

A MONTAVIO BROTHERHOOD NOVEL



infatuation

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INFATUATION

A SLOW BURN DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

MONTAVIO BROTHERHOOD

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Infatuation

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SYNOPSIS

I'm in love with Timeo Montavio.

If only it were that simple.

He's my best friend. Practically my brother-in-law...

And a cold-blooded killer.

I mourned his loss when he vanished from my life six months ago.

But now he's back, and he's no longer the boy I once knew.

There's a darkness in his eyes that chills me to the bone.

When a blizzard holds us prisoner in Bella Notte -- a members only club harboring secrets within its walls -- I have nowhere to run.

Even when I want to...

CHAPTER ONE

Starla

I OPEN the app for my bank account and blink. Some days, I look at that number and I wonder if there was a glitch. A mistake. Because I, Starla Soul, with no college education or even so much as a sugar daddy to pad my wallet, have managed to accumulate that much cash. After I confirm the numbers, I quickly close the app, because it makes me a little uncomfortable.

It's one thing having a few hundred bucks. It's another having thousands. And then, when it gets into the hundreds of thousands, you start seeing... possibilities.

And no one even has the slightest clue.

I hit my monthly goal, though. I set a goal, those numbers showed up in my account, and now I get my reward.

“Good job, Starla,” I whisper to myself as I swipe up on the UGG app and choose the prettiest pair of chestnut brown fur-lined boots. The stark branches of the trees outside the window, devoid of any leaves, sway in the chilly wind, heralding the arrival of a cold winter. A girl has to have protection, after all.

I can still feel the numb chill of my toes clad in hand-me-down shoes that were so big snow would slosh in over the sides and I would trip on the long walk to school.

Yeah, I won't take those boots for granted.

My phone buzzes, followed by another buzz and another until it feels like I'm about to be attacked by an angry swarm of bees. I look with concern at the screen. Though my phone buzzes all day long, the suddenness of these notifications gets my attention. I frown. I still have those damn interviews.

My heart beats faster, because my inner voice is telling me maybe it would be better to keep my secrets... well, secret. But I have work to do, and if I want to keep those numbers rolling into my bank account, I have to focus and I have to up the ante.

I check my makeup. Re-apply my lip gloss and flick my hair so the waves fall over my shoulders gracefully. I check and double-check that everything's in place, including a solid Wi-Fi connection. I practice smiling just to lift my spirits. No one will actually see me smile.

There was a time when just the thought of the day ahead, out from under the abusive thumb of my parents and the knowledge that I'd see him again, made everything seem brighter. I'd pop out of bed in the morning, grateful to be alive and free and ready to face whatever came.

Or so I thought.

When you survive what I have, you don't take little things for granted anymore.

But that was long ago.

No one's seen or heard from Timeo Montavio in six months.

I swallow the lump in my throat. I can't think of that now.

My brother-in-law Sergio is convinced he's dead but doesn't want to say it. He's hinted as much, though. "This is the world we live in," he said just last week. "The chances that he's made it this far, Starla, this long..."

Sergio's brother Ricco obviously agrees, but I don't care what they say.

They haven't found a body. They don't have any evidence that Timeo's not still out there.

I breathe in deeply and close my eyes. I finger the locket around my neck and whisper a prayer that I know may fall on deaf ears, because I have no idea how or when I'll ever believe in any kind of being like God ever again.

I swallow hard and check the phone again. Almost go time.

I hate having notifications on when I'm working, so I quickly swipe down to "Do Not Disturb."

It's been a hot minute since I've done an interview. I want to be fully present. Center stage. On.

There's a knock on my door. I hold my breath. God, I do not want anyone

here right now. If it's my sister Eden or her husband Sergio coming unannounced...

"Starla?"

Shit.

I shut down my laptop with a frantic look at the time. Only five minutes left.

"Yes?" I yell, my voice too high-pitched.

"It's Jody."

Jody. Right! God, how could I forget? I've been so nervous since booking my interview I'm forgetting everything.

"Phoebe! Mimi! Time for a walk!" I nearly keel over when my pair of golden retrievers comes bounding in from the bedroom. I grab their leashes and open the door for the dog walker. My work will go so much better if my girls aren't begging for treats or tummy rubs. "Thank you! Sorry, I have a work meeting with a client in like thirty seconds, please make it a super long walk today!"

Jody blinks from behind large wire-rimmed glasses and nods. "Got it. You okay?"

"Fine," I lie, as my stomach churns and clenches with nerves. "I'm good."

"Okay!" she says brightly, flashing her braces at me when she grins. Taking the leashes, she gets down and lets my babies slobber all over her and lash their pretty tails. "Let's go, girls!"

I shut and lock the door behind her, trying to quell the rapid beating of my heart.

Maybe I should take those little edibles my friend Quinn's been trying to convince me to try, but the good girl inside of me that only very recently moved out from beneath Eden and Sergio's roof worries. Because they would kill me.

I wonder if the edibles would help calm me down. I don't have to smoke weed. Just a little sour watermelon chewy...

I walk over to my computer, propped in my powder room right outside the bathroom with a bright round ring light behind it. For privacy reasons, on camera, no one knows I'm near the bathroom. Lily Lue pops up on the screen.

"Hi!" I say brightly, waving at the camera. She can only see me from the chin down.

"Hey," she says, grinning at me. "Oh my gosh, I can't believe it's actually you and you're granting me an interview. You have no idea how much this means to me. It was like one of my bucket list things just to meet you, never mind interview you."

I squirm uncomfortably under her praise and adoration. I'm just me, nothing special, and I don't know why people get all weird about meeting me. Some days, I wish I wasn't so popular. Other days, it's the only thing that keeps me going.

Timeo would've been proud of me. He would've cheered me on, given me those damn edibles, then taken me to spend some of that money I have stashed away in my account. Maybe he even would've known what to do with it.

"...and then when I met Myers Moe, I was like, this is the best job ever," she croons, name-dropping like it's a competitive sport.

"It is," I say, but I'm not so sure.

"Was there ever a job you wanted to do but didn't?" Lulu asks, tipping her head to the side in that way that only she can. It's sort of her signature move, so her blonde curls bounce adorably. "Just off the record," she says, waving her hand dismissively. "I'm not recording yet."

I stifle a snort. As if I'm that naïve. Naïveté is a luxury I can't afford anymore.

"I wanted to be a writer once," I say with a smile. "Still do, really."

"Oh my God, that would be amazing. You should write your story." She nods excitedly. "You would kill it, seriously slay, girlfriend."

Maybe. Maybe not. I shrug. “Maybe someday.”

Someday, I’ll write my book.

Someday, I’ll tell Eden and Sergio everything.

Someday, I’ll see Timeo again.

“Now for the interview,” Lulu says. “When you confessed in a recent video that there was a man you once loved, the internet blew up. Everyone knows you lived this sheltered, almost idyllic existence—”

“It was not idyllic,” I say, wondering to myself if I’ve really given that impression. “Not at all.”

“Right, right,” Lulu says, waving at me again. “But the whole Amish thing.”

“I...was not Amish,” I say, shaking my head and trying to stay friendly. Attacking her on camera would be absolutely disastrous for my career.

“But it’s like being Amish.”

I shrug. People say that all the time. “Yeah, and I suppose I sort of focus on that sometimes, don’t I?” I say with a charming smile, even though sadly she doesn’t get to see that. “In many ways, I miss the simplicity of it all. Being disconnected from the constant need to perform and respond.”

“Yes, yes! And then you dropped the bomb and told us you were once in love.” She sighs dramatically. “And the whole world sighed collectively.”

It was hardly the whole world, and I’m not sure what those supposed sighs held, but —

My phone buzzes. It can only be Eden or Sergio, the only two who can still text me during Do Not Disturb.

I’ll get it after the interview.

I swallow and focus back on the camera.

“Can you tell us a bit more about your love? What he was like, how you knew him?”

I bite my lip. I thought I was prepared for this question, but now that the time has come to tell a perfect stranger about Timeo, it feels like defiling something sacred and special.

“He was my brother-in-law’s brother,” I say. Dammit with that stupid past tense again. “Is, I mean.”

“Your brother-in-law’s brother,” she says, as if trying to puzzle out a complicated math equation. “Okay, right, I get that. Yup.”

“We met when I was only a kid,” I say, fully aware of the fact that Sergio would still call me a kid even though I’m twenty-two years old. But I’m not a kid anymore. One could argue that what I suffered stripped me of my childhood long before I hit the legal age of adulthood.

“Ohhh,” she says suggestively. “You were underage?”

I shake my head. “No, no, it was nothing like that. We never—”

“You can tell me,” she says, giving me those wide eyes that christened her Lulu Doe Eyes. “You can trust me.”

Right.

“We were only friends,” I say with a sigh. I can’t tell her that Timeo Montavio is a high-ranking member of one of the most dangerous mobs in New England. I can’t tell her that he went undercover to do a job as repayment for a favor that I’m not even supposed to know about that. I can’t tell her anything. “His job is dangerous. He...he took on a job that was probably the most dangerous one he ever did, and he never came home.”

Lulu wipes what I’m confident is a fake tear from her cheek. “Heartbreaking,” she says in a shaky voice. “Absolutely devastating. Please, if you can,” she says, clutching at her chest. “Tell us one of your fondest memories? And can you tell us his name?”

I shake my head. “No names, please. But yes, of course.”

My phone buzzes again.

And again.

And again.

Is everything okay? Why are they trying to get in touch with me?

I either have to end this interview sooner than later, or somehow discreetly check my watch for messages.

“He taught me how to drive,” I say with a happy sigh. God, those are fond memories. Sergio almost lost his mind when he found out that Timeo had been taking me to the quiet graveyard near our home, but when I logically pointed out it saved him the trouble and I was ready to get my license, he decided to let Timeo live after all. “God, that was so fun. We’d sneak out at the crack of dawn, since I was still living with my —”

Oh, God. I almost slipped. I almost told her more of my back story that I do not share.

“My family,” I say. “We’d drive around this graveyard that was nearly abandoned. It was one of the older ones you only see in New England.”

Fuck. Shit. I’d ask her to edit that out, but we’re live.

New England’s a big place, I reason. A really big place. I could be anywhere.

Another series of texts comes in. I can’t put this off any longer.

I pretend to drop something on the floor and lean over to get it, before discreetly checking my watch.

I have twelve texts.

My belly swoops.

Eden:

Starla, please answer. Please. Are you home?

Starla! I’m trying to get in touch with you. Please, please respond. I’ve been calling and texting and haven’t heard from you!

“Sorry, dropped something,” I mutter as I quickly click on Sergio’s messages next. He’s a lot less diplomatic than Eden.

Sergio:

Where the fuck are you?

There's a loud banging at my door.

I jump to my feet.

"I'm so sorry, I'm going to have to continue this interview another day," I say apologetically as I scroll through ten messages from Sergio demanding I call immediately.

"Of course, of course," Lulu says. "Thank you for your time and I am so sorry to hear that you—"

I shut the connection down. Looks like I had "technical difficulties." Lulu will roll with it.

Bangs sound at the door again, loud and insistent. My poor pups aren't even home yet. With a racing heart, I walk to the door. I have a bodyguard, per Sergio's insistence, but there are voices outside the door.

I peek through the peephole and gasp.



CHAPTER TWO

Timeo

I BLINK in the glaring light of the overhead spotlights. After God knows how long of being in the dark, or a dimly lit space, I'm nearly blinded by an actual overhead light.

Where the fuck am I?

I've been asking that goddamn question for months — years? Who fucking knows how long. A question I've never been able to get the answer to. I don't even remember how I got here.

But I've never forgotten who I am. That's one thing they can never take from me.

I'm sitting in a metal chair secured to the floor in a typical holding cell — brick walls, concrete floor, no windows, hands cuffed. Six assholes sitting in folding chairs with their arms crossed over their chests, staring at me.

I'll take a fucking beating to those drugs they give me that fuck my mind up.

I'm here ostensibly as a favor for my brother, but that plan quickly got derailed, as plans do.

I went undercover as a favor to my older brother Ricco. I'd agreed to go undercover, report back to the cartel as repayment for a favor.

What these motherfuckers don't know is that I'm getting exactly what I need.

"You guys look worse in the fucking light than I imagined," I mutter. My voice sounds husky and rough from disuse. "I've never been a 'fuck with the lights off' kinda guy, but I sure as fuck hope you dicks keep the damn lights off."

If not for my voice in my own ears, I'd wonder if I said anything at all, because there's no response. They don't even blink, like the fucking well-trained robots they are.

The door swings open. They leap to their feet as one, like trained military.

Maybe they are trained military. Would make sense.

Fuck.

Logic tells me the only person they'd stand for is their boss, and I haven't seen him up to this point. He walks in the room, his heels clicking on the floor, and I breathe a little easier. The guy's fucking ancient, walking with a hobble and a cane, even if he's dressed as if he's about to go to a Broadway show. Impeccably clean, three-piece suit, shined leather shoes. I'm wearing threadbare, soiled clothes, my feet are bare, and I've got a beard that would challenge Rip Van Winkle. He probably likes it that way. Imbalance of power or whatever the fuck.

Still, a man his age can't fight the way these other motherfuckers can, and that's a plus. Doesn't mean he can't pull a trigger on a gun, though.

"Mr. Montavio," he says in a gravelly voice, sitting beside me. His face is creased with wrinkles, and I detect the faintest trace of an accent. Probably been in America for decades. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Ah, so he's one of those guys. Professional, reserved, takes his job seriously and expects his men to do the same. The type that would slit your throat with casual efficiency, step back so the blood wouldn't splash on his shoes, then wash his hands and take his wife out to dinner. Contrary to how they appear, they tend to be the most ruthless sort, so driven by their unwavering need to get what they want, there's not one fucking line they won't cross.

Shit's about to go down.

I take a quick inventory of my body. Pain in my back where the assholes beat me with a fucking nightstick. That pain in my right arm, which I'm convinced is from a break that was never set. Constant pain in my head from chronic dehydration and whatever fucking meds they give me.

Eh. Nothing I can't fight through. All I need is one chance, one opportunity...

"Looking good, boss," I say brightly, not because I'm in any kinda good mood, but because this asshole needs to know he hasn't bested me.

Sitting beside me, he steeples his fingers together. "There's been an

interesting new development.”

My pulse spikes and my mind races. Sergio’s been killed, Adriano’s in jail, Ricco’s found me... thank fuck nothing they can use against me involves Starla. They have no idea who she is.

“Yeah?” I pretend to yawn. “What’s that?”

“We’re considering allowing you to go home.”

I hear the words but don’t process the sentiment behind them.

Home.

There’s no fucking way these men are allowing me to go home without conditions and the threat of very, very serious consequences. I pretend I’m not hoping, that I’m not holding my breath for the rest of his story.

“Yeah? Why’s that?” I try to keep my voice nonchalant but fail miserably, at least to my own ears.

I watch as he takes out his phone and flicks through it. Responding to messages? Checking his email? Maybe the fact that I’m a prisoner sitting next to him holding my breath doesn’t even ping his radar.

“Oh, there will be conditions, of course.”

Of fucking course. There always are. I wait for him to continue.

“Aren’t you curious, Mr. Montavio?”

I lick my lips and shrug. “Sure.”

It’s fucking killing me.

He jerks his head at his crew, who silently get to their feet and circle me.

What the fuck? They’re afraid I’m gonna try to kick his ass or something?

“You’ll go back home, Mr. Montavio. You’ll pretend you remember nothing of where you were or who you saw. We’ll get a notice to you about a secure location where you’ll find a burner phone you’ll use to communicate with us ___”

As he starts to lay out the terms of our agreement, I'm already laughing.

“Right, yeah, you guys are smart enough to know that asking me to spy on my family and report back to you means that I would rather die first. Kill me now. I'll bare my fucking neck. If you think that for one second—”

I stop talking when he shows me his phone screen.

Rage, like red hot lava, spews into my veins. “You motherfucking son of a whore,” I seethe. One of the men slaps my face for daring to disrespect his boss, but I don't even feel it. As soon as he gets near me, I kick my foot out and nail him in the balls. Screaming, he falls to the ground and grabs his crotch.

“You fucking goddamn assholes. Let me out of here! You fucking undo me! If you motherfucking assholes don't, you—”

Another one comes at me, but I use both feet, rear back, and kick him so hard in the chest he falls into one of his cronies. Starve a man and put him in solitary confinement, all he fucking has to do is turn what's left of his body into muscle.

“If you get anywhere fucking near her—”

A third and fourth come at me. I manage to incapacitate one with a kick that shatters a kneecap and even get on top of the fourth. I pin him beneath my knees and smack him with my head, knocking him out cold. “Fucking pussies. Uncuff me and I'll take fucking all of you.”

Something pricks my neck.

I growl like a rabid animal and bite the hand that holds the syringe. I bite hard until I'm deafened from the screams, and the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth.

“You will do what I tell you,” the boss says placidly, as the room swirls around me. “And now you know exactly what's at stake.”



CHAPTER THREE

Starla

“YOU DON’T HAVE to escort me,” I say, yanking my arm out of my bodyguard’s grip. Giorgio is nice enough but old-fashioned, and the only reason I can think of why he’d hold me is because he’s afraid I’m going to take off. “I’m not going to run.”

Giorgio’s taller than I am by a head or so, built like a cinder block, with steely-gray, short-cut hair and a nose that’s seen better days. “I don’t think you’re going to run,” he says in a steady voice. “I want to keep you safe.”

Keep me safe.

Why?

I look back at my phone and don’t see any more messages from Sergio or Eden.

The chill winter air nips with the promise of snow, but none of these guys wears a coat. Figures. I, on the other hand, would pay big bucks for those sheepskin-lined boots I just ordered.

“In the car, Starla.” Giorgio gives me a look that tells me if I don’t get in, he’s going to stuff me in and lock the door.

The half a dozen men sent to escort me wherever we’re going surround the vehicle. The old-fashioned streetlights of Boston provide meager lighting, but enough that I can see a flash of metal in their hands. What the hell? We’re in downtown Boston; my apartment is nestled smack dab off Beacon Street, so we are far from alone. Pedestrians and college students stream past us, and I can already see some of them pointing to us and whispering. Don’t these guys even care that everyone can see us?

I’m suddenly very afraid. My pulse races and my stomach plummets. “What happened?” I whisper. When Giorgio looks ahead stoically and doesn’t respond, I reach for one of the other guys and grab his arm. “What happened?”

Finally, one of them takes pity on me. “Mr. Montavio will explain. Please get

in the car. We don't want to force you, but we will if we have to."

My throat gets strangely tight. My skin prickles. I swallow so I can talk. "Which Mr. Montavio?"

They share a look that passes briefly, but I catch it. "Sergio."

Sergio. Of course, it's Sergio. He's the Don of the Montavio family.

