother. "I felt awful."

"Oh, pity, even better."

"No," I argue. "I couldn't tell you. I—"

"Why?" he bellows.

"Because of this situation we're in right fucking now, Dante," I yell back. "Your father has me cornered at fucking gunpoint."

"No..." He shakes his head, struggling to reconcile what is unfolding. He rubs his temple with the heel of his hand.

"I'm free to leave, then?" I walk toward the door, and Joey's arm raises, his gun following me.

I stop, turning slowly with my hands raised, looking at my brother. "*This* is why I couldn't tell you. You can hate me for wanting to know you, but I won't regret it, not for a second. My only regret is that I couldn't get Luna to give me the time you did. Because if I die today, which is your father's wish and a high probability, I will search for an eternity to find our mother. I will fight my way into heaven to sit with her and tell her that I knew you. I will tell her that her son is handsome, strong, funny, and kind. I will tell her that the moment I met him, he made me feel as though I belonged. He eased the

uncertainty in my gut, and my mind felt at peace in his presence. He felt like home, just like she always did.”

Pain, anguish, guilt, and affection shine out at me, and I long to reach out and touch him, to wrap my arms around him and make him feel the love I hold for him.

Joey grunts. “Don’t listen to her. She’s talking out of her ass.”

I turn to Luna. “I don’t know you. Not in the way I wish I did. But I’ll tell her that you remind me of her. You are selfless, just as she was. She’ll be happy to know that you’re a mom and a really fucking great one at that. Like her, Luna, you’ve put happiness on hold because you’ve promised yourself to a man who doesn’t deserve you. You are light, and he is an eclipse, and he will suffocate you like your father did our mother. When I find her, though, I won’t tell her that. I’ll tell her that her grandbaby has her nose and that her daughter is more beautiful than she could ever imagine. That she’s fierce and she’s protective and that she was relentless in her love until the very end.”

Luna won’t look at me. Her face averted, she sucks her lips into her mouth to stop herself from crying. I gave up on that long minutes ago. I’m openly sobbing but no less absolute in my words.

“That bitch had a one-way ticket to hell. You will be searching for an eternity if you’re looking in heaven,” Bruno says.

“Well then, I’m sure we’ll see you there,” I retort. “Because if I have to trek through hell to find her, that’s where I’ll be.”

“When you see the bitch”—Joey smirks—“make sure she knows *I* was the one who killed her bastard child.”

Bianca cries out, rushing toward me, but Bruno grabs her arm, holding her back.

“I’m good, babe,” I assure her.

I can’t fucking see. My eyes are so thick with tears I can scarcely make out her silhouette.

“But if you could tell Lorenzo that I love him and that the happiest moment of my life was living out my forever with him, I’d be grateful.”

Joey steps closer to me, and I’m annoyed that everything about my last moments will be consumed by him. I refuse to meet his eyes, choosing to look at Bianca instead. It’s selfish of me to do so, forcing her to meet my eyes as I cross to the other side, but she’s familiar, and she’s family, and she’s my friend.

The barrel of a gun touches my temple, and I straighten my shoulders.

Everything within me screams at me to fight. This is not how my life was supposed to end. But Bruno has a gun aimed at Bianca, and Dante and Luna remain in the room. Stray bullets will only put each of them in harm’s way. I took enough from them in life. I won’t let my refusal to die cost them their lives.

“Dad,” Dante snaps, but the rest of his words fall away because all focus is on me and the barrel pushed against the side of my head. No one notices Tony step up to the window of Lorenzo’s office. He moves slowly, with the precision and stealth of a panther, gun raised and ready to fire. His gaze tracks over the situation, assessing risk and outcomes in the

time it takes me to blink. His eyes touch mine, apology heavy in their depths. He has one shot, and he has to decide on who to kill, on who to *save*. If he kills Joey, Bianca likely dies. If he kills Bruno, there are no ifs or buts about it, I die.

I smile, reassuring him that I understand. It's not a choice.

*"I'm sorry,"* he mouths, and his finger snaps into place, gun firing. The sound of shattering glass explodes at the same time Bianca screams, a spray of blood from Bruno's skull coating her crown.

I duck, and Joey roars. Curling into a ball, I wait for impact, for the piercing heat of his bullet to slice through me. Instead, a sickening bang ricochets through the room, and everything falls silent.

Cautiously lifting my head, Dante reholsters his gun. Joey lies beside me, blood spilling from his temple, no more peaceful, even in death.

*"Bianca!"* her brother screams, climbing through the broken window. He turns her on the spot, tracking her for injuries. She stands by in shock, grabbing his forearms to stop herself from shaking.

*"Dante,"* I whisper.

He leans down, helping me up. *"This was not supposed to happen. I just wanted to know the truth. I never wanted you dead or hurt or fucking threatened. I just wanted answers."*

*"I need to call Vincent,"* Bianca murmurs.

*"He's on his way,"* Luna cuts through the tension calmly. *"He and Lorenzo. I texted them when I heard you arrive."*

*"He called me,"* Tony adds. *"I was just finishing my smoke when he called."* Guilt radiates through his words, and

Bianca falls against him, hugging him tightly.

My hands fly to my ears when another bang echoes through the house, and then Lorenzo is there, striding toward me with panic in his eyes. He grabs my face—one of them holding a gun—searching it for damage.

I grab his hands. “I’m fine.”

He kisses me. A long, hard slam of his lips that he doesn’t break away from until Luna shrieks. Lorenzo spins, pushing me behind his body with his gun lifted in her direction.

Vincent has Dante by the neck, pinning him against the wall, and Luna is yanking on his arm, begging him to stop.

Dante’s legs kick and his face, currently red, begins to turn an awful shade of bluish-gray.

“Vincent.” I push out from behind Lorenzo, who holds me back. “Stop!” I yell.

Bianca’s hand touches her husband’s back. “Baby, he saved us.”

Vincent’s hand tightens. “*After* he put you in harm’s way.”

“No!” I fight against Lorenzo’s hold. “It was Joey. It was all Joey. Stop!”

“Drop him.” Lorenzo speaks quietly, and Vincent’s hand opens automatically, dropping him to the ground.

Dante’s hands fly to his neck, and he gulps in air.

Lorenzo steps close enough to stand over him. He skitters backward. Lorenzo places a foot on his ankle, silently telling him to stop. “I will punish you. Whether you intended to or not, you put my wife in danger. You put Vincent’s wife in danger. Your life will be spared because I know it to be your

bullet that killed your father. But you will be punished. I would do it now.” He speaks so softly that goose bumps rise along my arms. “But I won’t be able to stop myself from killing you, and I fear my wife won’t forgive me that sin.”

Nostrils flared, Dante dips his chin in acquiescence.

“Bianca, are you harmed?”

Vincent has her in a bear hug, his lips at her ear, the soft murmur of his voice low in the room. “Physically unharmed,” he says. “Just in shock. I’m going to take her home.”

Lorenzo nods once. “Tony, leave with them. You wait outside their apartment door. You’re at their fucking beck and call. Do not leave until Vincent gives you verbal instruction to do so.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Luna, are you harmed?”

She shakes her head, crouched by her brother. “No.”

“Dante, take your sister home. You will stay with her until otherwise authorized.”

Luna helps him up, and he straightens his clothes.

“If you think about running, I will know, and your death will not be pleasant.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good. Leave.”

Gun in one hand, Lorenzo retrieves his phone from the other. He hits one button, speaking almost immediately. “Diego, I have two bodies. I need them taken to a secure location in Long Island. There will be a meeting there tonight.”

He hangs up the phone, only to lift it again. “Leonardo, I need a family meeting. Call Diego for the address. Organize it. Early hours.”

He hangs up, throwing his cell phone to his desk.

Eyes closed, he takes a fortifying breath.

“Baby,” I whisper, but he won’t look at me.

Eyes opening, he tracks his gaze over the mayhem of his office. The broken glass, the dead bodies, the blood. He scratches his nose with the barrel of his gun.

“Baby,” I repeat.

“You almost died.”

I shake my head, but he still won’t look at me.

“His blood is on your skin.”

I tap my palm over my face, tiny droplets of red coming off onto my fingers.

He walks toward me, gaze still averted as he grabs my hand.

“Lorenzo.”

“We need to wash it off.”

I glue the front of my body to his arm as he leads me out of the office, but he doesn’t move up the stairs. Instead, he veers off toward the bathroom on the bottom floor.

Gun still tight in his grasp, he reluctantly lets go of my hand when we step into the bathroom. He turns the bath on but leaves the plug out.

I step forward. “The plug.”

“No,” he bites out. “No plug.”

“Okay.” I step back.

He undresses me with one hand.

“Baby, put the gun down.”

He pauses, staring at the weapon.

“It’s just us.” I reach for his hand, taking the gun, but he holds on to it. “You don’t need it. *It’s just us.*”

Finally, his grip loosens, and I place the gun on the vanity. Before I can speak again, he moves back to undressing me, eyes super focused on the gentle removal of my clothing.

“I’m not hurt,” I whisper.

He pauses, nostrils flaring as he inhales deeply.

“Enzo.”

“I know you’re not hurt.”

I grab his hands. He’s shaking.

“I’m afraid *I’ll* hurt you.”

I don’t know what to say, so I choose my silence. He’s struggling. That much is obvious. Very few times in my short time with my husband have I seen him this worked up emotionally.

“Enzo, baby, *amore.*”

He ignores me, divesting me of my sweater and bra.

“Look at me.”

His jaw clenches. I know he heard me, but he turns his focus onto my pants, fiddling with the button of my jeans. It takes him three attempts to unbutton them.

I reach out, cupping his jaw.



He lifts his eyes to mine. “You almost died.” His voice shakes, the words scarcely audible.

I deny him, shaking my head.

“You did. You...”

“If you use this as a reason to run from me, I will hunt—”

“Run from you? *Run* from you? I’m trying to work out a way to fuse us together permanently so you’re never out of my fucking sight. I’m not running away. I’m running to you. I just need to find a way to make sure you never leave me.”

I open my mouth to speak, but he does it before me.

“Unintentionally. I need to find a way to make you never leave me *unintentionally* because you almost fucking died, and I should’ve been there to protect you.”

I’m stunned into silence.

Shunning his jacket, he rolls his sleeves up, baring his forearms. He takes my hand. “Hop in.”

I step over the lid of the bath, a puddle of warm water at my feet. He holds my hand until I sit before kneeling beside me. Cupping his hand, he pours water over my skin. Using the scented body wash, he massages it into my skin, cleaning me. He doesn’t speak as he works, and I want to tell him that my body is clean, that none of Joey’s blood marred the parts of me he’s intent on washing, but I leave him to it, enjoying the touch of his calloused hands.

He retrieves a washcloth, holding it under the faucet to wet it. His jaw tightens when he focuses on my face, the damp cloth shaking as he cleans away Joey’s blood from my forehead, cheekbones, and chin.

He rinses it again, the soft reddish-pink trail of blood swirling down the drain.

“It’s in your hair,” he murmurs. “Turn around and lie back so I can wash it.”

“Enzo.”

His eyes close. “*Please.*”

I spin around in the tub, moving my backside down to lay my back against the cool porcelain.

Warm water coats my hair, and he runs his fingers through it, wetting every strand. Squirting shampoo along the crown of my head, he massages it into my scalp, soaping my hair and scrubbing before letting the running faucet wash it away.

He washes it twice and then conditions it before turning off the tap.

Sitting me up, he stands while holding my hand. Standing up, he waits for me to step over the edge of the tub, feet planted firmly on the mat beside the bath.

And then he’s on me. His lips are against mine, his tongue is pushing into my mouth, and his big hand braces at the nape of my neck, holding me close.

I kiss him back with as much fervor, his desperation leaking into my skin and forging a deep sob from low in my gut to escape into his mouth.

He turns us, lifting me and placing my ass on the very edge of the vanity without breaking our kiss.

“Enzo,” I beg between his kisses. “Please, baby. I need you.”

Hand fumbling with his pants, he frees his cock, still never breaking his lips from mine.

He slams inside me in one quick thrust, and I tip my head back, screaming his name.

Buried inside me, my pussy aches with the intrusion of his unexpected hardness. I lift my hips, silently begging him to move and let me become accustomed to him, but he remains still.

I right my head.

His eyes are black with hate, and I grab his cheeks.

“I missed a spot.” He runs his left thumb against the underside of my ear, the tiniest smidge of blood staining his skin.

I push his hand away, wrapping my legs around his narrow waist to pull him closer. “Baby.”

His right wrist clenches, slamming against the mirror behind me with a powerful blow.

The sound of glass breaking forces my eyes closed, and I cower *into* him.

Pulling his hand back, he shakes it, but I stop him by grabbing his wrist and bringing his broken knuckles to my lips. I kiss the torn skin. Chest heaving, he watches me, the black of his eyes flaring in lust and love.

“It’s my responsibility to keep you safe.”

“I’ve *never* felt safer than when I’m with you. My forever is yours, Lorenzo. How long or short. It’s yours.”

“Forever.” His hand grips the side of my neck, his thumb dragging down over my chin and against the skin of my

windpipe. “Our forever,” he says, more to himself.

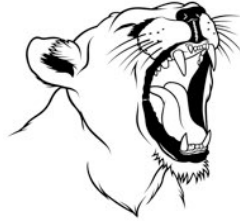
“Ours,” I echo.

He pulls his cock from my body, slamming forward.

“Your forever better be long, lioness.” He thrusts again.  
“Otherwise, I’ll be forced to follow you to where the world steals you away to and make it *ours*.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

## LORENZO



The manufactured lights of the city fade away as Diego drives.

Vincent and I sit in the back seat of Diego's Escalade. Leonardo is already waiting for us at the prearranged location.

I left Gabriella in our bed, fast asleep. Three soldiers have been placed at our home. Two on the perimeter, one inside. I hope to be back before she knows I am gone and notices the three men she has yet to meet, placed in her personal space for protection.

My paranoia is at an all-time high, which is why I sought both Vincent's and Diego's counsel on who I could trust to keep her safe.

My blood is racing through my veins, daring someone to spill it. The only moments of calm I've stolen since Luna texted me notifying me of Joey's presence in my home were when I was balls deep in my wife, my blood on her lips, my thumb at her pulse, and my name on her tongue.

"There will be more bodies tonight," Vincent murmurs.