I swipe impatiently at the tears on my cheeks as we drive. Why would I even get my hopes up? "Can you at least tell me where we're going?"

Again with the shared looks.

"Okay, alright, that's enough of that," I snap. "This whole cloak-and-dagger game was old when you showed up. What. Is. Going. On?"

Giorgio finally blows out a breath. "We're taking you to Bella Notte."

I stare.

I blink.

Um, what?

I wasn't even supposed to know about Bella Notte, the exclusive, high-end sex club owned by my brother-in-law. They managed to keep it a secret from me for years. Eventually, though, I found out. I heard things through the grapevine. I wanted to know where Sergio went at night, and exactly where my sister Eden was a head chef in Boston.

But we didn't really talk about it. I certainly wasn't invited there. I have to practically use fairy dust and a magic wand just to get in, and always with the understanding that I only visit the communal rooms at the very entrance, which might as well be a hotel with a nice restaurant. I definitely don't get to the good stuff.

If I'm being taken there, it's for a damn good reason and I don't know what could've precipitated this strange turn of events.

Do I want to know?

Wait.

My heartbeat spikes.

I clear my throat. “Are Eden and Sergio okay?”

Giorgio’s answer is prompt. “Yes.”

I dial Eden.

It goes straight to voicemail.

I call Sergio next.

Same.

Thankfully, the ride is short and the traffic uncharacteristically light tonight. We get there quickly.

“We’re heading in, Starla,” Giorgio says, drawing out his gun. “You’re staying right by my side. I want you to listen carefully.”

I stare at him. I feel like we’re on the verge of a war, like I’m being brought to some kind of bunker before something terrible and disastrous happens.

I lick my lips. “Yes?”

“If I tell you to drop to the ground, you drop to the ground. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to get back in the car—”

“I get back in the car, yeah, I get it,” I say, hoping the snarky tone hides my shaking hands and pounding heart. I wipe my sweaty hands on my legs. “You, uh, got an extra gun or something? Didn’t have time to grab mine.”

Giorgio smirks, as if to say this isn’t a joking matter.

I’m not joking.

“You think I want you to shoot my head off?”

Of all the— “I happen to be very skilled at handling a weapon.”

Rolling his eyes, he shakes his head.

“You know how Mr. Montavio feels about that.”

“I do, but these seem like.... unusual circumstances. And maybe what Mr.

Montavio doesn't know won't hurt him."

But I'm not sure they heard me. They're talking on these little device things in their ears and gesturing at each other. I catch what sounds like Sergio's voice but can't hear a word anyone's actually saying.

Bella Notte's beautiful tonight. Discreetly tucked between brownstones in Boston, there's nothing but an elegant sign in gilded letters that claims what this is.

Bella Notte

An Exclusive Night Club

Members Only

Ha. Guess that makes me a member?

As soon as we exit the car, the elusive door to Bella Notte swings open, revealing another swarm of scary men in suits. I lose track of what's happening as I'm escorted inside, flanked on all sides by men that would take a bullet for me only because that's their job.

It's a strange, unsteady feeling, and I'm not sure I like it.

"Come this way, please," Giorgio says, leading me into a hallway. To the right are telltale noises of a kitchen in full swing. Ahead of me, there's a door that leads into a bar area, but Giorgio opens a different door before we get there. I try to peek over his shoulder, but he takes me by the hand and pulls me through the door.

Our steps are silent on the descending flight of stairs, the atmosphere becoming thinner and cooler as we head down. I have no idea where we are. It smells faintly musty, but everything at Bella Notte is clean and well cared for, so I'm not surprised when my feet actually hit carpet at the bottom of the stairs.

My eyes widen. I stand still, taking in every detail.

Whoa.

"Where are we?" I whisper.

Giorgio smiles at me. “Look around, Starla. Where do you think we are? There’s an old Italian saying: If you want to hide the treasure, put it in plain sight.”

I stare all around me. A large safe is embedded in one wall, with a complicated series of locks. A fridge, some stacked cases of bottled water. Extensive first aid kit. Sleeping bags, pillows, and blankets. An arsenal of weapons—guns, knives, pepper spray. Chargers and batteries, piles of neatly folded clothing.

“The doors are reinforced, and every inch here is protected by security.”

“I see,” I whisper, even though I’m not sure I do.

It’s a safe house, planted in the basement of an exclusive, members-only club, outfitted to house someone — or several someones — for a long period of time.

Voices come from under a door in front of us. I pause, frowning. There’s something vaguely familiar about one of those voices. I feel as if I’m hearing the voice of someone I knew in a past life.

Giorgio turns and looks at me, his face uncharacteristically pained. “I’m sorry,” he says. “This isn’t going to be easy.”

I stare at him and refrain from kicking him in the nuts, even though I very, very much want to.

“Open the fucking door.”



CHAPTER FOUR

Starla

THE ROOM IS DIMLY-LIT and smells like a hospital room — antiseptic, cleanser, and a faint hint of rubbing alcohol. My stomach tightens. I take a deep breath.

Sergio's on his feet, blocking my view of a bed — no, it's a stretcher? Eden sees me and her mouth parts as she rushes to me, her long blonde hair fluttering behind her.

"You weren't supposed to bring her here," she snaps at Giorgio. I blink in surprise, staying still as I try to observe everything. Something's off. Peaceful, implacable Eden never snaps at people.

"Where was I supposed to go, then?" he snaps back, and Sergio hisses out a growl.

"Watch your fucking tone of voice with my wife. That's your one and only warning." If looks could kill, Giorgio would be a dead man.

Giorgio immediately realizes his error and blanches. "I'm sorry, boss. I took her to where I thought you instructed."

Eden and Sergio share a look before Sergio shoots a brief but troubled glance behind him.

My belly swoops, making me suddenly nauseous and lightheaded.

There's someone on that stretcher. Someone they don't want me to see.

A chill skates down my spine while I instantly take it all in.

"Eden." I barely recognize my own voice. I swallow and moisten my lips. "Please."

Eden steps aside.

I...

My hand covers my mouth, holding back a gasp of shock.

Timeo.

Clad in dirty, ripped clothing that barely covers his skin. An unkempt beard longer than I've ever seen him wear. He's bloodied and bruised, but... breathing.

"I knew he was alive," I say on a choked whisper. I want to run to him. Touch him. Feel his pulse with my own bare hands.

But I stand frozen in place.

Tears well up in my eyes as I take in his condition — the scratches and angry red marks on his cheeks and arms, welts and bruises, caked blood on his neck and likely elsewhere.

"Timeo," I whisper.

He opens his eyes and stares at me, but it's not the look I imagined. It's the look of someone who's plummeted to the depths of hell and doesn't know his way back. Harsh. Cold. Merciless.

"Oh my God," I say, my voice breaking. "Timeo?"

He lifts a hand caked in blood and gives me a weak wave.

I choke on a sob and run toward him.

Sergio steps in front of me, and before I get three paces, his strong arms wrap around me.

"Sergio! Let me down! Let me see him!"

I push and fight him, but he easily overpowers me and restrains my arms.

"No." Sergio wrestles me with ease, settling me back onto the floor and pins both of my arms to my sides. He stares at me, stern and unyielding.

"We have to check him, Starla. We have no idea if he's been compromised or tapped. You can't be near him until we know he's safe."

But that's one thing no one understands, especially Sergio.

Timeo was always my safe place.

Always.

“Let them, Starla,” Eden pleads with me. She reaches for me, but I turn away. Timeo closes his eyes with a weary sigh.

The rush of emotion nearly consumes me.

Relief — he’s alive!

Anger — he’s barely alive.

Someone hurt him and hurt him badly. I want to hug him. I want to feel him hug me back, but we’ve never been anything but brotherly and sisterly in front of Eden and Sergio.

We’ve barely crossed the line of friendship, though I always harbored hope my infatuation with him wasn’t one-sided.

I want to touch him with my own two hands, to convince myself of his realness, his aliveness. I want to feel the warmth of his hands and steady pulse. I want to look into his eyes and know the man I love is still here. I want to know he’s alright.

But I don’t. I stand, watching.

“You can leave until we’re done if you’d like, Starla,” Sergio says quietly. He stands to the side, and I know for a fact he isn’t leaving.

“What are you going to do?”

“He’ll be isolated. We have to debrief him. You shouldn’t have been brought here. He’ll be examined by a medical team, too. After isolation, you may talk.”

“Are you kidding me right now?”

Sergio doesn’t bother to respond. Not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

A team of doctors stands by the door, waiting for Sergio’s instruction. I want to shove them out of the way.

I want to be the one that cleans those wounds. I want to be the one that makes

him comfortable, that gives him meds and food and whatever else he needs.

My hands reach out to him involuntarily; I want to hold him to me and never let him go. I want to stay here with him. I want to make it all better.

“Who’s that?”

I stare at Timeo. His voice is scratchy and husky. My heart begins to beat faster as Sergio and Eden look at each other.

“Who, brother?” Sergio asks him.

He jerks his head at... me.

Me.

Who’s that?

My jaw drops open. “It’s me,” I whisper. “Timeo, it’s Starla.”

He stares at me, unblinking, his eyes still cold and unfocused.

The man in front of me is a stranger.

“Starla?”



CHAPTER FIVE

Timeo

“I’LL SHOW him who Starla is!” Sergio almost misses her this time but at the last second, manages to stop her from storming at me.

I close my eyes against the sudden rush of emotion.

I’d planned to let her go, to let her think I didn’t even remember her, but the second I saw that light in her eyes my plan went to shit.

That’s my girl. There she is. Fierce and determined. The most resilient woman I’ve ever met.

I first met a girl on the cusp of womanhood. And when I look at her now, I can only see the shadow of that girl, the traces of what made her who she is today...a woman, so beautiful she takes my breath away.

I pretend to be tired, but it’s only because I can’t look at her right now. I want to reach for her. I want to hold her. I want to whisk her away and hide her where no one will ever, ever threaten her again. Where she’s safe and protected and all mine.

“Oh, yeah,” she says vehemently in a mocking tone. “I vaguely remember a Timeo. Snarky asshole? Never took anything seriously. Would’ve been God’s gift to women, or so he thought, if not for that damned crooked nose —”

I clench my teeth. Fuck the goddamn cartel and their friends.

Fuck all of them.

“Yeah, it’s coming back to me.”

“Good, it better be fucking coming back to you!” She glares at me, her arms crossed over her chest.

“Starla, language,” Eden says, obviously not happy with her sister’s mouth. “Will you please calm down?”

“I’ll calm down when you guys give me a basin of warm water and soap, a

washcloth and towel, and an arsenal of medications. We're standing around here wasting time, pretending he doesn't know who I am, which is ridiculous."

"Starla—"

"I don't care what kind of medication they have him on or if he sustained head trauma from a blunt object, he knows who I am, and if he doesn't now, he sure as hell will soon. He's in obvious need of medical attention but noooo, we have to make sure he isn't 'compromised.'" Eden flinches at her air quotes as if she's physically slapped Sergio. "Okay, whatever, get your team in here, make sure they haven't embedded a stupid chip in his ass or whatever." Her voice cracks. "That's my best friend on that table come back from the dead and wild horses won't hold me back."

I turn away and draw in a deep breath. Eyes water for a lot of reasons, right?



Six years earlier

WE ENTERED a warehouse constructed of concrete. A holding house, of sorts, that smelled faintly of soured milk and body odor.

We had intel that said Starla was here.

Her captors, the elders of the fellowship who were under the protection and pay of the cartel, moved her here as an intimidation tactic. It was really Sergio's wife Eden they were after. We came as one, the men of the Montavio Brotherhood and our cousins the Rossis, and now we'd located who we were after.

I'd never met Starla. All I knew was that she was Eden's younger sister. That she'd been held in captivity and brainwashed, like Eden. And I knew she was being held inside.

A door opened. The light was dim, but I'd know my older brother's stature and profile anywhere. Sergio walked behind Eden, their voices in whispers, and he was carrying someone...

When I drew closer, I cursed under my breath, and held back my need to rage and curse those motherfuckers who hurt her. I didn't want to wake her. The girl Sergio carried was unconscious and waking her up to relive whatever the fuck she went through would be a crime.

Long, long hair, tangled but a soft and lovely blonde, hid a thin but impish face. I wanted to brush that hair off her face. Give her clean, soft clothing. Fling open these goddamn doors and bring in sunshine to kiss her too-pale face. Feed her good food and clean water.

Take her to a place where no one would ever hurt her again.

Find the people that hurt her and exact the type of revenge worthy of a crime like this.

Sergio held Starla as if she were fine china and one false move would break her. Eden laid her hand atop Starla's, her eyes watering.

"She's unconscious, but she's alive."

My cousin Mario took one look at Starla and cursed under his breath. "Who the fuck would do something like this? Would take a fucking monster." He shook his head.

"Definitely a monster," Sergio agreed. "Maybe several."

I gave Sergio and Eden a chilling smile, masking the raging fury that thrummed through my blood and blurred my vision. I clenched a fist to quell my temper.

"How convenient," I said in a voice that promised violence. "I love hunting monsters."



SOMETHING ABOUT MY CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCE, laying on a goddamn stretcher in the middle of who-knows-where while Starla paces outside this room waiting to get in, reminds me of the first day I met her.

She was only a kid, but the fact that she was only a kid fueled a rage in me

I'd never felt before.

I hardly had an idyllic childhood. Hell, if I gave enough of a shit to see a shrink, they'd probably have fuck all to say about what I went through and what I battle now. I'm not above admitting I was wounded and scarred and whatever the fuck. But the loveless home I was raised in? The expectations of perfection and constant comparisons to my older brothers who were smarter, faster, better at anything I could possibly do just by virtue of being older than me... fucking paled in comparison to the absolute horror Starla experienced.

I want to see her, alone.

I want them to leave us, so the two of us can reconnect and catch up and go back to the way things were.

But even that's too much to want because I know the consequences. I know what's on the line.

Even Sergio doesn't let Starla in the room when they do a full body search on me. I let them. I'd do the same if the situation were reversed.

Fuck, I don't even know if I've been compromised myself. All I know is what I was told to do and what the consequences will be if I don't.

"Let me in," she says on the other side of the door. The medic Sergio called in smiles wanly at me.

"She doesn't give up, does she?"

"No," I say with a laugh that hurts my rib cage. Broken ribs? "She'll battle you to the death and then her ghost will come back and haunt you for eternity."

Sergio snorts in the corner. "Got that right."

Sergio's had the privilege of being Starla's pseudo-dad for the past six years, when he and Eden got custody of Starla before she reached adulthood. He ought to know.

Pride swells in my chest. I've never met a single other human who could fight the way Starla does.

Don't think of that.

Don't think of her.

You don't know her. She doesn't know you.

I wait as patiently as I can while the doctor pokes and prods. After someone in our brotherhood's been taken as prisoner, reentry is almost a militaristic procedure. I'll go through an initial screening to make sure I get the proper medical care, followed by a security screening and questioning.

I'll do whatever it takes.

I'm home.

"There's minor evidence you've been compromised, Mr. Montavio, but nothing that would prevent your full immersion back into your family," the doc says, sliding his stethoscope off my chest and folding it up. "You've obviously been beaten and injured. I've noted three badly bruised ribs that'll mend quickly, lacerations, and evidence you've been drugged as well. You may have memory impairment, confusion, or poor concentration. The effects vary widely depending on the length of time and the drug used, but if you find you're experiencing hallucinations or delusions, I'll need to know immediately." He looks at Sergio. "Tolerance and mental fortitude will have a large impact on his ability to move beyond any cognitive disablement."

"Right." I sit up and stretch, ignoring the pain across my back and through my ribs, and the sudden visceral image of three men entering my cell bearing weapons. Fucking assholes. One man against an armed one is an unfair advantage. It was my own fault for fucking the first one up. After that, they always sent them in groups of three. "I'm free to go?"

The doctor and Sergio share a look.

"Not yet," Sergio says. "We need you to meet with a few more people."

Shrinks? Investigators? Questioners.

"Bring it," I say on a sigh, as Starla's voice on the other side rings clear.

"Did you guys feed him? He needs like a really good meal or maybe ten. Did you give him water? Sergio, don't tell me you jerks were so invested in

searching him that you—”

Someone pulls her away, her voice growing muffled and faded.

I quirk a brow at Sergio. His lips purse in a thin line and he shakes his head at me.

“No Starla yet.”

I grunt in reply. “She has a point. Could give a brother a cup of fucking coffee.”

“We needed to investigate first, Mr. Montavio. Some evidence of human tampering becomes hard to trace after the administration of food and water.”

“Fine,” I say, leaning back on the stretcher. “At least tell me you’ve got a hottie to do the body cavity check?”

Sergio snorts. “Jesus, you can’t be that fucked up,” he mutters. “Still a wiseass.”

“I’d have expected you guys to be happier to see me,” I say with a shrug. “Bring out the fatted calf and all that like the prodigal son.”

The investigation continues, but I manage to convince them to bring me a tray of food probably made in the kitchen by Sergio’s wife. Eden’s the resident cook, and her food has won awards in local magazines. I feast on apple pie, roasted chicken, and mashed potatoes until I’m satisfied, while I answer question after question.

Well, answer as much as I can, that is.

“Cleared?” Sergio asks. I don’t look up. Eye contact right now is probably not the smartest choice. There’s no fucking question I’ve been mentally compromised. Did I give those assholes the keys to the kingdom? Hell no, which is why I’m sitting here beaten as badly as I am.

“Are you going to let me in or what?”

Sergio rolls his eyes heavenward and pulls out his phone.

“Yeah, she’s giving us shit through the door, babe. You still in the kitchen? Yeah. I know, but we had the o— right.” He blows out a breath and shakes

his head. “No, I know, but—”

My brother is one of the fiercest mobsters on the East Coast. People take a step back when they hear the name Montavio, and when paired with Sergio, it’s a whole other ballgame.

It used to be that my brother Ricco and I were the ones that had the greatest sway over Sergio... and then he married Eden.

“Alright. Yeah, I understand. I’ll tell you later. Love you, too.”

Sergio powers down his phone and tosses it on a side table.

“I’m going to let her in.”

My heart surges. I nod and shrug, all nonchalant and shit. “Yeah.”

“Before I do, I have some questions for you.”

“Okay? Ask me anything.” I stare at him, unblinking. I thought we finished the interrogation, but he has more to ask.

Doesn’t mean I’ll tell you everything.

I expect him to ask who took me and what they did. To ask what I can remember about what they did to me, what their plans are, if I got any intel I need to bring to them. Instead, he asks the last question I expect.

Leaning forward, Sergio rests his forearms on his legs. His gaze on me reminds me of my father, only Sergio’s eyes still spark with humanity. “Did you compromise Starla?”

I clench my fist and hold his gaze. “Fucking never.”

I beat the shit out of a motherfucker who hit on her at Hampton Beach, the day she decided to try out a two-piece swimsuit. When she was a senior in high school, I once helped her into the back of my pickup, scantily clad and puking her shitfaced guts out, then got her meds and Gatorade and a place to crash so Sergio and Eden wouldn’t ground the fuck out of her.

I watched her grow from a girl to a woman before my very eyes.

“I never did, Sergio.”

“You give me your word?” I watch him take a switchblade out of his pocket and flick it open.

Shit.

Still holding my gaze, he scratches a short line along his inner arm until it bleeds, then hands me the knife.

To others, this would look barbaric and uncivilized, but I know what he means and why he does it. It’s the highest form of honor and respect to swear a blood oath.

I swallow and nod, still holding his gaze as I lightly slice my own flesh, just enough to make the blood bubble to the surface, then press my arm to his. “I give you my word.”

“Tell me you’ll protect her, Timeo.” His fingers lace around my elbow, clamping our arms together. “Promise me.”

My hand laces around his forearm, joining him in clamping us together so tightly I can hardly breathe. “You have my fucking word. I promise no matter what, I’ll protect her, Sergio.”

No matter what.

Even Sergio Montavio has no idea what that will mean.



CHAPTER SIX

Starla

“STORM’S HEADING IN,” Giorgio says, staring at the weather on his phone. “No one’s going home tonight.”

“Great,” I snap. “Dow Jones is up, too, isn’t it? Looks like trouble in the Middle East. The Red Sox acquired a star pitcher in the off season, and rumor has it the governor may increase the school budget after all.” I lean in. “Who the fuck cares? I. Want. To. See. Timeo. And I want to see him now!”

“I want a golden goose,” someone says behind me in a singsong voice. I turn around and there’s Mario Rossi, Timeo’s cousin, leaning against a doorframe. Tall and lean and ruthless in a fight, Mario’s an iconic member of the Rossi family and by proxy, a Montavio as well since they’re all cousins.

“I want a what?”

“God,” Mario groans. “I forget you and Eden don’t know shit about pop culture. Willy Wonka? Veruca Salt, the spoiled brat, wants a golden goose to lay a golden egg, and she —”

“Shut it, Mario,” I say, trying fruitlessly to hide the tone of petulance in my voice.

“You’re acting like a spoiled brat,” he says, holding out a white pastry box. One of Mario’s redeeming qualities is the fact that he owns a pastry shop in the North End. “Here, have a cannoli.”

A sensible action, really. It’s hard to be pissy when you’re eating a cannoli.

I glare at him when he opens the box, but in the end do the smart thing. I take a cannoli.

“I want to see him,” I say around a mouthful of decadently sweet, creamy mascarpone cheese. “Shit, this is good.”

“When’d you start cursing like a sailor? When I met you, you were all demure and respectful. What happened to you, kiddo?”

I shrug. “You guys all talk like truck drivers. I find cursing brings stress

relief. And also? I was never, ever, demure. I am not a mini-Eden.”

He shrugs and helps himself to a cannoli. “True. But I bet Eden hates you swearing.”

“Eden hates a lot of things,” I say in a small voice.

Tight clothes. Drinking. Weed. Social media.

God.

“I don’t give a shit if you fucking swear,” Mario says with a wink. “Just stop acting like a brat already.”

“I’m not acting like a brat, you patronizing jerk.” I polish off my cannoli. “Even if you do make damn good cannoli.”

“Starla, baby,” he says calmly in typical older-brother fashion, pulling out a chair and gesturing for me to sit. “You’ll see Timeo. We don’t know where he’s been or what’s happened.”

“I know, I know, it’s for my own good,” I say, rolling my eyes. “It’s just that —”

The door opens. Mario and I turn around. Sergio stands in the doorway looking fierce and intimidating as always, but he’s like a brother to me and I know him well beyond that tough guy exterior.

“Let’s go.”

I’m on my feet. Shaking.

Sergio puts his hands out. “Listen. He needs to see a few more people. We need to finish our interrogation.” He takes a step toward me and shuts the door behind him.

My heart sinks to the floor. I hang my head. Sergio crosses the room in two large strides and puts his arms around me. I bury my face on his chest and choke back a sob.

“I want to make sure he’s okay, Sergio.” I can’t tell him that a part of me has come back from the dead, that I’ve been resurrected.

For the first time since Timeo went missing, I feel hopeful again.

“I won’t do anything dumb. You guys do what you have to, I know even Timeo would want you to, but it doesn’t mean I can’t see him.” I swipe at the tears that keep falling. “And I’m not being a brat like Mario says, I’m just — I missed him so much.”

“We all did, Starla,” he says gently, as his arms tighten around me. When he’s like this, it’s hard for me to believe the rumors they say about him, but if Eden can love him, so can I. “You called her a brat?”

Uh oh. Mario’s in trouble.

“She won’t take fucking no for an answer!”

Sergio snaps something harsh off in Italian, so I don’t understand a word he says, and Mario flinches.

“Okay, alright,” Mario says. “Starla, I’m sorry.”

I nod against Sergio’s chest, his damp shirt pressed up against my cheek.

Sergio sighs. “Alright, Starla.”

“Yes?” I ask, trying fruitlessly to keep the hope out of my voice.

Sergio lets me go and jerks his head to the pastry box. “You can bring him a cannoli.”

I’m in the room in two seconds flat, a cannoli in each hand. Mario and Sergio watch from the doorway as I sit by Timeo’s bed.

Timeo’s eyes are closed. “Who do you have taking care of him?” I nestle the cannoli on an empty plate.

“We have a team, kiddo,” Sergio says. I flinch at his pet name for me. I don’t want to be called a kiddo. Not here, not now. “We’ve got what you asked us to get. Mario and I have to call a meeting. Starla, look at me.”

I look up at him impatiently. In my peripheral vision, Timeo’s eyes flutter open.

“What?”

“We’re still watching Timeo carefully. Giorgio will be right outside this door, and we have three more men on alert. Go ahead and visit. But be careful.”

I don’t exactly know what they expect Timeo to do to me, but I think they’d all do well by eating more cannoli.

“Got it,” I say, waving him off. “Go see Eden, I think she’s got some food for you to try or whatever.”

Sergio pauses, debating, but in the end, he leaves with Mario.

I’m alone with Timeo.

Alone.

He isn’t even looking at me. Instead, he stares at the wall, his jaw clenched, and a stoic look on his beautiful, tired face.

“You look tired,” I say softly. “I think we need to get you cleaned up, then you can get some rest.”

“Rest,” he mutters. “That’s all they say is rest. Rest, rest, rest. Jesus. I don’t want to rest.”

I lift a warm cloth from the basin of water and wring it out so it’s only damp. “Sit up and tell me what you want to do instead of resting.”

It’s hard for me to believe he’s here, in the flesh. Timeo. My first and only friend.

The first man who ever made me feel like a woman.

“Heard you fighting out there,” he says, his voice all hoarse and raspy. “I’m happy that hasn’t changed about you.”

The look he gives me makes my heart turn over in my chest. He might be tired and hurt, and I don’t know what he was pulling in here saying he didn’t remember me, but that look in his eyes tells me everything I need to know.

Timeo hasn’t changed.



Five years earlier

I STARED out the window of Sergio and Eden's sitting room at The Castle, the Rossi family home on the North Shore of New England. After being rescued from our abusers, I relocated with Eden. We found comfort and solace at The Castle. The family matriarch Tosca and her mother, affectionately called "Nonna" by everyone, resided in The Castle, and all the Rossis and Montavios frequently visited.

Nonna, a stout and fierce Italian grandmother always dressed in signature black, expanded my cooking abilities, and I taught her how to make my family's favorite heirloom recipes. Even though I was mistreated by the fellowship, I did learn more than a few sustainable life skills.

But no one taught me how to drive.

I shrugged. "I know how to proof bread, can jam, and preserve pickles, but I don't know how to even turn a car on."

Timeo was the youngest Montavio, but still older than me by enough that Sergio and Eden watched us like hawks. Not sure what they expected we would do, but I was hardly ready to spread my legs for my best friend.

Timeo shook his head with that boyish grace. Even though it had been years since he was a boy, there was a certain look, a certain laugh, that was all Timeo.

"That ends now. Everyone needs to know how to drive, Starla. It's like a fundamental life skill."

Not true. Learning to drive was a privilege, but I didn't want to school him on what I actually learned out of necessity to be crucial life skills.

I nodded and thought it over. Was I ready for Timeo Montavio, the gorgeous man that featured in every one of my nightly fantasies and dreams, in the interior of a car, right next to me, where no one could watch us and scold or cajole?

On second thought, that sounded like a fantastic idea.

"That sounds good. But what if I'm a terrible driver?" I asked, giving him a

curious look.

“That’s why you learn. Mario and Sergio taught me, and you know how they are.”

I did. They drove with absolute precision but also at death-defying speeds like maniacs because they owned race cars.

“I do know.”

“We can’t keep it secret forever, but let’s not announce this to Sergio and Eden until you’re good at it.”

That became our mantra.

You can’t keep it secret forever.

A promise that you could keep it secret for a little while, but you were on borrowed time. A tryst that no one but us ever knew about. Our secret.

“Alright, into the driver’s seat with you.”

My heart pounded madly in my chest. From where I sat, huge bushes in full bloom blocked my view of The Castle, so theoretically...they couldn’t see us either.

I swallowed. “Uh...is Sergio going to kill you when he finds out?”

Timeo smirked. When he smiled, a little dimple formed in the corner of his cheek. But I didn’t let his wildly rugged good looks fool me. Timeo could be as ruthless and cutthroat as all of them, Rossis and Montavios included.

But never to me. Never, ever to me.

“You let me worry about Sergio.”

Excellent plan.

My heart thumped a little faster when I realized that unless I got out of the car, I’d have to basically climb over Timeo — tall, strong, older, and deliciously muscular Timeo.

I got out of the car.

Still, I was acutely aware of his strong, masculine hands on mine — stout fingers, dark hair, rough palms — showing me how to position my grip. His husky voice loud and commanding in the small, cramped interior.

“The first rule of driving. Obey traffic laws. And since I’m the licensed driver here, that means you obey me.”

A shiver skated over my skin, and I wasn’t sure why. I’d heard the “obey me” command before, of course, but it always made me want to put up my fighting hands and tell someone to leave me the hell alone, that I wouldn’t obey anyone, not after the abuse I experienced in the fellowship.

But when Timeo said those words to me... when he gave me a look that dared me to disobey him, to cross him and tell him no... the first lick of erotic pleasure pulsed through me.

“...accidents and legal consequences.” Timeo stared at me. “Starla, did you hear a word I just said?”

“Of course I did!” I protested, racking my brain for details. “Obey the traffic laws.”

Timeo’s eyes narrowed on me. “Stay sober and pay attention. No cell phone in the car, ever. If I ever catch you driving under the influence, you’ll wish Sergio was the one who found out instead of me, and you know he’s no pushover.”

Was that a threat?

And why did it make me all kinds of hot and aroused?

Did his concern mean that he... cared?

Still, I had a reputation to uphold.

“Okay, since when do you boss me around?” I said, ignoring the flush on my cheeks and the way my voice wobbled.

I wanted him to touch me. I wanted him to show me what happened after that first throb of need took over my senses.

Timeo moved a little closer. “Since when do I boss you around?” he asked in

a husky voice, affected by something, but I had no idea what. Leaning in, he tugged an errant lock of blonde hair. “Since I knew you liked it.”



“I DON’T WANT to fucking rest,” Timeo mutters. “I want to catch up with my brothers. See the people at Bella Notte. See how everyone’s doing since I’ve been gone.” He exhales. “It’s been too damn long.”

He flinches when I rub the saturated cotton ball over a particularly angry looking cut above his eye.

“Shit,” he mutters.

“I have to clean you up,” I say softly, with practiced patience. “It’ll be alright. I can look up—”

My phone vibrates in my pocket.

Again.

And again.

I want to smack my forehead and groan.

The interview. I was halfway through an interview when I found out he was back, and I dropped everything. I’d had another one scheduled thirty minutes after that, and before now I’d never missed an appointment. It’s a point of pride with me that I’m dependable and hardworking, right on the verge of breaking out...

“I’ll be right back.”

I grab my phone out of my back pocket and run to the bathroom. When I flick it on, I see thirty missed messages. I’ve completely ignored them while sidetracked by Timeo’s arrival. Understandable, but still—

Shit. It’s my assistant, Maya:

Girl, do you have any idea how popular that video was? Starla, there are rumors going around!!

Wait, what?

I check through notifications and send her a reply.

There will always be rumors

I roll my eyes.

The next message is from Ruthie. Oh, God.

I let my followers know you were coming and you did not arrive. I don't take being stood up very kindly. I do think it's unlike you to take advantage of someone like me. I will assume for the moment that you had a family emergency, because I can't imagine another reason why you didn't come as promised.

I wince. Shit. I'm sending a quick message when I glance up through the bathroom doorway to see Timeo sitting up and looking over at me, scowling.

"Who are you talking to?"

"Uh, no one," I lie. None of his business. Like I want anyone to know what the hell I do? Especially not Lieutenant Safety. "All good."

I shoot a message to Ruthie.

I am so sorry. I had a family emergency and had to leave and there was no time to message you. I'm happy to make it up to you with another interview or something similar.

The message pops on that it was read but there's no reply. Great.

I shove my phone in my pocket and walk back over to Timeo.

"What are you up to?" he asks, more curious than I'd have expected.

"It's none of your business. Lay back down. You have bruised ribs."

He grunts, his brows cinching together as if to remind me who he is. "Do Sergio and Eden know you're hiding something?"

My pulse races. God. Why was I so eager to have Timeo back? He was the only one who ever saw through damn near anything. In two point three seconds, he's already realized I'm hiding something.

“I think you’re delusional,” I tell him, pursing my lips at him. “Lay back down.” I press my hand to his chest and give him a little shove. Off balance, he falls back to the stretcher, hard. “There. Now let me take care of you.”

“I might have been taken prisoner,” he says in that deep, growly, affected voice of his that I missed every single goddamn day, hearing it only at night in my dreams. Every. Night. “But I haven’t had a personality transplant, sweetheart.”

Timeo.

A sudden, overwhelming feeling takes over and my breath catches. I lay my head beside him on the bed and close my eyes. I blink back tears at the sudden remembrance of what it felt like to be near him. To hear his voice. To talk to someone who sees me, actually sees me, for who I am.

His heavy hand rests on the back of my head, fingers gently flexing.

“You look different,” he says in a shaky, raspy voice. Just hearing him speak feels like coming home. “More...fuck, you’re actually all grown up, Starla.”

“I’ve been all grown up for a few years, Timeo,” I say, swiping at my eyes that insist on watering.

“Maybe I didn’t notice,” he says in a voice that tells me he absolutely did notice. “And you were a technical adult, yeah, but we both had a lot of growing up to do, didn’t we?”

He pulls his hand away. I raise my head and stare at him.

Did I imagine he was touching me just now? Do I want it so badly that I conjured up tenderness and familiarity where before there was none?

Does his “growing up” have to do with being captured and abused?

Which would be... honestly... a lot like mine...

“Timeo,” I say gently, tipping his head toward me so I can wipe the grime and blood from his face. “What can you tell me?”

Someone had him in their grasp. Someone hurt him.

He still hurts now.

Who?

Why?

And what will I do to bring my Timeo back?

“Leave it.”

I blink at the sudden change in temperature. “What?”

I flinch as if he slapped me.

“Excuse me?”

Timeo stares at me, a coldness in his eyes that’s unfamiliar to me. “Sergio told you. There’s a team here to take care of me.” His jaw clenches. “Go home, Starla.”

He turns away and stares at the wall before he closes his eyes.

I open my mouth to respond but can’t remember what I was going to say. My belly clenches in anger at his betrayal, and I have to remind myself that he isn’t himself.

He only just came home.

He’s still injured.

And I of all people should know that in an abusive situation, the physical effects of abuse are only what people can see with the naked eye.

What did they do to him?

When a knock comes at the door, I open it to find the team of medics Sergio referenced. They carry a black bag filled with medical supplies.

“Good timing,” I say, my voice tight and high because I’m angry. So damn angry. “I have to go now.” I wave a hand over my shoulder even though it kills me. “He’s all yours.”

My damn phone buzzes and buzzes and buzzes. I ignore it, even though every ping triggers me.

The team that came in stares at me in turn. “Where are you going, Miss

Soul?” one of them asks.

“Home,” I say with a sigh.

“Oh,” she says, bewildered. “I’m so sorry, ma’am, but you can’t go home.”

I stare at her, uncomprehending. “What do you mean I can’t go home?” I toss a hand in Timeo’s general direction. “He obviously doesn’t want me here. He needs real medical attention. And? We’re in a fucking sex club owned by my brother-in-law. It would be great to get the hell out of here.”

I don’t even want to go back home to my apartment. I want to go back to The Castle. My “woe is me” feelings will be well sorted with some of Nonna’s pastry and Tosca’s strong liqueur.

“Ma’am, there’s a blizzard out there.”

I turn back and look at Timeo, curious if he heard her, but he’s fast asleep.

Sergio appears out of thin air, likely hovering like a mother hen the whole time.

“You’re staying the night here, Starla. We all are. No one’s allowed on the roads in these conditions.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

Starla

“YEAH, I DON’T THINK SO.”

I brush past Sergio, pretending I’m not trying to get the hell out of here so I can go cry in peace.

“Starla—”

“Sergio.” I turn and look at him. I grab the jacket I wore and tossed on a chair when I came down into this dungeon or whatever it is supposed to be.

Sergio snaps. “Those roads will be shut down. Don’t do something stupid.”

I walk past him and head up the stairs, aware of the fact that he can stop me, but I don’t want him to. Not now. I have a lot of respect for Sergio, but he’s not my guardian anymore.

I make it to the top of the stairs where Eden’s blocking my path. “Starla,” she begins, in a softer tone than Sergio’s, but she can really put her foot down when she wants to.

“So, you guys are telling me you’re not going home to your kids? You’re going to hole up at the club instead of going home to them?”

Eden sighs. “We’ll try, but we might not be able to. Their nanny is staying with them. They’re fine. Starla, if you go out in this—”

“I don’t care, Eden. I’m not the one that needs a nanny anymore. You guys have your own kids to take care of now, and I can take care of myself.”

I brush past her into the biting cold. A few snowflakes fall, but the ground is still bare. I wonder if we’re even going to get any snow, or if everyone’s way overreacting over nothing.

I pull out my phone and book an Uber, then make a call as one of the security guys exits the club.

“Starla—”

“You guys need to leave me alone. I made a call.”

I glance at the app and note a black sedan heading my way . Rides abound on the streets of Boston and come like magic when I call. “Gotta go.”