I don't move my gaze from the fading lights of the city. "I know."

"How many men are you willing to lose?"

I turn my focus to my best friend, ignoring the probing glare of Diego in the rearview mirror. “The entire outfit.”

Vincent watches me blankly before dipping his chin. “Good.”

“We’re here, boss,” Diego murmurs.

The ignition hasn’t even been switched off, and I’m out of the car, striding toward the empty warehouse with murder on my mind. I’m ready to kill. I’m ready to defend my wife’s life and kill every asshole who even *thinks* her death is an option. The family will be irrevocably changed tonight, and I can’t help but feel gleeful at the thought. I want my organization strong, but more than that, I want it united, and until I know Gabriella’s life is safe among the men I’m supposed to trust, I won’t be able to rest.

I step inside the shed, darkness cloaking me as my feet echo on the concrete floor. Vincent’s and Diego’s footsteps ring behind mine, and I take a deep breath, moving toward the single light at the back of the warehouse.

Leonardo leans lazily against the wall, cell in hand, fingers moving across the screen in a way that tells me he’s not texting.

“What are you doing?”

He looks up. “Killing people.”

I roll my eyes and stop beside the bodies of the men killed earlier today. My temper flares and I wish I could find a way to bring them back to life, only to torture them back into the depths of hell once more.

Joey and Bruno lie side by side on the dirtied floor, and I place the pad of my loafer on Joey’s face, pushing it down into the unforgiving ground.

“Any pushback on tonight’s meeting?”

Leonardo slides his phone into his pocket. “None. Everyone should arrive within the next thirty minutes.”

“Good.” I remove my foot from Joey’s face, sighing loudly.

“Leonardo and Diego.” They both stand to full height when I call their names, giving their attention. “I have made an assumption that your loyalty is with Gabriella.”

“My loyalty is to you,” Diego says. “Which includes Gabriella.”

I dip my chin. “Lives will no doubt be lost tonight, and I do not wish for the two of you to be included in that collateral, especially if you don’t support my plight.”

Leonardo moves to speak, but I hold up a hand.

“Gabriella’s life is of the utmost importance to myself and Vincent.”

“Don’t fucking insult me,” my brother gripes. “You may have married her, but before you decided to pull your head out of your ass, G and I had become close friends. Best friends. Don’t forget that, and don’t insult me with some exit strategy you know I’d never take.”

I turn my attention to Diego.

He shrugs. “I don’t have friends, so I’m not going to tell you that G and I are close. I don’t hate her, which works in your favor. But as I said, my loyalty is yours, which means it’s hers.”

“Good.”



Confident I've finished speaking, Diego moves toward the two dead family members, standing at their heads, a semi-automatic held protectively in front of his body.

"Diego, you can relax."

"Prefer to remain vigilant."

I choose not to argue.

My capos arrive first, as I knew they would. Armando, Frederico, and Cosimo all glance down at Bruno, their eyes refusing to give away any shock or surprise they may feel at the loss of a man they'd worked alongside for too many years. The death of a capo should be more significant and shocking, but they keep their feelings hidden, waiting for further information before passing judgment. They barely glance in Joey's direction, standing to the side in their dark suits and glowering composure. They don't speak as they wait for the rest of the family to arrive.

Soldiers begin dripping in one by one, their surprise harder to disguise. They take their position at the feet of the dead, arms crossed over their chest, waiting patiently.

The room is quiet, but the tension is high, and my heart races with an unhealthy desire for bloodshed.

I look around, eyeing each of my men individually, my hands in my pockets, and clear my throat. "As you can see, we lost two men this evening. I wish I could tell you that they died in honor. That they died for a purpose. They did not."

Murmurs start, and I hold up my hand.

"Now, I could stand before you and lie about their demise, but that's not who I am, who I have ever been, or who I will ever be."

While the rest of my men keep their eyes trained on me, Dante chooses to keep his face downturn. I can't determine if his avoidance is caused by the ghoulish color of his father lying at his feet or out of fear or retribution.

“What is going on?”

I breathe purposely through my nostrils before turning my focus to Sal. Motherfucker still hasn't learned his lesson after all these years. His eye patch taunts me, and I consider demanding he remove it and wear his disobedience proudly.

“We have two dead high-ranking members, and you're talking in riddles. Be straight with us.”

My eyes close over in frustration. Vincent takes a step toward the overconfident fuck, but I place a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

“Antonio killed Bruno,” I say, letting my pride take over my voice as I look toward the young Rossi. “Warranted, considering he was holding Bianca Ferrari at gunpoint.”

Armando's face turns red. “What?”

I want to laugh. Armando gives less than two fucks about his eldest daughter. But he acts appropriately aghast, likely more for Vincent's benefit than his own.

“Dante killed his father,” I continue. Finally, Dante lifts his head to meet the judgment of his family. “Again, warranted, considering Big Joey was preparing to shoot my wife.”

I let the noise of their disbelief carry through the warehouse.

“This doesn't make any sense,” Sal gripes. “Why would they do that? They're not stupid. You're not telling us the full story. What was their motive for this treason?”

“Are you saying there is any reason that you would deem acceptable to hold my wife at gunpoint, Greco?” Vincent asks, his hand pulling a coil of wire from his pocket and wrapping it around his open palm in warning.

Sal opens his mouth and shuts it again.

“*Listen*,” Vincent speaks again. “Don’t speak until you are given permission. Am I understood?”

I don’t give Sal the opportunity to agree or complain before turning my attention away from him.

“You were recently made aware that my wife is the daughter of Carlo Ferrari,” I explain unnecessarily. “What you aren’t aware of is her maternal parentage.”

The room falls quiet.

“Decades ago, Rita Romano and Carlo were engaged in an affair. Gabriella was the collateral of that union.”

I could drop a pin in the room right now, and it would echo between us like the fall of an empty shotgun casing. Quiet doesn’t begin to describe the sound.

“Vincent and I have been aware of this truth since Gabriella approached us. The two of us alone made the decision to keep it quiet for her protection.”

Leonardo makes a noise deep in his throat, irritation at being left out of the line of fire.

“That’s not your call to make.”

I turn on Sal. “Speak again before I am finished, and I will fucking *end* you.”

His face turns a deep shade of red, his anger making itself known without the need for words.

“Gabriella will not pay for the sins of her mother and father. I will die before I let that happen.”

Sal makes a sound of approval deep in his throat. That motherfucker will die tonight. I will make it my life’s fucking mission.

“You deceived us,” Cosimo says calmly. “There are procedures, Lorenzo, rules we follow for a reason.”

Diego turns to his old man, disgust in his eyes.

“There are,” I acquiesce. “But there was no precedent for a situation as convoluted as this.”

“You married the girl to protect her,” Cosimo condemns me.

I shake my head. “She was betrothed to Leonardo for protection. I married her because she’s mine.”

“What do you want from us?” Armando speaks, his loud voice echoing against the high ceilings. “Two ranking members are dead, killed for what they knew.”

“No,” Dante cuts him off. “They were killed for deciding they had more power than the collective.”

I should reprimand my cousin for speaking to a capo with such disrespect, but I chose my silence because fuck Armando Rossi and his misguided accusations.

“Okay,” Armando concedes. “If that’s the case, let us vote. No one here has sinned like Joey and Bruno. Let us decide Gabriella’s fate as we decide on all matters of the family.”