Sergio stands in the doorway as the car marked “Uber” pulls up beside me. “Let her go,” he says in a stern, yet very displeased, voice.

Halfway to The Castle, I call Tosca, the only woman I’d call my second mother. The Rossi family matriarch and blood relative to the Montavios, she’s Timeo’s blood relative and a woman who took me in when I was rescued. I clear my throat a few times.

“Starla! Of course you can come, but isn’t it terrible out there?”

I look at the snow accumulating on the ground in tiny flakes. “Not much yet, no, but maybe soon.”

“Come, sweetheart. I’ll ready your room for you.” My throat gets all tight. Just when I think I’ve finally reached adulthood... Just when I think I’ve put the demons of my past to rest...

I’ve never really had a place I wanted to call home, but The Castle is close.

When we arrive in Gloucester, there’s hardly any snow on the ground. The Castle, nestled deep on the shore of Cape Anne, doesn’t get as much snow because of the ocean effect.

“This is it,” I say, pointing to the tall gates that welcome us to the Rossi family home.

The driver comes to a screeching halt and stares at me in the rearview mirror. “I put the address in but didn’t know it led here. You had me drive here?”

“What’s your problem?”

“This is the Rossi home.”

I sometimes forget that my best friends and found family are all in the mafia, and people around here don’t like that. The Rossis and the Montavios are heroes compared to the fellowship I was raised in, but I guess who’s bad and who isn’t is all relative.

“So yeah, here is fine,” I say.

The driver screeches away before my car door is closed all the way, as if the Rossi family demons are going to haunt him in his dreams.

Jesus.

I wave to the guards at the gate, who wave back.

“Hey, Starla,” one says, though in the dark it’s impossible to see which one. “Good to have you back, kiddo.” What do I have to do to get them to stop calling me kiddo? Ugh! “Tosca expecting you?”

As if on cue, the heavy front door yards away from the gate is flung open and Tosca waves fiercely at me. I put my head down against the biting wind as two uniformed men flank me on my way to the house.

“Fuckin’ pussy driver,” one mutters to the other. “Find out who he is.”

“No, no,” I say with a forced laugh. “No need to do that, now.” All I need is to get on an Uber shitlist because the Rossi guards have a hair across their collective asses. “I appreciate the sentiment, though, guys.”

Their broad shoulders block the brisk wind from assaulting me, as they escort me in. Tosca gives me a huge embrace as soon as I’m over the threshold, and the men go back to their posts.

I hug Tosca a little longer than necessary. When the first beat passes and she realizes I’m still hugging her, she holds me even tighter.

“You alright, love?” One would never call Tosca a gentle sort, but she has her favorites and lucky for me, I’m one of them.

“I’m alright,” I say, stifling the need to cry again because I just cried on Sergio’s shoulder, and it seems crying a second time might be a point against my “I’m an adult” case.

“In, in!” Nonna says from the doorway. “Cold enough to freeze gelato in the doorway. Come, I make you cioccolata calda and biscotti.”

The difference between American hot chocolate and Italian is like the difference between watery broth and a hearty stew. Nonna’s hot chocolate is so thick and creamy it coats the back of a spoon, and even I, Queen Sweet Tooth, can only take a small amount.

Tonight, I want to tell her to make it a double.

“Yes, please,” I tell her, nodding eagerly. In a short time, I’m sitting by a roaring fire in the Rossi family living room. Thick, burgundy carpet under my sock-clad feet, a plush ivory blanket tucked over my lap. Nellie, Tosca’s Siamese cat, her newest acquisition when the last of the Rossi children left home, lays at my feet snoring peacefully. I’m holding a cup of Nonna’s cocoa the size of my head in one hand, a large platter of Nonna’s decadent cookies propped up beside me on a TV tray.

They’ve asked me no questions but sensibly waited until I indulged and warmed up before expecting me to tell them why I’ve come. While Eden and Sergio – my sister and her husband -- were good to me, Tosca and Nonna damn near coddled me.

My heart aches in a way I’ve never felt before.

Honestly, they would probably be fine if I didn’t even tell them, but I want to.

I have to talk to somebody.

“Sergio called,” Tosca says.

I mutter under my breath, “Of course he did.” He can track my phone, and likely knows the exact name and location of the Uber driver as well. “And?”

“I told him you were safe but not to pry,” Tosca says with a wink.

I sigh and lean back against the couch. “Thank you.” I take one more sip of cocoa before I continue. “Did he tell you that Timeo’s back?”

The thump of Nonna’s cup to the carpet tells me no.

Tosca stares, wide-eyed. “No. Where? When? How?”

I shake my head. “Honestly, men. Why didn’t he tell you? Giorgio brought me to Sergio’s club tonight. They were afraid I was in danger.”

Oh, yeah. There’s that pesky little worry about my being in danger. I’m not sure why Timeo coming home puts me in danger, and it probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do, taking off in the middle of an impending snowstorm

when Sergio wanted me nearby, but...

I clear my throat. "They brought me to see him."

Tosca and Nonna stare at me. I look down at my cup and trace the rim with my finger.

"And why are you here and not there, bella?" Tosca asks gently.

I take a deep breath. Let it out slowly.

Then I tell them everything. How he pretended he didn't know me. The familiarity in his eyes, quickly masked by anger and a flinty look.

"Ahh," Tosca says, nodding. "I see."

"You see what?" My voice quavers. "Because I don't see anything at all."

Tosca and Nonna share another look.

"When he left, you were a girl," Tosca says gently, as if carefully choosing her words. "He came home... to a woman."

I look down at my hands. "I don't think that's it at all." I wish that was it.

"Then what do you think it is?"

I don't want to talk about this. I have the sudden urge to shut the whole conversation down.

I shake my head. "I have no idea. I just know it wasn't the reunion I imagined. I needed... space." I sigh. "I needed to get away."

"Of course," Tosca says pragmatically. "You stay as long as you like."

I change the subject and talk about her grandkids, how everyone's growing and where they all are now, while I ignore the buzzing on my phone. Eventually, I'll have to excuse myself but for now, I like not being at anyone's beck and call.

Finally, I yawn widely, hopefully giving them the hint that I need to get to bed.

"You get some rest, Starla," Tosca says. "Let's get you to your room."

It feels good to flop on the bed where I discovered who Starla Soul really was. Here, under the protection of the Montavios and the hospitality of the Rossis, I left behind the broken girl who had no voice, and excavated who I really am. It's comforting to remember that.

I take out my phone and decide it's time to face the music.

Staring at the insane number of notifications, messages, and emails, I cringe.

Eden.

Sergio.

And at least fifty more. I groan and reschedule the interview I was supposed to do tonight, then as graciously as possible, I respond to every other message in my inbox.

It's good to play hard to get sometimes.

Do Sergio and Eden know you're hiding something?

Of course Timeo would say that.

Feeling guilty, I finally open the message from Eden.

I'm sorry if it was hard seeing Timeo. You need to come home.

I needed space, and I'm in my second home, safe and sound. I know for a fact there's security up the wazoo here.

Sergio's cousin Romeo, Tosca's oldest son, would've seen to that.

Maya:

Babe, we have a really, really big problem. Like REALLY BIG

I roll my eyes. Maya is such a drama queen. A "really big problem" might mean that she's down to her last tube of lip gloss and Sephora's closed for the night due to impending snow.

What? What's the problem?

Someone's leaked footage they have of you. They don't know who you are yet but there's a grainy pic of your face that popped up online. I've done my best to keep my line presence anonymous, but now...

I stare. I blink.

Shit. This is way, way worse than I thought.

WHAT?! HOW?!

I knooooowww OMG I can't even. Just ignore it, these things always pass

Oh my God. That's easy for her to say.

I file it away to worry about later, and swipe through the rest of the messages. Nothing I don't get every day. I've got a team that helps me filter through the thousands of fan messages I get, but lots make it through to my main profile. I'm checking my dash appreciatively when another message comes through.

Babe, I know that you weren't exactly planning on leaving that interview halfway through, but let me tell you, the buzz around the web was worth it. People are TALKING. I'm not sure if there's a single more interesting story than yours right about now.

Is that a good thing?

I'm honestly just not so sure anymore.

I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't want to perform for anyone. I don't want to answer to anyone.

I've worked my ass off since I left the fellowship to be left alone, and that's exactly where I want to be. Ironic, really, considering my current mode of employment. But that's well within my control.

I power off my phone and whip it into a drawer. When I slide the drawer shut, I pretend it means it's gone for good.

I lie on the bed, my eyes heavy. I'm so tired I could fall asleep right here, fully clothed.

When I close my eyes, I can still see him, glaring at me as if wishing I'd go away. The clench of his jaw and the steel in his eyes warning me that he isn't the same person as when he left.

How convenient. Neither am I.

I curl up on my side, then remain as still as I can be at the sound of voices down the hall. My home in The Castle, nestled on the first floor close to the kitchen, is only paces away from the main entryway. Tosca's voice catches my attention.

My eyes fly open, and I sit straight up in bed, my heart beating a staccato rhythm in my chest.

"I'm not sure she wants visitors right now, Timeo."



CHAPTER EIGHT

Timeo

YEAH, no one wanted me to get behind the wheel of a car and even I'm not dumb enough to do that yet. But I've got a team of men happy to do my bidding, and there isn't much the right price won't get you.

"She went to The Castle," Giorgio says.

"And you're here why?" I snap at him. Sergio and Mario watch in silence as Giorgio quakes under my glare.

"I didn't know she was leaving, sir. I—"

"Should've followed her to the depths of hell if that's where she fucking went." It hurts to sit up and hurts worse to stand but I don't fucking care. I look over Giorgio's shoulder and talk to Sergio, standing behind him. "Sergio, permission to fire Giorgio."

Sergio frowns but nods. "He's right, you should've followed her. Consider yourself lucky. Strike one. We reassign you."

Last year, I lost my fucking mind when one of her guards let her out of his sight. Then I come back to this? I've had it. Had. It.

"You'll stay and do whatever Sergio asks you to, but you're relieved of your duty of guarding Starla."

"Timeo—"

I snap my fingers at Giorgio. "Get the truck. It has snow tires if this fucking blizzard turns out to be anything. You're driving."

My body aches as we make it to The Castle. Can't imagine what I'd feel like if I wasn't on heavy pain meds right now.

Strike that. I know exactly how it would feel and I'm in no hurry to relive it.

I'm shocked when the Rossi family guards at the gate stand at attention, like I'm a general come back from war or whatever the fuck. They're only under my leadership by proxy. They answer to Romeo first and Sergio second. And

yet...

“Welcome home, Mr. Montavio.”

“Good to have you back, Mr. Montavio.”

“If we can help with anything, let us know, Mr. Montavio.”

“Thank you.” It takes all my effort not to fall to the cool grass. It would feel welcome right now against my scorching skin.

I have no energy left for any additional niceties, so I only nod. They’re deferring to me out of respect because...I survived.

But Starla is here. I know she is. I don’t give a fuck what Sergio says, or Eden, or anyone at this point.

Starla’s in danger and she made a dumbass move coming up here. I flick open the phone and swipe on the weather. Forecast still says snow.

I welcome the cold droplets on my heated skin. Burning a fever, probably, wouldn’t fucking surprise me.

I don’t care.

“Bring me up to speed on security and surveillance.” I stifle a groan when a wave of pain tightens my chest. “Bonus points if you can do it in thirty seconds or less. All details.”

The first guard snaps to. “Sir, we’ve secured the perimeter of The Castle with an electric fence, topped with razor wire. We have video surveillance and motion sensors to constantly monitor for any breaches.”

“Cameras?”

“Yes, sir, newly equipped with infrared lasers to enable night vision. Feeds are monitored by a team in our control room.”

“Location of your control room?”

One guard looks at another. “We’re only allowed to reveal that information under the express command of Romeo Rossi, sir.”

Good, good. That was a test, and they passed it. I nod.

My cousin Romeo's done due diligence.

"Access points."

"Main gate's heavily fortified and controlled. All visitors not previously vetted are evaluated. All other access points are monitored with similar surveillance."

"Good. Anything else I need to know?"

"Yes, sir. To protect the air space we've set up a no-fly zone and installed anti-drone technology."

Every one of these steps mimics what Sergio's put in place at Bella Notte. Since my capture and detainment, they've upped their game.

Still, I'm not naïve enough to believe there's any such thing as foolproof security. The effectiveness of security measures hinges on the trustworthiness of those with access.

"You've done well. Stay vigilant and keep me abreast of any new developments." I stare at the cloudless night sky. "If we get the snow predicted, I'll be here until it clears."

"Yes, sir. Does Mr. Rossi know of your visit, sir?"

"Yes."

Sergio would've told Romeo immediately.

The Castle against the night sky is beautiful, and my heart aches a little when I look at it. I've missed the familiarity and comfort of family.

Imposing and majestic as always, set against the backdrop of the winter sea behind it. White lights twinkle in the windows, and spotlights cast bright white light on the pathway lined with evergreens. I have way more fond memories of The Castle than I do of my own damn mother, it's that much a part of the fabric of who I am.

It feels like the temperature's dropped twenty degrees since I left Bella Notte. I shove my hands in my pockets and wish I'd at least brought a damn coat.

I'll find something here.

When I step foot on the front step, something feels off. It takes me a few seconds to realize what it is. The back side of one of the front bushes, low to the ground so it's barely noticeable in the glow of the exterior lighting, has been trampled. The Rossi family, most notably Tosca, takes meticulous care of her house. The garden is no exception. They have both a full-time landscaper and arborist, even in the winter months.

I bend down and reach for the broken branches of the bush and lift it. Too much damage for an animal, and there's no good reason a large animal would be anywhere near the front of the house. It sure as hell wouldn't have been unnoticed, especially with the motion cameras.

I take out my phone and snap a few shots as the door to The Castle opens.

"You're here."

Tosca's voice warms me even as I stand on her front steps as cold as a snowman.

She embraces me lightly before I've fully stood, and Nonna quickly toddles in from the reception room.

"Timeo," she says in a low voice, a much lower register than she normally uses. "You home."

I bend to let Nonna kiss each one of my cheeks, but wince when she gives me a hug. Fucking hell, I hate acting like a pussy.

"You hurt, Timeo."

I nod and swallow. Both of these tenacious women are used to seeing the men they love hurt, but I'm not sure it ever gets any easier. My mother couldn't care less, as long as no one impedes her shopping therapy sessions.

It feels good to have someone fucking care about you. No wonder my mother hates Tosca.

"Come in, come in, freeze my ass off," Nonna says. God, I love this woman. "I make you cioccolata calda."

“No, thanks, I’m good.”

I turn and watch as Tosca slides all the locks in place. It takes her a full minute.

Romeo’s done his job.

Tosca eagerly takes my arm and steers me to the sitting room, in the opposite direction of the hallway that leads to Starla’s room. She’s sharp as a tack and suspects why I’m here. “I know what you need that’ll warm you up better than hot chocolate.”

Fuck, yeah, a stiff drink sounds good right now, but I have to be at the top of my game. I decline, though this time it pains me.

“I want to catch up,” I say as politely as I can. “But I came here for a reason.”

Tosca smiles knowingly. Sadly. “I’m not sure she wants visitors right now, Timeo.”

I nod and turn toward Starla’s room. “With all due respect, I’m not asking her permission.”

Tosca and Nonna share a look before Nonna yawns widely.

“Bed. I go to bed. Timeo, you know where everything is.”

“Of course. You two get some rest and we’ll chat in the morning.”

Tosca sighs and finally nods.

Before they leave, Tosca shows me where the extra bedding is, the first aid supplies stocked amply enough to open a small hospital, and her stash of liquor. “Just in case. And if you need more than this couch to sleep on, you know you’re welcome to any room in the house.”

I nod. “Of course.”

“Good night, Timeo.”

“Tosca, one question—”

Turning to face me, she nods. “Yes?”

“What happened to the bush outside your house?”

Tosca frowns. “Where?”

“Outside your door.” I show her the picture on my phone. Shaking her head, she stifles another yawn. “I can’t think of why, Timeo. I’ll look into it in the morning.”

I nod and stretch, my own limbs ready for rest. I’m sure I’m making a big deal out of nothing. “Where’s Romeo right now?”

“Traveling, but he’ll be back this weekend.”

“Thank you. Good night.”

Even though I’m sure the two of them would happily stay up much later than this, I’m grateful they’ve given me and Starla some space.

The Rossi family home is enormous, boasting so many rooms I’ve lost count — twenty? Thirty? But Starla always liked staying on the first floor.

I don’t love that.

I was a frequent flyer in this house when she lived here. I always had a reason, an excuse to come, but...well, I suspect most of them knew what my real reason was.

I walk toward Starla’s room, my steps echoing in the large, vacant hallway. When I was a kid, I liked to pretend The Castle was haunted by ghosts from the past.

As an adult, I now know it is absolutely haunted, but not just by ghosts from the past.

Before I left — before I did my duty to the Montavio Brotherhood and put myself on the line — Starla and I were friends. Best friends. We were inseparable. I was careful with Starla, though, staying within the boundaries of platonic friendship.

Sergio would’ve killed me if I hadn’t, and I liked and respected Starla too much to have crossed that line.

But she’s an adult now. Things and circumstances have changed. And so

have I. Sergio knows that we're more at risk now than ever before. And Sergio also knows there's no one, not one single member of his staff or anyone else's, that would ever take Starla's safety more seriously than I do.

The door opens when my hand is still poised to knock. Starla rolls her eyes skyward and motions me inside.

"Get your ass in here before you collapse," she says with a sigh. "God, Timeo, what were you thinking?"

I brush past her into the room and immediately sweep it.

"Timeo," she says, her pretty little hands on her hips as she cocks a brow and watches me. "Romeo Rossi owns this home. Every one of those guards is on his payroll. Do you think for one second he'd have a place that wasn't as secure as a maximum-security prison, for crying out loud?"

"Does Alcatraz mean anything to you?" I shake my head at her. "It was supposedly the highest security prison ever made, and yet, prisoners managed to escape. And it wasn't that long ago seven men—seven men!—escaped a maximum-security prison in Texas when they pooled their resources. No place is completely foolproof."

She purses her lips and I imagine she indulges me as I check the locks on the door, the windows, and the access points by the windows and bathroom.

"Never should've let you take a first-floor bedroom," I mutter under my breath. "Who the fuck said that was okay?"

"Uh, Sergio?" she says with an eye roll so snarky she'd be over my knee if I had full use of my limbs right about now. "He said it was beneficial and healing for me to be near Nonna and Tosca."

"Did he?" I mutter, double-checking the window locks. "It doesn't matter. You're not staying here."

Starla doesn't respond. When I turn to see why she's gone quiet, tears are welling in her eyes.