I laugh. “Are you threatening my wife, Rossi?”

“It’s no threat, boss. It’s what is right.”

“Make sure you include my life on that vote.” Vincent sounds bored, but the tension in his voice cracks in warning.

“Your life?” Armando questions, his thick brows kissing at the center of his forehead.

“Gabriella was conceived from the affair of her mother and my father. Rita’s sins are also my father’s. Maybe worse, he continued living among us, knowing Rita was alive when we were grieving her death. If you decide to kill my sister, you will also have to kill me.”

That gives my men pause.

“You will also be required to kill me,” I say, unbuttoning my suit jacket and sliding my hands onto my hips. “Gabriella is all that is important to me, and if you threaten her safety, you are threatening *my* life. For your own safety, I suggest you kill me if you plan on touching a hair on her head. Make it count, though,” I add conversationally, “because if you *attempt* to kill me and fail, which you will, death will be a mercy I’ll be reluctant to grant you.”

“Sounds like an ultimatum to me,” Cosimo surmises. “If we don’t accept your wife, we die.”

I smile.

“I know you and Vincent are on board with your plan. Leonardo, do you stand with your brother?”

Leonardo smiles, flossing his front teeth with the blade of his knife. “If you have to ask, Cosimo...”

“I also stand with Lorenzo,” Diego declares, eyeing his father in warning. “But trust me when I tell you that I won’t die for your narrow-mindedness. I don’t give a fuck where you rank. I’ll fucking kill every one of you before you have the

chance to come at me. You'll be asking to die if you threaten Gabriella or Lorenzo."

"Son," Cosimo growls.

"Gabriella is family," I speak again. "She is a victim of the crimes of her mother and father, both of whom are now dead. We can move forward as a unified conglomerate or let my wife's presence unravel everything we've spent all our lives building."

"I knew you weren't built for this," Sal spits. "You're a fucking traitor, dropping to your knees for a pretty piece of pussy. Your father would be turning in his grave."

Diego shoots him before I can remove my weapon.

A sense of relief slides through me as Sal hits the ground, and I consider that I should've done that years ago when I took power.

"Anyone else care to disrespect my wife?"

Armando shifts on his feet, the hesitance in his voice almost embarrassing. "I don't disagree with the demise of Joey and Bruno. Their actions were no doubt punishable by death, but we *should* have been made aware of this entire situation from the get-go."

"Why?" Tony asks, his voice firm as he questions his father. "What bearing does Gabriella have on your life?"

Armando opens his mouth to speak, but Tony cuts him off.

"Don't spout shit about protocol and hierarchy. Lorenzo is heading up an organization that has made you all rich. Our family has only magnified in strength since Lorenzo ascended to power. We are all forced to make decisions day in and day out about things *far* more pressing than the life or death of a

twenty-year-old girl who was born through no fault of her own. If Rita or Carlo were alive to pay for their sins, *maybe* this would be a different conversation, but it still wouldn't warrant Gabriella's death. Rita and Carlo fucked with the unity of the family. Gabriella's existence brings us closer. We'll have more numbers."

"I count three *fewer* men," Cosimo argues.

"Three fewer liabilities, and we all know it," Tony bites back. "Gabriella and Lorenzo will have kids, and our family will grow. Look at the bigger fucking picture. Her arrival has only solidified our power."

"Bruno was about to die for insubordination," I tell them what they already know. "He cost us money and respect. Everyone in this room was done cleaning up his mess. Sal should have died when he shit on my authority at my father's wake."

"And Joey?" Cosimo pushes.

My nostrils flare, and I consider shooting the asshole. "He threatened *my* wife," I roar. "*And* Vincent's wife. Tell me what you would do if someone threatened Anna?"

Cosimo frowns, and I lift an eyebrow in challenge.

"Joey was humiliated that his dick couldn't satisfy his wife. Nothing more, nothing less. Let's not kid ourselves."

"I stand with you, Lorenzo. I always have." Cosimo sighs. "But I can't help but think we've let a woman sever our ranks. I'm concerned."

"Gabriella hasn't severed our ranks," I tell him confidently. "Joey and Bruno severed our ranks by thinking they could go behind not only my back but also the backs of the collective

for their own warped form of justice. Had they come to me and expressed their concerns, they might still be breathing.”

“Unlikely,” Cosimo argues.

“You’re right because, in the end, they wanted my wife dead. You want my wife dead, Cosimo? If so, kneel now so I can have your son shoot you.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t want your wife dead. I want reassurance that our family is solid and not breaking down ranks for pussy.”

“Call my wife pussy again, and I’ll kiss you with this.” Vincent holds up a coil of wire, and Cosimo lifts his hands in silent surrender.

“Let me be very clear.” I interrupt. “There will be no vote. There is no democracy when it comes to my wife. You have the truth. You are free to do with it what you will. The purpose of this meeting was to tell you what your fate will look like should you think to follow in the footsteps of these two cunts.”

“Show-and-tell,” Frederico finally speaks, amusement high in his voice.

Frederico is loyal. He’s unwavering, and I’m not concerned about his allegiance, so when I speak, there is no animosity in my tone. “No, Mancini, they’d still be alive if it were a show-and-tell. They’d be tied to a chair while the rest of you were forced to watch me torture and maim them. Show-and-tell would be listening to them beg for death as I carved my wife’s vengeance into their stomach to remove their intestines and strangle them with them. Am I understood?”

Frederico shrugs. “No arguments here, boss. I stand with you always. If there’s nothing further, though, I have work to do.”

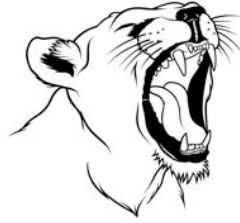


I dip my chin.

“I suggest anyone who plans on double-crossing me stay and die now. I promise to make it quick as a reward for your honesty. Make no mistake, my dedication to my wife isn't thawing my bloodthirst. It's only sent it wild.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

## GABRIELLA



*I* stretch awake, my muscles protesting at the pull in my arms and back.

“Sleep well?”

I open a single eye, bringing my husband into focus.

He’s dressed for work, his dark bespoke suit gliding over his muscular frame in a way that makes my mouth water. He’s leaning against the bedroom door, shoulder to the frame, feet crossed at the ankles. He watches me casually, right hand twirling his wedding band in thought.

“Are you okay?”

He pushes off the doorjamb, fitting his hands into his pockets as he strides toward me.

“You have to go to work?”

He shakes his head. “Just got back.”

I twist, grabbing my phone to look at the time. “You’ve been gone all night?”

“I had people keeping guard.”

“You haven’t told me if you’re okay.”

“Better than, lioness.” Standing at the end of the bed, he grabs the comforter and slowly pulls it away from my body.

My knees clamp together automatically, and he shakes his head, not needing words for me to open them again to expose myself completely.

He inhales deeply. “I threatened a lot of lives tonight in your honor.”

“I don’t want people dying in my name.”

“If they know their place, they won’t.”

“And if they don’t?”

He smiles, the gesture frighteningly wicked. His tongue dances over the sharp lines of his canines, transporting me back to the first time we met. A moment when I had no idea who he was, and he greeted me with the barrel of a gun and a stale piece of bread to taunt me. It seems ridiculous that I didn’t know who he was in that split second. Lorenzo Caruso oozes fucking authority.

“Lioness,” he *tsks*. “Behind closed doors, you’re at my mercy. But to the outside world, you’re as formidable as I am. You may be my greatest liability, but you are also my greatest strength. I will wage war and stand in rivers of blood to keep you safe. I’ll destroy my own world in your honor only to come home and fuck you senseless for the privilege.”

I blink at him in shock.

“You asked me once if I would drop to my knees now and beg for a taste. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” I scratch out.

“I’ve been on my knees from the moment I met you,” he confesses quietly. “Even if I was oblivious to that reality. You

pierced my heart with your claws and watched me drop. But kneeling before you, I'm not begging for a *taste*. I'm demanding everything because the world I hold at my fingertips means nothing without you."

My eyes are wet with tears.

"Gabbi," Lorenzo murmurs. "Put your fingers in your pussy."

I gasp, shocked at the abrupt change.

"I want you to come. I want you to cry. And I want you to do them at the same time, so I know you feel as fucking lost in love as I do."

I slide my hand down my stomach, whimpering as my fingertips brush my clit.

Lorenzo's nostrils flare in approval. "Two fingers."

I obey, my middle and forefingers sliding into my heat without resistance. "*Enzo*."

"We are destined, *luce della mia vita*." His voice has dropped an octave, the scratched restraint edging his words with unbridled lust. "I know this because I want many things in life, but I *need* very few and *love* even less. We were decided by fate, and I know this because I love you, Gabriella Caruso. I most definitely need you, and I want you more than anything else in this life and the next."

A sob heavy enough to quake my body escapes my lips, and he crawls over me.

"Lioness."

"I love you." I pull my hand from my body, cupping his face with both palms and bringing him down. "Taste my tears. They're yours, only ever yours. I'll break for you and only

you.” I kiss him. “Fuck me, *amore*. Fuck me the way you love me.”

“How do I love you?”

“Brutally.” I watch him remove his jacket and shirt. “Unapologetically.” His belt goes next. “*Hard*.” He moves from the bed reluctantly to remove his shoes and pants. “Obsessively.” His naked form crawls back over me, and my thighs open, welcoming him against my body as my legs wrap around his waist. “Violently.”

He slams inside me with a shout.

“Rip my cunt open like you’ve done my heart. *Claim* me.”

His barbaric and unmerciful thrusts are what I need.

“I don’t need to claim you, lioness.”

“No,” I agree, preening at the way his tongue collects my tears and moaning at the bliss on his face as he swallows me. “I’m already yours.”

We both come so quickly that he flips me over, cock still hard, and slams back inside me from behind.

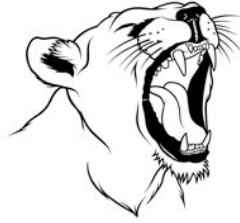
He tells me he loves me with a bruising grip on my hips.

He declares his devotion with the bite of his teeth on my shoulder blades.

His love is ruthless, and he lets me feel how hard he’ll burn for what we share. And before I come, he doesn’t need to tell me to cry because my broken-down declaration of love is echoed by sobs that wrack through my body as a precursor to my orgasm.

# EPILOGUE

## LORENZO



It's her birthday. Or it *was* her birthday a few days ago, but we're celebrating tonight. My wife just turned twenty-three, and all she wanted to do was see Mallory in Denver to share a turkey sub and then party with Bianca, Luna, Codi, and Camryn. Which, of course, meant the cavalry also activated. Ruin is now swarming with mafioso and ranking members for the Rein and Shay conglomerate. Every single one of us is on edge, waiting for blood to spill. Not that we'd let Gabriella see that. It's her birthday, and if my wife wants a celebration surrounded by the most dangerous men in the fucking country without bloodshed, that's what she'll fucking get.

She begged for Caterina to be here too, but Bianchi shut that possibility down faster than my lioness could plead with me, knees planted into the carpet and lips around my cock. The leader of Chicago is mere weeks away from tasting freedom from his years-long stint behind bars, and he isn't risking his soon-to-be-wife out in the open for the world to taste before he could. I can't argue with his logic.

The music pounds loudly through the VIP area of Ruin, and champagne glass in her hand, I watch as my wife sways her hips to the beat thrumming in my ears. She's laughing and smiling, and a sense of pride blooms in my chest. Gabriella's



greatest fear was failing her mother. Rita's dying wish was for her daughter *not* to live out her years as she did, lonely and hiding. Gabriella speaks of it only as Rita's wish, not hers, but I know the truth. The fears of the mother were that of a daughter. Living a life that shut her away from all of this petrified my wife. Family, friends, and *freedom*. But my lioness walked into the fucking lion's den, head held fucking high, and stared death in the eye. She claimed her spot in this world and stamped herself into my heart forever more. Rita warned her away from the underworld, but I hope wherever she has found rest, she can see that her daughter doesn't belong anywhere else.

Luna wraps a hand over Gabriella's shoulder, kissing her cheek and jumping up and down to the music. Sisters, finally connected in a way that Gabriella has longed for. Following the death of her husband and father, something changed in my cousin. A weight of servitude lifted from her shoulders, and for the first time since Rita left, I'm seeing the *real* Luna. She's still a fucking ball breaker, but her eyes shine a little brighter, and she laughs a little easier and far more often.

Their friendship bloomed almost instantaneously following the events in my office. They bonded over their very different but shared grief surrounding their mother. They filled in the gap Rita left in each of their lives.

Dante is a different story. He kept his word and stayed put, waiting for his comeuppance for his involvement in their father's betrayal. In the end, I had to reconcile the thought that he was the one who saved my wife. Dante is a good kid. He made a mistake, and if Gabriella had been hurt, his ending would have been painful. I settled for beating his ass black and blue enough to put him in the hospital for a few days while he was pissing out blood. Gabriella refused to speak to me for an

entire week, and Vincent, not satisfied with his punishment, woke him up in the hospital with the kiss of barbed wire to scare him half to death. I'm surprised he didn't shit himself, but he took his punishment without argument and garnered himself a shit ton of respect through the family.

His relationship with Gabriella isn't what it was, but I'm confident they'll find their way back. He often avoids her, which my wife has taken as his rejection. It's obvious enough it's his guilt building a wall between them, though. Guilt surrounding his mother and Luna, regret at what unfolded with Gabriella, and shame at how he handled it all. That's not forgetting the final nails of acceptance he had to face following the concrete confirmation that his mother was now dead. He's been swirling around in a pit of grief and remorse for years now, and if that's not punishment enough, I don't know what fucking is.

He had replaced Rita's maimed headstone before the girls saw it, which saved him an eye. In all honesty, at this point, I think he'd welcome the physical pain of a lacerated eyeball. But I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

Gabriella swallows her glass of bubbly in one swift gulp as a server moves around the women, topping up their glasses. Codi's doing, no doubt, never-ending champagne.

I took Gabriella shopping today, but she refused to buy anything, again opting to wear one of my dress shirts to celebrate her birthday. I can't blame her; she looks a fucking sight. Just how I want her, freshly fucked and in her man's clothes.