My thoughts of access points and drones and maximum-security breakouts come to a screeching halt.

I never could stand it when she cried.

And when she wraps her arms around her torso as if to protect herself...from me...

“Why are you here, Timeo?”

“You know why I’m here,” I say, my voice husky. Fuck it, what I wouldn’t give to collapse on the full-size pale pink bed of hers.

Starla tips her head to the side, her eyes filled with sadness and wonder. “Do I? It wasn’t long ago you didn’t even know who I was.”

A pang hits my chest.

“Of course I fucking knew who you were,” I say, taking a step closer to her. My knees wobble, and I want to fucking scream. I hate not being healthy and whole and at full strength. I hate how this makes me feel so goddamn helpless. All I’ve ever wanted was to be able to protect the people I love, and now—

I’m standing so close to her I can see her blue-gray eyes, as delicate and beautiful as flowers I’ve seen in Tosca’s garden. The little bump on her dainty nose, the tiny cleft in her impish chin. The full pink of her cheeks and blush pink of her lips. A streak of hair the color of cotton candy that was once all blonde — like a flash of something rebellious reared its head, but not so much it throws off her equilibrium. Just. Enough.

I reach for her.

My world spins. The floor meets the ceiling, and just in time, I crash onto her bed.

“Oh dear God,” Starla says. “Should I call some—”

“No.” Fuck. “I hate being like this.” I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“What kind of meds did they give you?”

“Oh, the good stuff,” I say, shaking my head. “Fuck.”

“And Sergio sent you up here to protect me why?”

I open one eye. “Because he knows how invested I am.”

That’s putting it mildly.

Starla perches beside me on the edge of the bed. The light behind her makes her look almost angelic, even as her forehead’s creased and her lips are pinched in concern.

I want to kiss her. I want to grab her gorgeous blonde hair and yank her head down to me. I want to stroke the little flyaway hairs out of her face and kiss the pretty pink apple of each cheek.

I want to get to know the woman who emerged while I was gone.

Protect her, Timeo.

I want to protect her, even if the only threat against her is me.

Just by virtue of being near me, she’s in grave danger. Starla has no idea.

“You still have your gun?” I ask her as she bites aggressively down on her fingernail. “Stop that chewing.” She used to bite her nails down to the quick until they bled. “Haven’t you found another toxic habit by now? Smoking? Drinking? Drugs?” I shake my head.

She frowns at me, that adorable divot forming between her brows. “Did the meds make you bossier, or am I just misremembering?”

“The meds made me less bossy, and you are absolutely misremembering.” I consider her. “Before I left, you were still a girl.”

“Not technically,” she says, shaking her head at me.

I release a ragged breath. “In my eyes you were.”

“Sergio and Eden weren’t my guardians anymore.”

“On paper they were. But I’m not talking about technicalities.”

Starla leans in closer to me, her blue-gray eyes piercing. “Neither am I.”

God, I missed her. A pulse of electric energy vibrates between us.

Starla blinks before she pushes away from me.

I reach for her and miss, my reflexes too slow. Just as well. I'm not sure what I'd let myself do to her if I caught her.

"There's no snow yet. They made it seem like such a big deal."

"Sometimes they swing and miss."

"I guess so. Huh."

Yeah, I don't think she jumped up so she could observe the weather.

I swallow and lay my head on the pillow. "You're tired," she says.

I don't like this imbalance of power. I don't like that she's the stronger one right now.

"Yeah," I say, my voice all raspy.

"What do you need, Timeo?"

You, baby.

"Sleep," I mutter, my eyes suddenly heavy and sand papery. I open one eye. "And for you to show me you still know how to hold a gun the way I showed you."

Starla's cheeks flush a deeper pink. Her eyes open wide, and she swallows and holds up a pretend gun, her fingers poised in position.

The overhead light glints, illuminating a small fleck of gold around her neck. I blink.

There's no way. After all this time, has she really held onto it? But when she catches me looking, she quickly tucks it back inside her top.

"Like this," she says, with that adorable note of pride in her voice. "Dominant hand holds the gun, non-dominant hand supports and stabilizes. Always use two hands when possible, for added stability and control. Non-dominant thumb positioned beneath the dominant thumb."

I nod, a surge of pride warming my chest.

"And your stance?" I ask like a stern teacher, not letting her know how proud

I am of her. How fucking hot she is holding her pretend gun.

“Upper body leans slightly forward. Alert but not too tense. Soft knees to prepare for recoil but front foot forward slightly in case of the need to run,” she says, intent, her voice a slight whisper.

“Excellent. But your stance is a little off.”

I push myself off the bed and stand behind her. “Open your legs up wider,” I say in her ear. I’m aware of the press of her tight body against mine. Her quickened breathing. The way her pulse beats rapidly under the nearly translucent flesh at her neck.

Fuck.

“The most important rule to keep in mind when you’re about to shoot is not to hesitate. If you know it’s your life or the life of someone you love you’re protecting, you fucking pull that trigger. There’s rarely enough time for second chances.”

Starla lowers her hands, her voice wobbly. “You sure about that?”

I close my eyes against a rush of heat. I want her so fucking badly.

I swallow and lick my lips. “Rarely. I didn’t say never.”

“Thank you for showing me my stance,” she says, “but I sure as hell hope we won’t need it here.”

“Likely won’t but you can’t be too sure.” I yawn widely.

“Let’s get some sleep, Timeo. Where are you—” she looks around the room. “Uh, sleeping? Those couches are huge, but— you’re injured and all. I mean,” she says, clearly thinking out loud, “I could take the couch. And then you could—”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? Jesus. Get ready for bed.” I’m so tempted to slap her pretty ass.

Her take the couch? What does she think I am, a monster? Jesus.

I point to the door to the en suite bathroom. “Go.”

There's a moment's hesitation as she looks at me curiously, her hands planted on her hips.

"I'm only going to do what you said because I'm tired."

"And the only reason you're not over my knee is because I'm tired. So let's get some sleep."

I quirk a brow at her, make a motion to walk toward her, and with a little squeal, she grabs a small pile of clothes and runs to the bathroom.

So that's the game we're gonna play.

I didn't pack a bag of clothes and there's no way I'm traipsing through thirty fucking whatever rooms to find some, so I pull off my shirt and kick my pants to the floor.

I ignore the goddamn erection. "Down, boy," I snarl, tucking a throw blanket over my lap. But when the bathroom door opens — and Starla comes out — fucking hell.

"I don't keep a lot here anymore, alright?" she says on yet another eye roll as she steps out of the bathroom wearing a tiny pair of pale pink terry cloth shorts with the word PINK stamped across the ass, and a teeny, tiny ribbed white tank that shows her navel when she dares to so much as breathe.

"You would've worn more clothes if you knew I was coming?" I ask, thankful that throw blanket over my dick is thick.

She snorts. "Right. Yeah, no. If I knew you were coming, I probably would've made sure to leave something sexier here." She shoots me a look. "Do you think I waited six months for you to come back, kept my virginity, and declined every one of those dates I was asked on for the sheer fun of it? Believe me. It wasn't fun, and that's not why, but damned if I'm going to put myself on the line again for you."

Ah. The girl talks a big talk but can she walk the big walk?

Wait.

Kept my virginity.

Kept.

My.

Virginity.

When's that goddamn snow coming?



CHAPTER NINE

Starla

I DON'T REALLY UNDERSTAND how men can sleep. My sister's told me about this strange, complex phenomenon.

Eden and Sergio get into a fight? He tells her to get some sleep and is snoring before his head hits the pillow, while she ruminates and questions and wonders all night long about what they fought about. In the morning, he's fucking forgotten they fought. I even talked to Eden's bestie Quinn about it, because she's an open book and her husband Adriano's what one might call a hothead.

"Oh, we fight," she said, shaking her head. "But he just like compartmentalizes it while my entire day is wrecked."

"That's so not fair."

"Definitely not fair but I'm not sure what we can do about it," she said pragmatically.

And now, when the tension and heat between us is so palpable I swear inhaling it will burn my lungs, Timeo's asleep. Snoring, even.

Timeo, in all his sinfully delicious perfection. Even injured and recovering, every inch of him exudes unbridled masculine strength.

I turn away. I can't look. Not now.

I lay beside him and resist the urge to wake him up. We've been apart for so long. I've missed him so much. I want to do what I've always wanted to do, from the first day we met.

Lay my head on his chest. Close my eyes and let him hold me. Feel with our bodies the connection I've felt from day one between our minds and hearts.

I know he feels it, too.

"Timeo," I whisper as he peacefully sleeps. "I've missed you."

But are we the same two people? Or have we grown apart, in a way we can't

bridge?

When I first left the fellowship, I needed some time. I had to figure out who I was and where my place was in this world, unburdened by the rigid rules and structures that confined me my whole life.

Eden and Sergio helped me, because for the first time in my life, I was under the protection of people who loved me unconditionally.

For a while, I told myself I viewed Timeo as a brother. I knew it was a lie from the first time we met, but it felt safer to believe that lie. It felt safer, under the protection of Eden and Sergio, not to cross that line into unknown territory.

But Timeo's right. I am a woman now, in every possible way, even as the shadow of who I once was still lingers.

I want to wake him up and ask him to walk down to the beach with me, down where we wrote in the sand with our fingers and toes until the waves cleared our tablets away.

I want him to sit with me on the rocks by the beach and throw stones into the ocean, where we used to talk about our hopes and dreams as we watched the rocks we hurled sink into the endless depths, like little silver-finned minnows.

I tap my chin thoughtfully.

It is winter. The beach will be frigid, the rocks probably encased in slick ice.

The ocean's beautiful in winter, though. It's beautiful always, but in winter there's a lonesome sort of chill filled with promise, that life may have quieted for a time but will flourish in the spring.

In my eyes, the Montavio brothers are bossy and headstrong and sometimes downright scary... Fearless and protective, brilliant and loyal. Even heroic and almost...god-like.

But Timeo always became a little human for me.



Five years earlier

"LET'S GO FOR A WALK."

Sergio and Eden were traveling, leaving me and Timeo almost alone. Almost, because our ever-present guards and residual family members still lingered.

"A walk? Are you crazy?" Timeo frowned as he picked up his enormous sub filled with Italian meats and cheeses and took a bite reminiscent of a dinosaur.

"Hungry?" I muttered, shaking my head. "Yes, a walk. You know, with two feet, like civilized people?"

"But I like racing on all fours," he said with a narrow-eyed look at me. I pretended that didn't make my heart beat a little faster.

Savage.

I continued in a lowered voice so Tosca and Nonna wouldn't overhear. Even though no one ever forbade me from going anywhere alone with Timeo... something told me they might not approve. I wasn't sure if it was the residual rules of the fellowship that hung about me like scabbed-over wounds, or something else, but it still felt best to keep my plan a secret.

"I have an idea and we'd better do it soon. I am so fucking sick of sitting around this house."

Timeo took his eyes off his phone long enough to give me a sharp look. "Excuse me?"

"What?"

"Who gave you permission to swear, that's what."

I scoffed. "No one gave me permission." I tossed my head and looked away, because I wasn't sure how to handle the feelings that look gave me. "No one needs to give me permission for anything."

It wasn't true, but I liked to tell myself that.

Timeo cocked an eyebrow at me. "Oh, really? Interesting. If no one needs to

give you permission, why were you talking in a whisper?”

“Maybe I like to have some privacy.”

I hated that Sergio kept me under close watch, and Eden encouraged him. I had a cell phone they could easily track, a team of bodyguards, and even my online activity was monitored.

“It isn’t that we don’t trust you,” Eden would explain. “It’s for your own safety. Your own protection.”

I glared at Timeo, prompting him to give me a crooked smile that made my heart and body do unfamiliar but delicious things. I drew in a deep breath, hoping the heat didn’t spread to my cheeks, showing him how I really felt.

“So are you going to tell me your idea or what?”

I bit my lip, because what if he thought it was a childish idea?

“I...want to take a hike and roast marshmallows. I found marshmallows in the pantry, and there are sticks in the woods... I know how to build a fire, and I just thought maybe.... Okay so it sounded like fun.”

He stared at me, his brows drawing together. Before he answered, he took another huge, albeit contemplative, bite of his sub.

“You want to roast marshmallows. Over a fire.”

I swallowed and nodded. “Yup. I’ve never had them before, and they sound so good.”

Timeo grinned. “You’ve never had roasted marshmallows before?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. They didn’t believe in refined sugar or anything resembling fun in that awful place.”

“Just when I thought I couldn’t hate them any more—”

I blew out an impatient breath. “Timeo. Can you take me or not?”

“Of course I can, pushy.” He looked out the window behind me. “Grab a coat, it’s cold out.”

I opened my mouth to wise off to him again, then thought better of it when I considered he might threaten not to come after all.

The wind bit through my clothing as we traipsed through the woods. The Castle was nestled in the uppermost part of Cape Anne, surrounded by water on three sides. The fourth side gave way to a paved road lined with evergreens, my favorite place to take a walk because it felt like entering a new world.

“Goddamn matches,” Timeo said, crouched on the ground in front of the small clearing we made in the earth. “Could’ve used a fucking fire pit instead of this, you know.”

“I don’t happen to have any fire pits on hand. You?”

He only continued to grumble as he tried fruitlessly to light kindling beneath the pile of twigs and branches. Finally, the smallest flicker of flame took hold, turning the dry pieces of kindling a smoldering shade of orange-red.

“You know I used to build fires when I was younger so we could cook...”

It seemed being raised in a legit cult, complete with a separatist mentality to rival Quakers, had a few – a very few – advantages.

“Jesus,” he mumbled under his breath. “Sometimes I forget you were practically raised as a pioneer. Go ahead. Give it a go. Wood’s wet, I think —”

The wood wasn’t wet, he was trying to build a fire without giving the fire itself any oxygen, a necessary component to any fire building.

“Just build a sort of chimney,” I explained, moving things around. “So the oxygen encourages the flames.” I poked the fire with a stick. “There!”

Flames leapt to life.

“Good,” he said with an impressed look. I was quite pleased myself. “Now do you know how to roast a marshmallow?”

“I told you I’ve never done it before, show-off.”

Minutes later, we sat on logs, bundled in scarves and coats, roasting our

marshmallows.

“Ah! It’s on fire!”

Mine was burnt to a crisp — not intentionally — but his was a perfect golden brown.

“I didn’t know it would catch fire so quickly,” I muttered, staring helplessly at the charred remains of my marshmallow.

Timeo snorted, but the next minute handed me his stick. “Here. Take this. I’ll roast another.”

“No, I can’t —”

“Take it.” He shoved the roasting stick into my hands. “Your first taste of roasted marshmallow shouldn’t be a burnt offering.”

I reached for it, eager to taste it.

Our fingers brushed. I noticed how rough his were, calloused and warm, but most of all I noticed the way I reacted when he touched me. My pulse raced, heat skated across my skin, and a strange, warm sensation built low in my belly.

“You could burn yourself. Don’t touch it, just wrap your hands around the stick—”

“That’s what she said,” I muttered.

Timeo’s stunned gaze turned to me. “Did you just make a dirty joke?”

Who, me?

I meant, I didn’t live under a rock. Not anymore, anyway.

To avoid answering, I shoved the toasted marshmallow in my mouth. Flavors exploded — the warm, toasty, sweet taste of the crispy outer layer, quickly followed by the gooey inside, almost a toffee-like consistency. I closed my lips around it and uttered a moan. It was exactly what I hoped it would be — an almost childlike concoction elevated to something more.

A brisk wind blew my hair into my face, and a long strand stuck to the sticky

marshmallow on my lip. I squealed, trying to take it off, but only managed to get more hair stuck to my marshmallow-covered fingers.

“Jesus,” Timeo muttered on a laugh, untangling my hands from the mess.

We were so close. He stood taller than me, his eyes warm and amused as he carefully extricated my tangled hair from the gooey marshmallow.

All he had to do was take one step closer.

Bend his mouth to mine...

“Starla!”

“Timeo!”

I blinked at the sound of the voices behind us.

“Eden,” I whispered.

“Sergio,” Timeo said with a sober nod.

We kicked dirt over the fire and came out of the woods onto the main path, each of us holding a roasting stick. But to my surprise, neither Eden nor Sergio seemed to care where we were or what we were doing.

“Starla, I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Eden said, uncharacteristically reproachful. She was usually the calm sort.

“I told you she was fine if she was with Timeo,” Sergio said, shaking his head. Timeo stood taller, obviously pleased with his brother’s admiration. “What’s going on?” I asked.

Eden reached for my hand. “They apprehended the remaining elders.”

A sick feeling grew in my belly. I swallowed and kept my head on straight, reminding myself that just today I’d tried to convince Timeo I was an adult. “Did they?”

“Remaining” meant the ones that had escaped brutal retribution at the hands of the Montavios and the Rossis.

“Yes. And that is good news and bad news. The good news is, we’re closer to

getting justice served.”

“And the bad news?”

Eden’s face fell. Sergio cleared his throat. “You’ll have to testify in court.”



A SHARP KNOCK on the door shakes me out of my memory. I stare down at myself, realizing I’m only half dressed.

Timeo’s immediately awake. He sits straight up and stares at me but doesn’t answer. No one’s supposed to know he’s in here.

“Hello?” I ask. “Who’s there?”

“It’s Tosca, please open. It’s urgent.”

I swivel my gaze to Timeo, expecting him to be halfway to the bathroom to go hide by now, but he’s only sitting there — bare chested and perfect, looking like his slightly tousled hair was styled on purpose for a photo shoot.

Why couldn’t I get Italian genes?

“Go,” I hiss under my breath, gesturing for him to go hide in the bathroom. “Hide!”

He smirks and mouths, “Nope,” at me.

My jaw drops for half a second, before Tosca knocks again.

“Please, Starla!”

Grimacing, I run to the door and throw open the lock. Tosca’s fully dressed, hair in place, makeup perfect. I feel like I just woke up with a hangover, and I didn’t even drink last night.

Her eyes flit over my almost-nothing clothing to Timeo, still sitting in bed like he isn’t half dressed himself. He raises a hand and waves at her.

“It’s not what you think,” I begin, but she throws up a palm and stops me.

“Starla,” she says in a firm voice. “You don’t need to tell me what you haven’t done...” She waves her hand in the air as if this conversation is very quickly coming to a close. “As long as we agree we don’t talk about what you will do.”

Will do?

What?!

Oh. My. God.

She continues, as if I’m not standing here wishing I’d get struck by lightning or at least abducted by aliens. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but Romeo and Sergio are here, and both told me they came here immediately so they could talk to you.”

Why not just call on the phone?

Timeo’s immediately sober. “Be right there.”

Tosca shuts the door behind her.

“Oh my God. That was so awkward. So awkward!”

“Yeah. I should’ve taken the damn couch.”

Would he have slept on the couch?

Does he regret being near me?