I pull my gaze from her body, uncertain I'll be able to control myself for much longer if I continue to stare. I glance around the cordoned-off area upstairs. The women stand close

to the balcony, dancing and watching the crowd below. Parker and Leonardo stand at opposing sides of the space, sipping their drinks and maintaining eye contact. I'm impressed they've lasted this long without having killed one another. Though the murderous gleam in their eyes tells me it's only a matter of time before they come to blows again.

“Maybe we should just put them in a ring and have them sort it out once and for all. Having to watch them constantly is a fucking chore I don't need.”

I lift my whiskey, smiling at Rocco. “If I trusted Leonardo to fight fair, I'd say yes.”

A maniacal spark shines in Rocco's eye, and I shake my head at the unhinged motherfucker.

It turns out we didn't need Shay's assistance with the Irish. Oisín was more than accepting of the loss of his man. Seems we did him a favor by exterminating the trespasser. I haven't vetoed the thought that he's playing me, though, so we remain vigilant, waiting for the moment he chooses to strike. The business connection we've made has been profitable for both families. Added bonus, I don't fucking hate the guy. Like Vincent and myself, Rocco Shay doesn't care for friends. He prefers the company of those who can serve him and those who do so quietly.

“I've got a call to make.” Rocco stands.

“Your kids are fine,” I tease.

“When you have 'em, let me know how often you call to check in, and then you can have an opinion.” He walks away, retrieving his phone from his pocket, kissing his wife's temple, and jogging down the stairs.

Vincent remains to my left, Diego at the edge of the booth. Vincent's eyes have remained glued to his wife the entire time we've been here. At first, I surmised he was uncomfortable with the company and keeping a watchful eye, but the tension in his frame alludes to something a little more salacious, so I'm doing my best to avoid eye contact.

Diego hasn't lifted his head from his phone, eyes watching the screen with an intensity that has his nostrils flaring.

Bianca sidles over, her hand rubbing circles against the swell of her stomach that seems to grow bigger by the day. Vin will be a father in mere months, and I can't decide if he's petrified or elated by the fact. Likely both.

Having reached our table, Bianca bends down, whispering something against her husband's ear, and he stands abruptly, grabbing her hand and stalking into the dark shadows.

Diego finally lifts his head, smirks at their abrupt exit, and returns his attention to his phone.

I haven't been able to get a proper read on my new capo. I'd trust him with my life, but I know little to nothing about him. That doesn't make an iota of fucking sense, but it's the reality I've found myself in, and he hasn't steered me wrong. *Yet*. He's vigilant and observant, and loyal to a fucking fault. He's dangerous, and the only information he's shared about himself is that he likes to *hunt*. I took it as he meant it, and in no uncertain terms, I told him that if his *hunting* involved any form of non-consent, he'd be a dead man. He only smiled in response, so I left it at that.

I feel Gabriella's eyes on me, and I let my gaze run the length of her body over and over again. Fuck, she's beautiful. Bruises and scratches decorate the insides of her knees, and I smile at how carefree she is showing off how rough I fuck her.

Bite marks on her neck and bruises on her thighs. She's an ode to my fucking lust, and she owns it proudly.

Curling my fingers, I beckon her over, and she comes without delay, dancing over with her arms above her head and my shirt riding up her naked thighs.

"Good evening, Diego," she slurs, sliding into the booth and kissing my cheek.

"Happy Birthday, G. I like the carpet burn your husband gave you as a present."

She scowls at him, lifting her middle finger in his direction, but he misses the salute, face focused back on his phone.

"Having fun?" I ask.

"The best," she says, cuddling into my side and hooking one of her legs over mine.

"Good." I nuzzle into her neck, biting at the dampened skin. "Take off your underwear and sit on my lap."

Her hand immediately reaches for my crotch, and I thrust my hips into her palm, letting her feel how hard she makes me. Watching her dance, her body barely contained in my clothing, has sent me into a fucking frenzy, one I'd sooner die from than want to escape.

"I can't do that," she sighs, squeezing my length.

I pause. "*Gabbi.*"

"It's not possible," she persists, her palm continuing to massage my cock over my pants.

Grabbing the back of her thigh, I slide my hand up, groaning when I reach the naked touch of her pussy. "Fucking

hell. I should shoot every man here just knowing you were dancing around with your cunt free for them to smell.”

“Jesus,” she coughs, and I growl. “*Enzo.*” She laughs. “Baby, you have a *dirty* mouth.”

Gripping her jaw, I pull her mouth toward mine, sliding my tongue into her open lips and tasting her lust. She moans against my tongue.

“Climb on, lioness. Look at the balcony and keep quiet.”

“Keep quiet?” she questions, doing as I ask and moving her body onto my lap, her back to my chest, and her gaze toward the crowd.

Unbuckling my belt, I remove my straining cock from my pants, wrapping an arm around her waist. I lift her body, positioning her where I need her.

She gasps when she feels the pierced crown of my dick at her entrance. “*Fuck.*”

This is a first. Fucking in public. Having her exposed like this isn’t high on my agenda of shit that turns me on, but I can’t stop myself. I need her, and I need her now.

“Edge back down.”

She slides down slowly, and with my hands at her hips, I watch as she swallows every last inch of me.

People surround us, oblivious to the way her greedy cunt chokes on my cock. She rolls her hips, and my eyes flash open, a guttural growl catching in the back of my throat.

Diego glances at us and bites his bottom lip to hide the grin pulling at his eyes. Standing, he moves away from the table without a backward glance.

Sliding inconspicuously back and forth on my dick, Gabbi's hand finds the side of my leg, clamping into my thigh in unrestrained need.

"God, why is this so hot?" she whispers. "Why do I want people to see how fucking hard you wreck me?"

My forehead meets her back. *Why do I* want everyone to see how badly I wreck her? Fuck. Something is fundamentally wrong with my brain. I should want to kill every person in this club for the *possibility* that they could at any time bear witness to my wife's pleasure. And I do. I want to pull out my gun and fire a round into every asshole standing close enough to hear her, but more than that, I want them to see. I want them to look me in the eye and know they'll never get as close to heaven as I am right now.

"How mad would you be if I killed Parker? Reckon he'd haunt me into the grave if I fucked his wife at his funeral?" Leonardo slides into the booth, necking his beer and drowning the contents without a breath.

"Leonardo," I growl.

"Hm?" He looks over at me.

I pull my gun from my jacket and point it at his face. "Fuck off."

He frowns at me just as a small moan escapes my wife's lips, and he grimaces loudly. "Really? For fuck's sake."

He moves away, and Gabbi laughs, the amused sound morphing into a strangled groan when my fingers find her clit and rub.

"Enzo, baby."

“You know the rules, lioness.” I bite her neck, dropping my gun to the table. She wraps her fingers around the handle, over my hand, and squeezes.

“I don’t want to ruin my mascara.”

I continue rubbing soft circles around her clit.

I smile. “Don’t fuck with me, lioness. I’m no idiot. I know you wear that waterproof shit.”

Head to my shoulder, she laughs into the ceiling, whimpering my name as my hand moves from her clit to where we’re joined.

She pushes up on her legs, and I grip her hips, afraid she’s trying to move off me, but she drops back down heavily. My teeth find her shoulder to camouflage the feral snarl of pleasure that catches me off guard.

“I want you to come *deep* inside me.”

“Hm.” I lick her neck.

She repeats the same movement, uncaring if anyone sees, now too lost to her salacious needs. “I want a baby, Enzo. I want you to come so deep inside me that you put *your* baby inside my belly. I want to be a mom, and I want to see you as a daddy.”

“Kiss me,” I demand.

She does so without a beat of hesitation. Lips to mine, I swallow down her command. She wants my fucking baby. She wants her stomach swollen with *my* baby. *Fuck*. I hadn’t even thought about kids until this very moment, and now I can’t think of anything else.

Our teeth clash, and our tongues war. My fingers massage her clit, and she bounces tenuously on my dick. To the crowd



around us, it looks like we're lost in a kiss, taken by lust and a need to taste. In truth, we're opening ourselves up to one another in a way we never have. And when her first tear falls, I catch it on my tongue, exploding inside her at the same time as she detonates around me, my cum *deep* in her body, just like she asked.

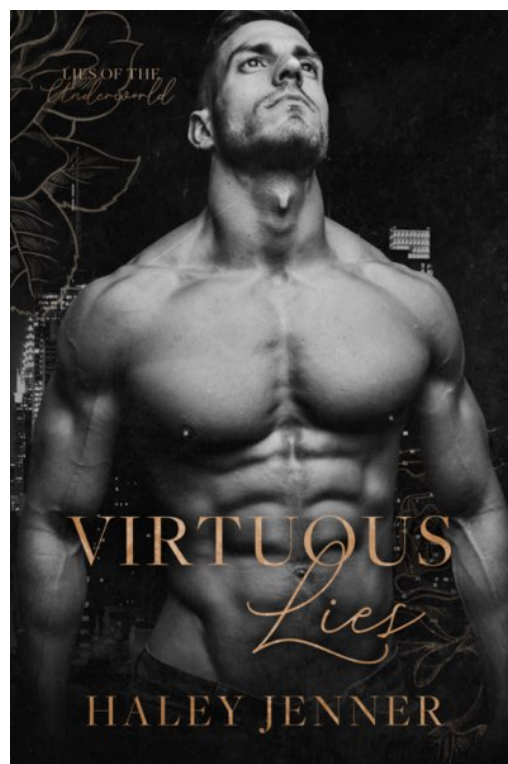


Thank you for reading **FRACTURED SECRETS**

We hope you enjoyed Enzo and Gabbi's love story.

**Haven't read Virtuous Lies yet?**

[Catch up on Vincent and Bianca here.](#)



Want to know more about **Parker and Rocco Shay?**

Jump into our *Chaotic Rein* duet today.

**TANGLED LOVE (#1)**



## FS PLAYLIST



- Love Me More ~ Sam Smith
- Heaven ~ Calum Scott
- I Didn't Know ~ Sofia Carson
- Call Out My Name ~ The Weeknd
- Prisoner ~ Raphael Lake, Aaron Levy, Daniel Ryan Murphy
- Talk ~ Retronaut, Salvatore Ganacci
- Can I Sleep in Your Brain ~ Ezra Furman
- Something to Someone (Piano) ~ Dermot Kennedy
- Hold Me While You Wait ~ Lewis Capaldi
- Maybe ~ Lewis Capaldi
- Silent Love ~ James Bay
- Save Your Love ~ James Bay
- Forget Me ~ Lewis Capaldi
- Empty Space ~ James Arthur
- Good as You Were Bad ~ Jana Kramer
- Grace ~ Lewis Capaldi
- Leaving My Love Behind ~ Lewis Capaldi
- If I Can't Have You ~ Lewis Capaldi
- Hold My Hand - Lady Gaga
- Days Like This ~ Dermot Kennedy
- I Don't Need Anyone Else ~ Liam Fitzgerald
- Bad For Me ~ Meghan Trainor, Teddy Swims

LISTEN HERE

# VIRTUOUS LIES

## BIANCA



Holding my head high, I walk from the apartment. One high-heeled foot in front of the other moves me toward the elevator. The silence is deafening. The plush carpet mutes the sound of my heel. No music plays through the hallway speakers. Even the lift moves silently.

The dress I meticulously chose from my closet—the sexiest one I own—brushes my upper thighs as I step into the elevator. Anxiety rushes over my skin, but I force myself to stop fidgeting. I push my shoulders back in a posture that screams confidence.

My racing heart pounds against my rib cage. I'm convinced I'm only moments away from a heart attack. At eighteen.

My eyes move to the digital read on the elevator, the metal cage moving closer and closer to the ground floor with every second that passes. My body wills to shake, to tremble with dread. I refuse to let it, holding it in. It inverts, my organs rocked by tremors that make me nauseous.

Life changes so fast. You blink, and your world turns inside out. Six weeks ago, I was told I would marry Salvatore Bianchi in a peace deal brokered between our family and the Chicago Outfit. I wasn't surprised, certainly apprehensive, but

I hid my hesitation well—as would have been expected. Salvatore was due to arrive in the coming weeks. I was of age, having just celebrated my eighteenth birthday, which meant by my family standard, I was ready to belong to a man I was yet to meet.

I know the basic facts about my future husband. Thirty years old and boss of the Chicago Outfit. Never formally married. Mama assures me he's handsome, but she'd say anything to make me agreeable. Honestly, I couldn't care less if he had two heads. I just wanted to know whether he'd hurt me. Mama tells me that men can't hurt us if we don't let them infiltrate our hearts. I told her I meant physically. She told me to learn to disassociate. Inspiring, no?

On the same day I was told of my union with Salvatore, Caterina was told of hers with Roberto Ferrari. An act to preserve power *within* the family.

Caterina and I knew this was our path. *This* being the accepting mafioso women who we were, we'd accept our fate. Only, I couldn't acquiesce my sister's.

Caterina Rossi would never belong to the consigliere of Cosa Nostra. Not if I had anything to do with it.

I pretend I can't see myself in the reflection of the elevator doors. My lipstick is smeared, but I don't fix it. My hair has lost the neat silk of the wave I'd styled it into, the strains a messy resemblance of what they were a simple hour before.

The elevator comes to a stop with a delicate jerk, and I take a fortifying breath, relaxing my face into what I imagine an eighteen-year-old woman stupidly in love would look like.

I adjust my dress purposely as I step from the open doors, the resounding click of my heel against marble loud enough to

steel my nerves. The black Town Car parked curbside is impossible to miss, and I'm both elated and petrified at the sight of it.

My brother, Tony, eyes me warily as I exit the building with balletic strides. He stuffs his hands into his black dress pants. The leather of his gun holster is visible, his jacket haphazardly thrown open, and I eye the concealed weapon with trepidation.

*God, if he makes Tony kill me.*

My brother dips his chin inconspicuously enough that if you blinked, you would miss it. I return the indecipherable gesture. The success of a scheme coming together without issue passed through silent conversation between siblings.

Tony was surprisingly agreeable when I came to him with my plan. Our sister is naïve and amorous. Traits that wouldn't fare well in the possession of a monster. Our father had no issue with pushing her into the lion's den. Mother would stand by idly and watch the carnage. I would not, and Tony wasn't convinced he could close his eyes to the slaughter of Caterina's soul either.

Tony steps forward when I'm mere steps away from the car, grabbing my upper arm roughly. "Well done," he whispers, his face a contradiction to his praise, twisted in disapproval to make my father believe he's reprimanding me.