It’s then that I notice he’s almost like... the real Timeo. The pallor’s gone from his cheeks and his eyes are bright again. His bare chest and arms show marks, though, cuts and bruises, and he’s got bandages wrapped tightly around his middle. I wish I could wave my fingers over his injuries and make him whole again.

I wonder how long it’s been since he actually slept all night long.

“Yeah, I mean, it looks like we— that I—that you—” My voice trails off because I don’t know how to say the next thing. “Spent...time....with each other.”

He grins, reaching for his tee on the floor. I pretend I’m not watching as his

muscles bulge — I pretend I'm not staring at his honed abs, the breadth of his broad shoulders, or the light smattering of hair on his chest and abdomen.

I swallow and look away.

I'm...not the only one who's grown up.

The door to the bathroom clicks shut as he goes to get ready. I take a deep breath.

I pull on jeans and a top, my hands shaking as I run a brush through my hair and wonder why they need to see us. Experience tells me that nothing good comes from urgent meetings at odd hours when you least expect it.

Or when you do.

Why does Tosca seem so certain that Timeo and I are...way more than brother- and sister-in-law? I wish I had the same assurance.

I pause at the voices outside my room. There are like fifty rooms in this damn place, why are they standing outside mine?

I look over my shoulder to make sure Timeo's still in the bathroom. Ugh, I haven't even had a chance to check my phone today, and I need to.

I open the door, step into the hall. It looks like they're further down the hall than I thought.

Walking toward the voices, I flick open my phone, not surprised to see it's blown up overnight with more notifications. I rifle through until I see Maya's.

You alright? It's not like you to be so absent!

I bite my lip and type a quick reply.

Timeo's home

"Starla, there you are." Sergio's standing in the doorway to the reception room dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved tee.

Shit. Tosca is one thing, but Sergio is another. I don't even know what I'd say to him if he saw me and his youngest brother — both of us single —

barely dressed and sharing a bed.

If only he knew how boringly, perfectly chaste we kept it.

“Glad you survived the blizzard,” I mutter.

Sergio’s gaze darkens. Through the windows behind him, the road is crystal clear, though a faint dusting of snow covers the grass on the lawn. “Don’t be petty, get in here.” He steps back into the room. It isn’t fear that makes me hop to when it comes to Sergio. I’ve come to respect him and all that he’s done for me. So I do what he says.

“Timeo around?”

“Here.” Timeo walks in fully dressed, his hair still damp, a gun visible in the holster on his hip. You wouldn’t know that yesterday he looked like shit and that he was snoring three minutes ago. “What’s going on?”

Another door to the reception room opens, revealing Timeo’s oldest brother Ricco and their cousin Romeo.

My heart sinks to my toes. Romeo was in Italy and now he’s home.

Something’s gone wrong.

If Romeo or Sergio, either one of them, had any idea that Timeo spent the night in my bed...

“Where’s Eden?”

“Eden’s fine,” Sergio answers, but he doesn’t say where she is.

“I didn’t ask if she was fine. Where is she?” Panic chokes me. Wordlessly, Timeo reaches for my arm and tugs me into a seated position on a reception room chair he’s pulled out next to him.

“Patience,” he says under his breath in a low voice.

Ricco talks first. “Last night, Timeo alerted us that one of the bushes outside The Castle was obviously trampled.”

I shake my head, confused. That seems like such a small, trivial detail. Why would it concern them so much?

“Okay?”

Ricco and Sergio share a look. Tosca stands with her arms crossed on her chest, her lips pressed together in a thin line.

“The Castle’s been compromised. We ran over the footage from yesterday, and it appears there’s been a plant.”

Ricco holds up a tiny device in the palm of his hand.

“What is it?” I ask.

Timeo reaches for it. “This is a tracker. Sort of like an AirTag. But this one is highly equipped and prepared to detonate.”

My jaw drops open.

“None of you are safe here until we make a professional sweep of The Castle,” Romeo continues. “Mama, you and Nonna will go stay with Orlando. Staff’s been put on paid leave until further notice.”

Tosca nods, not surprised or knocked off-kilter by the suddenness of this.

Sergio speaks up next. “Timeo, you’ll stay at Bella Notte. Starla, you’ll stay with me and Eden.”

Of fucking course they’ll separate us.

I shake my head. “I don’t understand. Why do I have to stay with you if it’s The Castle that’s been compromised?”

Sergio blows out a breath and exchanges a look with Romeo before he turns back to me. “It wasn’t just The Castle.”

My heart beats faster. I’m on my feet, shaking my head, afraid for Eden and my friends —

“Your apartment, Starla. It’s been completely destroyed. Someone sent us a message.”



CHAPTER TEN

Timeo

THIS IS ALL MY FAULT, and I know exactly why.

Starla remains stoic as Sergio and Romeo tell her what happened and show her footage of her apartment.

“What about...Phoebe and Mimi?”

They share a look and Starla’s face crumples. She covers her face with her hands.

Who the hell are Phoebe and Mimi?

“Her golden retrievers,” Sergio says in a low voice. “We can’t find them, Starla. We don’t know what happened to them.”

If someone hurt her dogs — I’ll fucking end them. End them.

I want to hold her. I want to comfort her.

But they’re watching.

“Starla, I need to talk to Sergio and Romeo alone,” I tell her. I don’t even know if she hears me.

“Starla, let’s get you packed up,” Tosca says gently.

“Come,” Nonna says, her arm up as if to embrace Starla and welcome her into the kitchen. “Breakfast. Coffee. Then go.”

To Nonna, feeding those she loves is akin to medicine.

Sergio, Ricco, Romeo, and I assemble in the reception room. They wait for me expectantly.

I go straight for the jugular.

“Let me protect her.”

Sergio shakes his head. “You’re not strong enough. You were only brought to us yesterday, and you—”

“I’m strong enough. Yeah, I’m not a hundred percent. But you all have families, and goddamn it, Sergio, I don’t trust any one of the guards as much as I trust myself.”

Sergio and Ricco look at each other.

“You’re afraid I’m too weak,” I say, shaking my head. I’m on my feet. Toss my gun on the table. “I’ll show you I’m not.” My ribs have been wrapped and I can handle pain. I’m ready to fight.

“Jesus, Timeo, sit down,” Sergio says. “That’s not it. We don’t know who the fuck is after her...” His voice trails off.

Ah. I get it now.

“And you think I had something to do with it.”

Fuck, if he only knew—

When they don’t answer, anger surges through me. “I won’t let anyone hurt her.” I point at my chest. “I’ll die before I let that happen.”

Sergio gives me a pointed stare.

I’m so fucking tired of being the youngest one, never able to prove myself, never able to be exactly who I’m meant to be under the shadow of my older brothers. I was the one that made people laugh, but never the one they turned to unless they needed some goddamn computer hack.

And I’m the one who has everything at stake here.

“If you give me one goddamn chance—”

“To fuck her?” Sergio finally snaps, his eyes smoldering at me. I know I’ve crossed a line when Sergio’s face hardens and I feel like I’m staring at my father’s ghost. “To ruin her? To make her think you love her, only to leave her?”

I stare at him. So that’s what this is about?

“Sergio,” Ricco begins, trying to calm him, but Sergio holds up a hand.

“Her sister’s my wife. And no one, no one, will hurt Eden’s sister. Not you,

not anyone.”

I sit silently, unable to respond, because even I know I can't promise Sergio I won't hurt Starla.

I know I will, but not in the way he thinks I will, and if I tell him the truth—

“I know. Let's go back to Bella Notte,” I say, changing the subject. “All of us. And come up with a plan.”

Sergio watches me coldly.

Romeo nods. “Makes good sense, Sergio. What if The Castle's more compromised than we thought?”

“Revealing everyone's location while here may not be the wisest move.”

Sergio presses his lips together in a firm line. “If they know we're at my house or Bella Notte, they know there's no fucking way anyone's getting past our security measures.”

We talk in detail about what needs to happen until the door to the reception room opens and Starla and Tosca walk in. Starla carries a white backpack and wears a matching white winter coat, still open, as if she put it on only to please Tosca but hasn't even processed what she's doing.

I want to get her alone and soothe her. I want to hold her, stroke her hair, and listen to her tell me what's in her heart and on her mind. I hate that she's hurting, and I can't bridge that gap between us.

I have to stay strong. I have to stay the course.

“Car's out front,” Sergio says.

“I'll be there in a minute. Need to get a few things. Meet you out front.”

I turn on my heel and leave before he can stop me.

I need a few minutes alone, where no one can see me.

When I know they're gone, I step into a vacant hallway and pull out my phone — not the one Sergio gave me, but the burner phone. I type out a message, grit my teeth and press send. I silently pray that this will be enough,

that they'll take this as payment for now, until I can give them something more substantial.

I close my eyes and ask a nameless god for forgiveness for the sins I have yet to commit.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Starla

“CHANGE OF PLANS. We’re taking you to Bella Notte to regroup before we move to plan B.”

Sergio stands in the large entryway of The Castle, his expression as serious as I’ve ever seen. I chew my lip and try hard not to look at Timeo. He’s the one I always go to during times of uncertainty, when I need some reassurance, but he won’t even make eye contact with me right now.

Why?

Just when I think we’re getting somewhere...maybe making a little progress, remembering who we were and picking up where we left off... he gets like this. Withdrawn. Aloof. Not really here at all.

“Why Bella Notte?” I ask.

“It’s the safest place for us all to be until we know the next plan,” Sergio explains.

“It’s a little creepy that it’s my brother-in-law’s sex club,” I mutter. Tosca coughs and Ricco snorts.

“Only part of it’s the sex club, Starla, and we don’t need to talk about that,” Ricco says, his eyes crinkling around the edges.

Tosca smiles and moves the conversation along. “I’m going to pack to head to Orlando’s. How long before The Castle is secured again?”

“No more than forty-eight hours,” Romeo promises. “We’ll make sure it’s secure while we investigate to find out who was behind it.”

I’m in the back of a large, armored SUV when we’re heading back to Boston. This time of day, the traffic into the city’s thick, every highway backed up. I’m by myself, alone in the back. I don’t even know where Timeo is. He disappeared right before we left. I close my eyes, wondering if I’ve only ever imagined any kind of intimacy or interest from him at all.

I don’t want to think about it. I can’t.

I pull out my phone and scroll through the notifications. I snap a few discreet pictures of myself not showing my face, the black interior of the SUV almost anonymous in its starkness.

“Hello, hello!” I say cheerfully into the camera, starting video. “I’m so sorry I’ve been MIA. Thank you for all the comments and messages wondering how I’m doing. I promise I’m totally fine and will be back soon, just had a bit of a family emergency come up. I know you understand. All my love!” I angle the lens so it shows only the lower half of my face, blow a kiss at the camera, and scroll through the clip. I quickly edit it, add a filter and adjust the lighting, then hit post.

I lean back against the seat and close my eyes.



Five years earlier

“I DON’T WANT to do this.”

I sat outside the courtroom staring at the clock. Only ten minutes until the trial began and I’d be forced to sit there where my tormentors sat. I barely slept the night before, tortured with memories of the pain I’d been through and the abuse I’d suffered.

Eden was already in the courtroom with Sergio, in a discussion with the lawyer. I was in the anteroom with Timeo and my other guards.

Timeo stood and crossed the small distance between us. Sitting beside me, he reached for my hand and nestled it in both of his larger, warm ones.

“Talk to me. Tell me what it was like.”

Tears welled in my eyes as memory after memory surfaced. My mother, slapping my face when I talked back to an elder. My father, wielding one of his many implements of choice, punishing me for my transgressions.

“I don’t like to talk about it,” I whispered.

“I know,” he whispered back. “I don’t like to, either. But if you start with me, it might be easier to talk in the courtroom.”

I nodded because this made good sense.

“I don’t even know where to start,” I said softly, fighting against the flood of memories.

“Don’t start at the beginning, like they always say,” Timeo suggested. “Tell me the first memory that comes to mind.”

I closed my eyes and let the tears flow freely. I didn’t bother to check them, because I was a little girl again, alone in my bed. Eden was in the kitchen, while my father sat at a table and watched her. I couldn’t see them, but I could hear them.

“You’re brave, Starla,” Timeo encouraged. “So brave.”

Eden was scrubbing the floor. I couldn’t remember why or how I’d gotten into the state I was in, but I remembered hearing his merciless voice, her small one in return. The welts all over my body from the beating he gave me had been throbbing. My mother was out again, as she often was, at some Bible study or quilting circle or something else approved and encouraged by the elders. It didn’t matter though. If she were home, she wouldn’t soothe me or comfort me when my father punished me.

If anything, she was worse than he was.

“I remember lying in my bed,” I whispered, as suddenly more memories came back to me, like frames of a movie sliding into place. “I remember now. I told my father a boy at school called me a bad name. I don’t even remember the name he said, but my father punished me for saying it out loud. And when I dared to question why I was the one in the wrong and the boy didn’t get punished, my father slapped me across the face.”

Timeo’s jaw tightened and he gave my hand a small squeeze. “Asshole.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, feeling a lightness in my chest because with Timeo, I was able to actually say the things I’d held onto for so long, only this time without fear of repercussion.

“And I told him that I was only called that because I bent over in gym class to pick up the ball, and my dress was loose. Yeah,” I said with a laugh. “We wore all sorts of ridiculously old-fashioned things and mine was a hand-me-down from Eden.”

“Ah,” Timeo said. “And like all good churchgoers, your father had to remind you that it was your job to keep temptation away from the eyes of the sinning boys.”

I grimaced. “Right.”

“Do you remember the boy’s name?” Timeo asked in a low voice, soft enough it almost seemed nonchalant. But I knew better.

Of course I remembered his name.

“Reginald Guffrey. He was awful. He used every single damn benefit afforded him by way of the patriarchy to abuse so many of us. He was married at seventeen to his first wife, and the stories I heard about the way he treated her were horrific. He only—”

The door opened and the clerk stood before us. I closed my mouth.

“You may enter the courtroom.”

Timeo stood and leaned over me, sliding his thumbs to either side of my jaw, cradling my face in his hands.

“You’re the bravest woman I know.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Turning away from me, he casually rolled up his shirtsleeves, revealing the Montavio Brotherhood tattoo on his forearm that would grant him access to damn near anywhere.

“I’ll be going with her.”



THE SUV CRUISES TO A STOP. I blink, surprised that we’re already

here. I've been so deep in my memories that I barely realized we were driving through Boston until we parked.

I take out my phone and ignore the ever-present notifications and messages. I message Eden.

Not sure I should be messaging you right now, but... I miss you. I want to know you're okay. They made me leave the castle.

I don't even know how much she knows, and I know she's rarely on her phone, so it's a shot in the dark.

My heart breaks when I think about Phoebe and Mimi, my babies. My consolation when I was all alone. Where are they now? Are they okay? Some people don't understand how deep a love for a pet is sometimes. Those people probably don't have to wonder if they are loved unconditionally.

I do. And I know now what it's like to be loved like that. Your cat won't judge you for eating too much cookie dough, as long as you remember who her majesty is and give her the proper attention afforded royalty. Dogs don't mind if you don't return a text message or forget their birthdays. They greet you with the same no-holds-barred affection and love as always.

I blow out a breath and square my shoulders. I'm heading into Bella Notte. Here we go, sex club.

What I wouldn't give to explore the recesses of Bella Notte and all the deviant delights it has to offer...with Timeo, of course.

Yeah, I went there.

When we reach the door, I'm flanked on all sides.

"Wow. Feels good to be a V.I.P., boys—" I start to say, when I realize it isn't just men this time. A tall, lithe woman with hair slicked back in a bun at the nape of her neck stands next to me, walking in militaristic fashion with the others.

"Good to see you here," I tell her quietly, even though I don't even know her name. She winks at me and opens the door.

It smells heavenly here, like warmed cinnamon and sweet vanilla, mixed with a liberal dose of fresh-baked bread and roasted walnuts. Homey. Comforting. My stomach churns.

“Where is everyone?” I ask blondie as we enter the community area of the club near the bar. My heartbeat spikes when I see Sergio and Timeo sitting at a vacant table in the far corner of the room. They must’ve driven at the speed of light. They seem oblivious to my presence.

Doors are opening and closing, and voices are chattering as the others arrive.

“It’s daytime,” she explains patiently.

“Ah. So why aren’t we going to the safe room?”

She cocks her head to the side. “You must be confused. There’s no safe room here, ma’am.”

Oof. Right. I nod.

“I am, silly me, I was thinking of The Castle.”

Clearly, I’m not supposed to know of that room, but I’m not fooled by her lies. She knows exactly what I’m talking about.

Interesting.

“So yeah, can I get something to eat?”

“Certainly, Starla.”

“And your name?”

“Mercedes.”

Ohh. I like.

She turns and exits, now that I’m likely in the secure confines of the inner sanctum of the Club, with Sergio and Timeo only a few yards away.

Expected something like Sam or Shawn, but Mercedes is lovely.

More voices join the various conversations. It sounds as if the others are arriving — likely the rest of the brotherhood.

My phone buzzes.

Eden:

Hi, honey. I'm so sorry I'm not there. I'm home with the kids and an army of guards large enough to start a Third World War. I am so, so sorry to hear what happened. Sergio didn't tell me details, but I can surmise. I love you. I miss you. I will see you as soon as this craziness blows over.

My heart feels like it's caught in my chest. I sigh and shoot her a quick reply as the door to the hallway opens and Mercedes walks back in, bearing a large platter of pastries and muffins.

"Thank you."

"Mercedes," Sergio barks from the corner of the room. I wait for him to call me over, or even look my way, but he doesn't. Timeo acts as if I'm invisible.

Well, then. I have work to do, and I have my phone. All I gotta do is find a quiet, private place.

Huh. Easier said than done. I stroll over to the bar. Fern, the resident bartender — tall and fit with a mane of luscious red hair—gives me a little wave.

"Hey, sweetie. How are you?"

Yeah, so Sergio's going to pretend that everything's just fine, unless he deems you worthy of the knowledge of the inner workings.

Got it.

"I'm good," I lie. "Hey, you got some orange juice?"

"Of course," she says brightly.

"And you don't happen to have like a secret portal to a private location unencumbered by the prying eyes of the brotherhood?" I ask, half joking. "Storeroom, closet, hidden trap door." I sigh. "Utility closet?"

Fern's eyes twinkle at me. "Overbearing, eh?"

I shake my head. "You have no idea."

Fern leans in. “Come here, and I’ll tell you a secret. But you have to promise not to tell anyone else. It’s useful to have a secret room, isn’t it?”

I nod eagerly.

“This one isn’t exactly secret, but it’s mostly Quinn’s, and if you go in the right way, you’ll know exactly why they can’t see you.”

“Ah. Got it. Okay, hook a girl up.”