He pushes me forward unexpectedly, and I stumble on my stilettos, falling against the car roughly. I scowl at him, my reaction one-hundred-percent real. "Ow."

I straighten myself, retreating onto the sidewalk and adjusting my hair. Normally, a driver would be waiting, car door held open for me to slide into the sanctuary of my



father's presence. Not today. Today, I'm forced to remain outside, waiting for a punishment I had hoped for.

Bile twists itself in my stomach, and I'm thankful for the heat New York City slathers my skin with. The sweat grasping my upper lip will be mistaken for the humidity in lieu of what's actually causing it—crippling nerves.

He could kill me.

Men have died for less.

The dishonor I've drenched my father with is a scandal my family has not had to overcome for generations.

I was the golden child.

The swan in a gilded cage.

I was my father's most prized possession.

The key to the expansion in the business.

And I've just fucked it all.

There will be blood on my hands. The loss of life resting heavily on my shoulders for eternity. But I can't find it in me to care. My hands might forever be bathed in red, but I would wear it proudly. If only to myself.

The back door of the Town Car opens slowly, and my heart skips a beat. I avoid Tony's eyes, afraid of the panic my older brother will be unable to hide.

Armando Rossi moves torturously slow, and I consider he does it purposely. I refuse to look at the buffed leather of his loafers as he steps out, my eyes kept forward as my father—all six-foot-two of him—unfolds from the car.

He straightens the cuffs of his pressed shirt.

He adjusts his collar.

He spins his wedding band three times.

He does all this before taking a single step. Before even looking at me.

The fury in his breath coats my face in warmth, and it takes everything within me not to grimace in repulsion.

I want to apologize, but I refrain.

I want to swallow, yet I clench my jaw to abstain.

“Look at me.”

My chin longs to wobble, the fear in my throat like acid. But I do as I am told.

The back of his hand scores across my face before I register he’s lifted it. The slap is hard enough the metal of his wedding band rips into my skin in a caress of reproach.

“Let it bleed,” he grates out when I lift my hand.

Fist clenched, I drop it to my side, my eyes watering unintentionally at the feel of blood trickling down my cheek and onto my neck.

“Tony,” he murmurs, refusing to take his eyes from me.

Tony moves toward the glass doors of the building without delay, and I send a prayer to anyone who will listen that he’ll be safe.

“No, Daddy,” I cry. “Please.” I throw myself toward him, grabbing the lapels of his jacket. “Don’t hurt him.”

He pushes me back with a disregard and disgust that pierces my heart in a way I wasn’t expecting.

“Get in the car before I’m forced to kill you.”

I swallow. It was always a possibility, but hearing the words fall from my father's mouth with such ease slices me open and makes my heart stutter in pain.

I scramble toward the car, attempting to be seen as a dutiful daughter when, in fact, I'd just blown his entire world apart.

He waits long enough for me to swipe at my tears before following me into the car. His stare burns a hole into the forefront of my head, where a bullet would lodge itself right between my eyes.

"I love him," I lie, massaging my hands in my lap. My eyes are cast downward, afraid my deception will shine through.

He snorts in disgust. "You know *nothing* of love. What of loyalty, Bianca?"

"I'll do anything you ask of me."

"Anything I ask?" he bellows. "It was implied, Bianca. You are *given*. You are promised to another. To the *boss* of the Outfit." The veins in his head pulsate so fiercely that I fear his head will explode.

"And I will remain dutiful to him."

"He will not want you," he sneers. "You are no longer pure. What will Lorenzo tell him? The disrespect is unforgivable."

My father is a beautiful man. Tall and muscular. A strong jawline and thick lips. Brown eyes the color of cognac. Women throw themselves at him. I'd love to say that he only has eyes for my mother—as beautiful as she is—but I'd be lying. He takes advantage of his beauty.

While he remains respectful of my mother, which is the Cosa Nostra way, he's kept a *goomah* for many years. Even then, he enjoys the women the family has on the payroll when it suits him.

I want to hate him for it. It's not uncommon for made men to cheat on their wives, and it's not frowned upon. The women accept it. My mother tells me my father does it respectfully. How does one *respectfully* commit adultery? He does it discreetly, yes. But respectfully? There is no such thing.

My father is a capo, and while he has never outwardly vocalized his charge, I know he's responsible for the underworld prostitution ring run by the family. It should make me sick, but I've met some of the women under his charge, and they're happy. As happy as you can be sucking cock for money. But their vocation lets them live a life they're comfortable with. They're protected, to a degree, by the family, and I can't begrudge them that.

"Why is it okay for you to have mistresses but not okay for women to live the same?" I stupidly spit. "Were you a virgin when you married Mama?"

"Watch your mouth." His mouth doesn't open as he threatens me. The clench in his teeth so tight, the words are scarcely audible. "You honor and you respect the old ways, Bianca. I am a capo, for fuck's sake. What do I tell Lorenzo? Huh? His key to peace with the Outfit has been blown up because you fucked his *consigliere*? His closest advisor?" he screams, shaking the windows of his Town Car.

I can't swallow. I try, but my throat has tightened. An invisible palm having closed itself around my neck. I didn't think about what Lorenzo would do.

Tony jumps into the passenger seat, startling us both. “Go,” he urges my father’s driver.

Twisting in his seat, Tony looks ready to combust. “Did you fucking kill him?”

“What?” My mouth falls open.

“Did. You. Kill. Him?” he snarls, his face twisted with unease.

“Wh—No. Of course, not.”

Looking at our father, he shakes his head. “Roberto already had a serious fucking headache when I got up there.”

“A headache?” I repeat dumbly.

“A gunshot wound to the *goddamn* head, B.”

“Who else was with you?” My father grabs my wrist, and I cry out from the pain.

“No one. I swear. It was just Berto and me.”



**[Continue Reading Here](#)**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Whose idea was it to release a book right after Christmas and New Year? Oh, right, that would be us. What a CRAZY couple of weeks. As always, we couldn't do this without our village, so let the words gratitude begin.

First and foremost, our readers. Thank you. We say it time and time again, without you, we wouldn't be here. Thank you for taking a chance on us and diving headfirst into the characters that live in our minds. We see you, and we appreciate you.

ellie. We are so grateful we got to squeeze you again in 2022. Thank you for always being with us. We love you.

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To our HJ street team. We love you. Thank you for your endless and unwavering support. You help us live this dream, and it is everything to us.

Group Therapy. We say it every time; you are our home. We love you.

We hope you enjoyed Enzo and Gabbi. If you have a spare second to drop an honest review for their story, it would mean the absolute world to us.

Love you.

Always.

H and J xx

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A blonde. A brunette. A tea lover. A coffee addict. Two people. One pen name. Haley Jenner is made up of friends, H and J. They're pals, besties if you will, maybe even soulmates. Consider them the ultimate in split personality, exactly the same, but completely different.

They reside on the Gold Coast in Australia's sunshine state, Queensland. They lead ultra-busy lives as working mums, but wouldn't want it any other way.

Books are a large part of their lives and they are firm believers that reading is an essential part of living. Escaping with a good story is one of their most favorite things, even to the detriment of sleep.

They love a good laugh, a strong, dominating alpha, but most importantly, know that friendships, the fierce ones, are the key to lifelong sanity and fulfilment.

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