A minute later I’m heading upstairs armed with a bottle of juice and a large blueberry muffin crowned with thick crystals of sugar.

That’ll do.

The hallway outside this bar is an almost-portal, according to Fern, with doorways to private rooms and a small entrance almost hidden that takes you to one of the least expected rooms here — a dance studio. Apparently before the Montavio brothers bought this place and fashioned it into an exclusive, members-only club, it contained several establishments, including a dance studio.

I open the door and smile. It’s gorgeous in here. And definitely secluded. I’m under no illusion that I’m completely off the radar by any stretch, but I’ll be able to hear footsteps if anyone actually makes an effort to track me down.

I check my phone. The only person I want to find me isn’t beating down the door, so I’m good.

I nestle in a quiet corner of the studio, sitting cross-legged in front of a mirror. I give myself a little wave, then a reluctant high five. I’ve heard that studies have shown giving your reflection a high five actually increases your ability to be productive, but who knows.

It’s fun.

I bite into the muffin and thank my stars my sister’s so good in the kitchen. Delicious. Yummy. I swig down some juice and when I’ve had enough sustenance, I open my phone.

I hit the state of flow I fall into when I’m working, that place suspended in time when you become unaware of the clock or your surroundings, you’re so

submersed in creating. It's an art to record just the right inflection of your voice, to speak just the right words. I stare into the camera and begin to tell my story.

My eyes grow heavy. My words grow slurred from exhaustion, and I start losing track of what I'm saying.

It's warm in here. How much did I actually sleep last night? I lean my head on my arms, wiped out after the events of the past few days, and I fall into a deep sleep. It's been so tiring, and God, the thoughts that have resurfaced have the power to absolutely knock me on my ass.

"What the fuck are you doing up here?"

I sit up abruptly and realize the room is dark and stifling. I blink rapidly, trying to get my bearings. Where am I?

When my eyes finally adjust, Timeo is standing against the doorframe. Backlit as he is by the light in the hall, I'm unable to see his darkened face but there is no mistaking his voice and stance.

"What?" I ask. "What's the problem?"

"What's the fucking problem?" Timeo asks, his voice tight with fury. What the hell?

He stalks across the glossy studio dance floor and prowls right up to me. I try to get to my feet, but they've fallen asleep.

"I fell asleep," I say on a yawn, rubbing at my feet to get the circulation going again.

"And shut off your phone," he snaps. "Didn't tell anyone where you were going. Locked the door behind you?"

Did I lock the door? I don't remember locking the door. And I didn't shut off my phone...

"Fern knew where I was. She told me to come up here."

He frowns. "God, you're exhausted, look at you. I think you're getting confused? Fern isn't here, Starla. She went home hours ago."

Hours ago?

“What time is it?”

“Noon.”

I yawn widely. “Then why’s it so dark out?” I ask.

“Stop changing the subject.”

I shoot him an angry look. “Stop being an asshole.”

“An asshole?” he asks. In two seconds he’s in my space, right in my face, and I can see I’ve somehow pushed one of his very few buttons, because his eyes are filled with fury. “Keep it up, darlin’. I’ll show you just how much of an asshole I can be.”

Excuse me?

“Look, I don’t know why you’re so mad,” I say, my voice shaky. “And hey, what is that supposed to mean?”

“I’ll tell you what that means.” He straightens and pulls me up to stand in front of him. Did he get taller? Or did I get shorter? I crane my neck to look up at his features, contorted in anger. “It means everyone’s left the club. It means you and I are here alone, and I’m the one who’s here to protect you.” He keeps talking but I think my brain just short-circuited.

“...Sergio left to join Eden and the rest of his family because the snow they predicted finally came. I saw your location on my phone, but it only shows you here, at Bella Notte. So I’ve combed this place looking for you, and you were nowhere to be seen.”

I try to process all of this, but my still-sleepy mind is confused and jumbled.

“What?”

“It means,” he says, reaching for my chin so that he can grasp it in his hand, locking my gaze on his. “That you’re under my protection now, and if you want to do anything to jeopardize your safety, you’ll deal with the consequences.”

Blink.

Swallow.

Cough.

What?

I stare, uncomprehending. “You’re my guard,” I repeat.

SINCE WHEN HAVE you gotten all dominant?

...SINCE I KNEW you liked it.

“I AM.”

The heat crackles between us, making me break out in a sweat. “It’s hot as fuck in here,” I whisper.

He swallows and licks his lips, his gaze wandering downward. “Maybe you should take some of those clothes off,” he says in a husky voice.

I look down at my chunky sweater and thick jeans, then snap my gaze back to him.

“Pretend I didn’t say that,” he mutters.

“I will do no such thing.” I get up on my tiptoes. I wrap my arms around his shoulders. “We’re alone?” I whisper.

His mouth is inches from mine. His breath smells like mint, warm and exotic on my skin. “Yeah, baby.”

I don’t wait for an invitation. I lean in.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Timeo

AT THE LAST SECOND, just before her lips hit mine, I turn my head away.

I can't, I won't.

I promised Sergio I would protect her, and I'm the only one who fully knows what that means. I want her so badly it's killing me inside, but I know that if I take that step with her, if I break that seal —

I know what's at stake.

"You asshole," she says again, but this time her voice wobbles. Starla flings her hand out and pushes my chest like a toddler shoving away her broccoli.

When I don't budge, her cheeks flame and her eyes flash at me.

"Why don't you take some of those clothes off," she singsongs as she shoves again, this time with both hands, harder.

She's right, though, and I know it. I should've kept my fucking mouth shut.

"Why?" she says, her voice shaking with anger as she puts her whole body into pushing me away from her.

I grab her wrists, my pulse surging at the delicate feel of her heart beating beneath my fingers. We stare at each other from only inches away. Her beautiful eyes search mine, her breathing labored and heavy.

"Let me go," she whispers.

I shake my head and pull her to me, so her chest slams against mine. I restrain her against my chest.

"That all you got? A seventh-grade curse word and a slap that wouldn't bother a fly?" I shake my head. "Pathetic."

I shouldn't be fucking baiting her but goddamn, she makes it easy. Sinfully seductive and ornery as hell, Starla is fucking begging to be dominated.

My phone vibrates in my pocket at the same time hers does. Weird. I lost

service half an hour ago and thought a cell tower was out.

“Go ahead. Take it,” she challenges, still trying to pull away from me. I’m acutely aware of the thin layer of clothing that separates us from each other as she continues. “You know you want to. Probably one of your brothers, asking you for a kidney. Maybe they didn’t take enough of your flesh already and want you to sell yourself back to their enemies.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Jealousy doesn’t become you, Starla.”

“I’m not... jealous,” she says haltingly through gritted teeth, as if she’s only now contemplating how jealous she really is.

She doesn’t meet my eyes.

Keeping hold of one of her wrists in my right hand, I fish the phone out and check the notifications. Jesus. I didn’t get these texts when service was down, and now they’re all delivered in rapid succession. All from Sergio.

Eden needs me. Storm’s coming. I’m leaving.

And one that followed a few minutes later.

You still here? I sent everyone home. Storm’s starting for real this time, I don’t want anyone traveling in this. Club closed until further notice.

And another.

Check in when you get this. I trust you.

He trusts me.

To keep Bella Notte safe.

But more importantly... to keep Starla safe.

We’re alone.

Indefinitely.

“Anything important?” Starla asks, obviously annoyed still. She’s pulled her wrist free and her arms are crossed on her chest as if to protect herself, her

eyes rolling heavenward.

“Got cell service for now, texts catching up,” I say, tapping the weather app on.

Jesus. Thirty-six inches expected in the next twenty-four hours. We’re getting slammed.

“Ah. Can’t report to big brother anymore?”

I slide my phone in my pocket and turn to her.

Sergio’s gone.

I know exactly the locations the cameras in this room record.

I know exactly where they don’t.

Starla’s shit at hiding her emotions and today is no exception. I watch as she swallows and licks her lips.

“You’re mad because I didn’t let you kiss me.”

“Nah,” she lies, her voice husky and low. “I didn’t really want to kiss you anyway.”

I snag her wrist again and pull her so she’s closer to me.

“Is that right?”

She licks her lips. “Well, yeah, obviously. I just want to know who those messages were from.”

I war with what I want and what I know is right. I know I have to stay the course, I know I have to keep her safe.

“And,” she says, her lips pursed, her free hand coming to rest on my chest. “We should probably have some ground rules, then, if you and I are stuck in a sex club for God knows how long and we’re not even going to kiss, much less do anything... else.” Her momentary bravado slips, and for one flash of a second, I’m looking at the girl we found so many years ago.

“Starla—”

The hand on my chest lifts and she interrupts, palm facing me. “No. Uh uh. No way, Timeo.” Her voice cracks, and my heart cracks right along with it. If only I could tell her the truth, but I can’t. Not now. “One minute you’re suggesting I take my clothes off and the next, you’re acting like I’m a— a child who has a crush on an older boy who doesn’t even know she exists.” She yanks out of my grip and takes a step back.

I let her go.

“And there... may have been a time when that was true.”

Never. Not once. I always knew exactly who she was.

When she blinks, a tear rolls down her cheek.

Fuck, I’m an asshole.

“Starla—” I take a step toward her and this time, she backs away.

“No. I have fucking had it, Timeo. I spent my whole life being manipulated, used, and hurt, and I won’t allow it to happen again.” Her eyes flick to the large windows in the studio then back to me, firm in her position.

“Is it really Sergio and Eden who you’re afraid of? You’re an adult, but guess what, so am I.”

I wish Sergio was the only one I was afraid of. Afraid isn’t even the right word. I know what it’s going to mean to protect Starla, and I know the steps I must take. I also know that telling her any of this would jeopardize her safety.

But sometimes, it’s easier to let someone believe what they think is true.

“I’m not afraid of Sergio.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. And honestly, baby, I don’t think I’m the one that’s afraid.” I take another step toward her, and this time her back hits the barre in front of the mirror, proving my point. I cage her in, my hands gripping the barre on either side of her, pressing my body to hers.

I’ve tried pretending I didn’t know her.

I've tried rejecting her, even as it damn near killed me.

I've got one other move to play. If she trusts me... if she knows that I'll keep her safe... it might work.

But first, I need to know.

"Tell me the truth, Starla. I want to hear it. I want you to tell me that you're scared. I want you to tell me that you want this." I lick my lips. "Because you know if we cross this bridge, there's no coming back."

"Coming back to what?" she snaps. "Wondering if you ever cared about me? Wondering who you're sleeping with? Wondering where you go at night when I don't see you? Wondering whose perfume's on your skin? Back to what, Timeo?" She chokes. "Giving you my heart so you can break it all over again?"

I stand in front of her and trace my finger along her jaw. She shivers, her eyes fluttering closed as I slowly run my fingers down her neck to her collarbone, her skin pebbling beneath my fingers.

"You're right," I whisper. "We can't go back to just being friends."

I know why I've held back, and I know why I want more. And I know that if I unleash myself... if I open that cage... I'm going to destroy both of us.

Starla's eyes flash open.

"As if we were ever just friends."

I can't stop myself.

I brush my lips against hers.

I cup her jaw and kiss her again, deeper this time, as her lips part and she melts against me.

I'm woefully, completely unprepared for what happens next.

It's like two stars colliding.

A supernova.

A fusion of light and energy and need, an intense connection that's irrevocable and transformative. A full and total culmination of desire, emotion, passion, and love kindled with so much more.

Longing.

Tenderness.

The fulfillment of utter completion.

Time stands still as I lose myself in her. My fingers tangle in her hair. Her hands are around my waist, her perfect body flush against mine. We deepen the kiss, our moans mingling, and the need to claim her suffuses me. I grip the nape of her neck and hold her to me while I kiss her, a silent branding of my mouth to hers.

There's so much I want to tell her that I can't speak with words. I'm not even sure how anyone could express to another human how deep and powerful fully surrendering to loving another truly is. What it truly means.

I slide my hand down the length of her back and kiss her again, relishing the softness of her lips. Her delicate flavor. The feel of her in my arms.

Panting, she pulls her mouth from mine.

"Timeo," she whispers before she drops her head to my chest.

I stroke her back. "You okay?"

Starla lifts her head and begins to laugh. God, she's beautiful, her face alight with humor and joy and relief. "Am I okay? Of course I'm not okay. You made me feel alive for the first time in my entire life, and then... I lost you." Her voice cracks.

I kiss her again and love how she kisses me back. Time loses meaning until we pull away for breath. My hands are tangled in her top and hers are gripping my ass.

Shit.

"How'd I do?" she asks, wriggling her brows at me.

"Not sure," I say on a groan, because my fucking dick has a mind of its own.

I want her. I fucking need her. I can't think beyond making her mine in every way possible.

"I'm not sure," I repeat, my voice low and husky. I hold her chin and bring her gaze to mine. "Maybe we should try again."

Her phone vibrates. It's on the floor beside us.

"Leave it," she says, shaking her head, but when she kicks her phone to the side like it's a pesky fly, I can't help but think she's hiding something again.

I want her. I need her.

I lean in to kiss her again.

"You and I are gonna have a talk about what you're hiding," I warn her, holding her gaze.

I love the way she bites her lip. I love that demure look she's giving me.

"Oh, will we?" she asks seductively when I lean into her. I brush my lips against hers.

A loud crash tears us apart.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Starla

ARE you even kidding me right now?

Fuck.

I thought my heart couldn't beat any faster.

I was wrong.

“What was that?” I ask, as a mask falls over Timeo's face and he's all business again. When he's making me laugh or flirting, it's hard to imagine who he really is— one of Boston's most notorious, feared by the richest and most powerful people in the world.

Right now? That's pretty easy to imagine.

“Good question,” he says with a scowl that makes my hair stand on end. “I'm about to find out. You got a weapon or no?”

“You know I don't—”

“Here.” He shoves a gun into my hand. He knows I know how to shoot because he was the one that taught me. “Get behind me and do not shoot unless it's absolutely necessary. You got that?”

“Of course,” I say excitedly, holding the weight of the gun in my hand with a little thrill. I love how this feels.

“I hope it's necessary,” I whisper under my breath. I mean, I don't want to kill anyone, but it feels like magic when you pull the trigger.

“What was that?” he says over his shoulder.

“Oh, nothing.”

That earns me a grumble, but he's too intent on figuring out what that noise was to push it.

The studio is clear, which comes as no surprise. No one's up here but us.

The main area of the club, though, now that's another story.

"Do you know the layout of the club?" Timeo asks, his gun poised as we walk in unison.

"Of course I don't know the layout of the club. I've barely even been here before. I know there's a kitchen, a safe room everyone likes to pretend doesn't exist, a bar... and beyond that? I dunno. Sex rooms?"

My cheeks feel hot. I was trying to joke, but he does a terrible job hiding his smirk, and now I wish I could take that back.

"Sex rooms," he says with a nod. "You could say that."

We walk down a long hallway. Timeo systematically checks each doorway. "These are the private rooms that are all locked during the day." As predicted, each is indeed locked.

"How sure are you that everyone's gone home?"

"Positive. We're the only ones here. I promised Sergio I would find you and he notified all the employees we weren't opening tonight."

There's one more room in this hall we still have to check, the last room before we get to an open doorway lit from within.

I swallow.

I want to ask him who has access to the club, but for some reason, my voice doesn't want to work. I'm not sure why I'm so nervous. I'm with Timeo and we're both armed. It was probably snow or ice or something outside...

Still, I press a bit closer to him. He definitely doesn't seem to mind.

"Who has access to the club?" I whisper. I suddenly have a pressing need to know. How far have I been kept outside this circle?

Timeo puts a silencing finger to his lips and tries the lock.

The handle turns.

My heart threatens to burst out of my chest as I mentally go through the steps of how to pull this trigger.

With a final push, Timeo throws the door open.

“Oh, God,” he says with a grimace. I cover my mouth and stifle a snort. He tries to close the door behind him, but I flick my foot out as a stopper before he does.

“No way. I wanna see.”

“Starla,” he growls. “We have a job to do and you’re not gonna let a few ropes distract you now.”

“A few ropes?” I say with a laugh. “That’s like calling Niagara Falls ‘a little waterfall.’”

Clearly, someone was in here, and that someone was very into bondage.

Lengths of ropes of every different size and kind and length are looped elegantly on black velvet mats. This room has obviously been set aside for just this purpose, as large, framed prints adorn the walls, each one more evocative and sensual than the last. Men and women, wearing nothing but... ropes.

My mind absolutely goes there.

Me, kneeling before Timeo, his beautiful face tight with concentration as he slowly winds the ropes about me.

Losing complete control to him.

Absolute surrender.

My heart thunders in my chest.

“Is that—” I ask, my mouth agape, just before he takes me by the arm and yanks me out of the room.

“Timeo, I wanna see.”

“Later,” he snaps. “You can see later.”

Well, he didn’t say no.

“I’m gonna hold you to that,” I mutter.

When we come to the bar, we find the source of the loud crash.

“Well, there ya go,” I say, pointing to some boxes askew on the floor. “Someone didn’t stack them properly. Probably rushing out before the snow came.”

“Yeah,” he says, frowning. “Right.”

“Can’t see anything else out of place, can you?”

He doesn’t respond, but bends and picks something up off the floor — a piece of paper? Empty package?

“What’s that?”

“Not sure,” he says, fingering it. “But I’m gonna find out. I want to check the video footage in the surveillance room to see if we missed anything.”

It’s the most boring hour of my life as I sit and literally twiddle my thumbs in the surveillance office. The only reason I don’t play with my gun is because for some reason, it was freaking Timeo out and he took it away. Grump.

I twirl in my chair, catching glimpses out the window at the drifts of beautiful white snow, the flakes reflecting like diamonds in the streetlights as they fall from the heavens.

And I remember...



Three years earlier

“IF YOU THINK you can hide out here and I won’t find you, you’re wrong!” Timeo shouted, his voice echoing at the edge of the forest.

I covered my mouth with my hand to stifle a giggle. He liked to pretend he knew everything and that he couldn’t really be fooled, but Timeo had no idea I was hiding behind a literal wall of snow at The Castle.

We’d been buried under a veritable blizzard that closed the roads from here

to Boston. Timeo and Sergio had arrived the night before to prepare for Christmas.

I loved Christmas at The Castle, the halls adorned like they were designed straight out of the old songs, with boughs of holly, sprigs of mistletoe. Twinkling lights like diamonds lassoed from the velvet night sky. The biggest evergreen tree I'd ever seen was firmly planted in the midst of the living room, ensconced in so many ornaments I could barely see the green branches. Silver boxes were nestled beneath those branches, and like a child I'd snuck a peek when no one was looking. My name was on lots of them.

I didn't even care what was in them.

I mattered to someone.

I had a family.

"Starla, I swear to God!"

I still flinched a little when he took the Lord's name in vain.

Old habits died hard.

I took stock of the pile of snowballs beside me. He barely stood a chance. I meant, the guy wasn't even really wearing a coat but some kind of lined hoodie or something.

I took a few of the smallest snowballs and tossed one about six feet in front of me. It plopped harmlessly to his left. Timeo's head swiveled around, and my jaw dropped when he reached for his gun.

His gun!

What the hell?

My heart started to beat a little faster.

"Starla," he began again. "You okay? I need to know."

For the first time, the playful atmosphere took on a more serious feel. Did he really think I was like... kidnapped or something? Hurt?

A rush of emotion flooded through me.

He cared.

But also... It was time to make my move.

I tossed another snowball to the opposite side, and when he swung around, I threw yet another snowball as hard as I could.

BINGO.

It smashed right in the middle of his back.

“Starla,” he growled, putting his gun away. “Get your ass out here.”

When I didn’t move, he bent and gathered snow in his hands. “Fuck,” he muttered. “Son of a bitch.”

Ah-ha! He might’ve been bigger and faster, but I was the one with gloves. I was the one who’d grown up without the benefit of smartphones or the internet, so I was well schooled in how to play in the snow. Making a snowball with your bare hands hurt.

It was now or never.

I stood, an armful of snowballs gathered to my chest, and pelted them at him, one after another.

The jerk had good reflexes, though, and he ducked damn near half of them.

The other half, though? He was toast.

Snow splattered against his chest and legs, but still he marched on. I had no idea what he would do when he got to me, but he didn’t let the barrage of airborne missiles even slow him down.

“You are in so. Much. Trouble,” he growled, narrowing his eyes as he advanced on me. I stared down at my quickly diminishing store of snowballs. He was too fast, undeterred, and while my plan had a decided beginning, I was sorely lacking an ending or even any type of exit strategy that would get me out of this.

So I did what any much smaller woman in a snowball fight would do if she was at a strategic disadvantage because her worthy opponent was a disgruntled, riled, older man with a chip on his shoulder.

I threw every snowball I had in rapid succession until I had none left, and when the last one landed straight in his face... I ran.

But as I ran, I was starting to see the benefit of being scantily clad in the snow. Whereas Timeo might've been freezing his ass off, he'd be light on his feet, while I felt like I was running underwater, bogged down with my puffy coat, hat, gloves, and boots.

I knew that there was no way I was going to be able to get away from him, and he was going to catch me very quickly. I had to make the most of it. So I ran harder, using my smaller figure to duck under tree limbs and zigzag through the familiar woods I knew well, because I spent every day out here.

I stopped when I came up against a wall I hadn't seen before. I was so taken aback that I stared, unsure what to make of this. What the hell was this? A brick wall, right here in the middle of the forest? Why?

I paused just long enough to sink any hope I had of escaping Timeo's pursuit. Seconds later he plowed into me from behind, knocking me to the ground.

"Hey!" I said, laughing because I didn't have any breath left in me. He didn't hurt me, of course. It was like shoving me onto a pile of pillows, the snow a welcome landing.

I managed to get to my knees and toss more snow at him, which fell in harmless tufts. I knew it was a futile attempt, that there was no way I was going to get past him now.

Still, when I caught him off guard I got back to my feet and made snowballs from the armful of snow I snagged.

When one of my snowballs caught him on the ear, he ducked and started brushing it away, so I tried once again to make my escape. But I slipped, and fell, and before I knew what was happening, he fell...straight on top of me.

Like on top on top of me.

His whole heavy, strong body straddling mine. I could tell by the look of shock on his face that he hadn't intended for it to happen any more than I'd intended to be pinned beneath him. But my God... How did something that was friendly, and fun, and even childlike, become so... instantly erotic?

Fire?

I expected as soon as he realized how close he was, that he would leap off me and pretend it never happened.

But... he didn't.

The smoldering heat in his eyes grew until his pupils were so wide I felt as if I stared into total darkness. I swallowed, barely able to breathe, as strong hands clasped my wrists and pressed them into the snow.

"You thought you could get away with it," he said in a husky voice, making my body do all sorts of things I was unfamiliar with.

Things I craved.

Things I fantasized about.

"I did, though, didn't I?" I said, in a little voice.

"Do you think this is getting away with it?" He gave a boyish, lopsided grin that made my heart do a somersault in my chest.

He was so close to me he could kiss me.

If he wanted to...

Did he want to?

We stared at each other for what felt like an eternity. Neither one of us was breathing, the air between us still and clear of any wisps of steam.

"Your eyes aren't blue," he finally said, perplexed.

I blinked. "What?"

"Is it witchcraft? Your eyes aren't just blue at all, they're bluish gray."

I was pinned under Timeo, far away from anyone that would ever tell us this was inappropriate, half in love with him. And we were talking about the color of my eyes?

"Yeah. They, like, change and stuff. Depends on what I'm wearing, depends what the weather is like, depends on..." I swallowed hard. "Who's looking at

me.”

The slightest press of his hands on my wrists pinned me to the snow as he held my gaze.

“Starla, you’re beautiful. Don’t you ever forget that.”

I half expected him to want to take it back, to realize that he crossed a line he shouldn’t have.

I almost wanted to shake him and tell him he couldn’t stop being my friend. I wouldn’t let him. He was the best friend I ever had.

When I relived this memory a thousand times in the future, I will do so many things differently. I will say something witty and cute. I’ll return his gaze and let him know it’s fine to kiss me. I will thank him for calling me beautiful.

But there, in the moment it actually happened, I was as frozen as the snow on the ground around me.

My whole body was on fire. And I didn't know what to do with that. I had no experience, no reference point, except full condemnation of any attraction growing between a man and a woman who weren't married... Or even worse, not approved by an elder. I knew enough to reject this, but not enough to build my own narrative.

“Oh, my God!” I yelled.

Curiosity flashed across his eyes as he looked over his shoulder. “What?”

It was going to work. I jackknifed up, completely engulfed in outerwear, but I was able to put him just enough off-kilter that I shoved him into the snow. And I took off.

“You little brat,” he growled. “You are gonna get it now.”

I had no idea what “it” was, but God, I loved it when he got all growly. I had no words to explain how it affected me, but I knew I liked the way my heart beat faster, my palms grew sweaty, and I longed to be nearer to him.

I was screaming, ducking from one clearing to the next, out of breath with laughter as he gained on me, when I stepped on a slick patch of black ice. My

ankle twisted beneath me and I went sprawling, crying out when a sharp pain gripped me.

Timeo caught me in record time, tossing a full, enormous armful of snow at me. I squealed and twisted but grimaced when my ankle throbbed.

“And if you think— aw, Jesus. You hurt? Of course, you’re hurt. Just when I was gonna get my revenge.”

But I knew he was only teasing me, as he knelt beside me and cradled my twisted ankle in his still-warm hands.

“How are you so warm?” I asked, my teeth chattering together. “I’m fah-freezing.”

He didn’t answer, inspecting my ankle. “Could be a sprain, might be broken.”

He helped me to my feet, but not before he smacked me with a full pile of snow.

“Hey!” I shook the snow off.

Timeo shook his head, his dark brown eyes dancing. “You had to be punished,” he said smugly. “Before we get back to The Castle. You’re lucky I took it easy on you.”

My pulse raced.

I brushed snowflakes out of my eyes and shivered as a trickle of icy snow made its way down my neck.

“I’ll get you back,” he promised. “You’re still in trouble. But let’s see if you can stand on your own.”

I tried, but my ankle throbbed with pain, and I faltered. Timeo caught me before I lost my balance completely.

“I think it’s broken,” I said, my voice wavering. I swiped impatiently at my eyes, frustrated that a fun romp in the snow had come to this.

Frowning, he shook his head. “Come here,” he said, his voice gentling. “You’ll need help back. I’m gonna carry you, and don’t you dare try to

protest.”

He knew me so well. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him no way.

But my ankle hurt, and I wanted to get dry and warm again. So I let him.

My heart swooped when he bent and lifted me.

I could hardly breathe when he pulled me to his chest, our faces just inches from each other.

“Relax, Starla,” he said in a soothing voice. “Let’s get you fixed up.”



I STARE at the screens in front of us, brought back to the present. One boring thing after another flicks by, but something finally catches my attention.

“Hey.” I roll my chair closer to him. “I... let me see that again?”

“See what?”

“Can you rewind that?”

He obliges, and I take the mouse, slowing down the frames of the footage from the bar earlier that day. Timeo, Ricco, and Sergio sitting at a table. The bar mostly vacant. Then it looks like only seconds pass, but in the next frame, the sun through the windows has shifted.

“Do you see what I see?” I ask him. “There’s like a gap. One second, the sun is reflecting on the snow outside the window behind Ricco, the next it’s shifted way more than it would have in only seconds.”

Timeo’s eyes narrow. “Someone intentionally manipulated the footage.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Starla

“I FEEL LIKE A DETECTIVE,” I say, my heart beating faster. I hop off my chair and look around the room. “Was that pen there before? I do not remember seeing that pen.”

“Jesus,” Timeo mutters. “We just found evidence of video footage being tampered with. You think this is a laughing matter?”

I shake my head at him and give him my most dazzling smile. “Honey, one thing you have to understand. After you’ve been through what I have, everything is a laughing matter.” I pick up the ballpoint. “And seriously, about this pen.”

Timeo swivels his chair around, propping an ankle on his knee and leaning back so he can look me over more fully.

I swallow hard when his eyes smolder.

“You have been through a lot,” he says softly.

I lick my lips.

“Yeah.” A pathetic, useless response, but I only say it because our reality is starting to hit me pretty hard, and my voice doesn’t want to work right now.

We’re alone.

And we aren’t kids anymore.

Were we ever?

Timeo puts both feet on the floor with an air of finality. The space between us crackles as we stare each other down.

“This isn’t a laughing matter,” he says, but his eyes twinkle. I think he’s looking for a reason to go all stern on me.

I cock a brow and plant a hand on my hips. “Says who?”

His gaze is loud and clear: challenge accepted.

“Me, of course. Someone is out to hurt you,” he says, his voice low and husky. With both feet on the floor, his knees part. I drop the pen on the desk and let myself slowly, leisurely stare at the spread of his legs. The way his strong hands lay at rest on his knees.

I lick my lips and swallow.

I’m done waiting.

Done.

And with his next words I realize he’s done, too.

“Come here, Starla.” Timeo pats his knee.

Every step toward him makes my heart beat faster. At the back of my mind, I know that we’re not safe, that we probably shouldn’t let ourselves get distracted... As I draw nearer to him, my heart’s erratic tempo makes me nearly quake.

“Someone tampered with that video,” I whisper. “But no one’s here, Timeo. It’s just me and you. So whoever did it’s gone now.” I lick my dry lips. “We’re alone. In the club.” I let my gaze flick to the window as I take another step toward him. “Indefinitely.”

“Jesus,” he mutters, laser focused on my approach, his eyes burning straight through me. “You aren’t going to make this easy for me, are you?”

My knees hit his. My skin tingles with anticipation.

“Depends on what this is. Easy for you to stay away from me? Oh hell, no.” I slide one leg over his, then the other, straddling him. I wriggle my hips at his obvious erection.

He slaps my ass hard and fast, making me squeal. Molten fire licks at my core. “Naughty girl,” he says, tsking at me. “Of all the times and places—”

I lean in and press my mouth to his.

This time, he lets me.

I sigh into him, the weight of my body melting into his. With his strong fingers woven in my hair, he pulls. Pain radiates along my scalp in the most

delicious ways. No one's ever pulled my hair before.

I like.

I lick his tongue and he rewards me with another delicious pull of my hair before he cradles my head in his large, capable hands. I squirm deliriously, eliciting a groan from him. I'm instantly wet. A low thrum of insistent need pulses between my thighs, and my core aches to be filled with him.

He bites my lip and pulls my hair, tugging my head back so that my lips slide off his, giving him full access to my bare neck. I brace myself on his shoulders as he drags his mouth along my throat. "Do they have surveillance cameras in the surveillance room?" I ask, my voice unrecognizable to my own ears.

He smells like snow-capped mountains, clean and brisk and so masculine, I'm boneless in his hands.

"No," he mutters into the crook of my neck. I shiver at the warmth of his breath on my sensitive skin. "Jesus, woman, you're gorgeous. What I want to do to you..."

"Mmm," I murmur, pressing my core against his erection. That earns me another delicious, firm slap to the ass. "What I want you to do to me. I mean, let's be honest, Timeo. I am not fucking around with you at this place when anyone else is here. I'd rather poke my eyes out with tweezers than do anything... like that... in my sister's sex club. But now that we're alone... and you have full access to the cameras... and shutting them off..."

I lose the ability to talk as his rough hands find the edge of my top. Just the feel of his palms on my naked skin beneath my top makes me moan out loud. Oh, God, yes. The tops of his thumbs stroke beneath the fullness of each breast, only a tease before he pushes the silky fabric up and traces the bare skin.

"I've wanted you for so fucking long," he growls. "So fucking long, Starla. The only goddamn thing that kept me going when I was in captivity was imagining... this."

"Me sitting on your lap?" I tease, as I bring my hands to his back and ease his tee up. Oh, God, I love the feel of his hot, taut skin beneath my hands, the

strength of his muscled back, and the way he holds me tighter when my hands touch his bare skin. “You imagined me straddling you in the surveillance room?”

“You, baby,” he says with a laugh, nodding. “Anywhere, anytime, it was the only thing that I held onto.”

A strange tightness chokes me.

Not his family.

Not the brotherhood.

Not his duty or loyalty.

Me.

“Timeo.” My voice is all trembly before his mouth closes on mine. Time ceases to exist as we kiss lazily. My heart soars and sings and swells.

Timeo wants me as badly as I want him.

And no one can stop us.

I hiss in a breath when he lifts up my bra, the fullness of my breasts cupped in the palms of his hands. I stop breathing.

“Aren’t you hurt, though?”

“Fucking scratch,” he says, even though I know he was on serious pain meds and those rib injuries were no laughing matter. But I know he’s been hurt a lot worse than this.

“Are you crying, Starla?”

Am I?

I swipe at my cheeks, surprised to find them wet. “I didn’t mean to... they’re not... I don’t think they’re sad tears.”

Timeo cradles my head in his hands and stops my mouth with his. It doesn’t matter who he is. It doesn’t matter who I am. It doesn’t matter who’s plotting against us or what danger lurks around the next corner. All that’s left is me

and Timeo. All that's left is us.

I relish every touch of his hands. The slightest brush of his tongue on mine makes me moan, my pulse racing.

"Still a virgin," he rasps in my ear before he nips the lobe. "I can't fucking believe you saved yourself, baby." Bringing his mouth to my ear, his warm breath tickles my skin when he whispers, "Do you have any idea what I want to do to you?"

"Hopefully... everything," I say in a breathy whisper. "Everything."

"You mean that?" he says in a growl that kicks my heartbeat up.

"Of course. It's... it's you."

I trust him with my life. What could he possibly do to me that I couldn't trust him with?

"But we're in a sex club..." he says in a voice that's half warning, half promise.

Are you, now? Let's see about that.

I open my mouth to reply when he lifts my top completely off. The balled-up fabric loosens my phone in my back pocket, and it clatters to the floor, the home screen plastered with notifications. He reaches for it.

"Don't!" I protest, reaching at the same time. If he sees my screen — if he sees even one notification —

Oh God.

It's too late. He's got my phone in his hand. He was trying to do me a favor, and now —

He grows still beneath me. My breathing accelerates.

"Give me my phone, please," I whisper, but I know it's too late when his gaze darkens.

I don't know what he saw or what he's thinking, but I know him well enough to know I'm fucked.

“Here,” he says, handing me my phone.

I wait for the other shoe to drop. I swallow and lick my lips, but he doesn’t say anything.

At first.

I power my phone off with trembling fingers and toss it onto the desk. I fight the desire to whip it against the wall and break it, but I’m not sure why.

“We are alone,” he says, his voice low and seductive. “No one to stop us. No one to hear your moans... or your screams.”

My pulse races. “Right,” I say, pretending I’m not damn near choking on my heart in my throat. “We are.”

He wraps his hands around my torso. For some reason, the silence around us seems almost deafening. I’m aware of how easily he could hurt me. I’m so much smaller than he is, so much more... fragile.

But this is Timeo.

Timeo wouldn’t hurt me.

Would he?

“Come here,” he says.

Come here? I’m already — oh.

I’m over his... his lap.

My belly on his knees and my hands flat out in front of me.

I close my eyes against a rush of emotion and need. I’ve never been in this position before. I’ve imagined it. And imagination doesn’t hold a candle to the actual feel of surrender. The erotic pulse of need when he palms my ass.

“Time to fess up.” Timeo’s voice takes on a hard edge that catches me a little by surprise, but I’m over his lap, he’s definitely in the dominant position here.

“Mmm?” I ask, pulse accelerating.

“When were you going to tell me?”

I still. “Tell you... what?”

He slaps my ass so hard it feels like his whole palm covers the entire surface. I gasp and squirm and open my mouth to protest when he answers.

“What you’re hiding.”

“I’m not—” I begin, but I can’t lie to Timeo. I can’t. Even if I were going to, the next hard spank stops me mid-sentence. I squeal when he gives me one spank after another in rapid succession.

“You lie to me, and I’ll bare your ass, Starla,” he growls. “Tell me.”

I can’t hold it back forever. It was only a matter of time. So I give it my only shot.

“Take me off your lap and I’ll tell you.”

That only earns me another hard spank. Goddamn it, why does that turn me on so much? I’m on fire even as I’m fighting the need to find a way out of here so I can run—

“This is your last warning.”

I open my mouth to tell him and find I can’t talk. “I — I—”

He grabs my pants and starts to pull them down. My cheeks flame. This is not the way I want him to see my bare ass for the first time.

“Timeo, no! I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you, okay?”

My voice trembles.

He pauses, his hand resting on my flaming hot ass.

“Go on.”

I sigh. I was going to have to tell him eventually.

“It started as a fun little thing I did just to make friends. I... started anonymously posting online, and I was shocked when people wanted to... to know more about me.”

I can feel his growl all the way to my belly. I squeeze my eyes shut.

It doesn't help.

“And I... I started an account. Anonymously. And it's... it's grown... a lot.”

“What kind of platform?” he asks.

“I...” My voice wobbles. “Well. All of them.”

I don't care if he whips my ass right now. I kind of feel like I deserve it. But if he pushes me away, or he tells Sergio on me, or rejects me in any way—

I'm upright on his lap, my aching ass against his knees. Timeo's eyes are as serious as I've ever seen them when he reaches for my chin and holds my gaze.

“You're an influencer?” he says, his gaze probing mine. “You make your money on social media? For anyone to see?”

I swallow and nod. It sounds so much worse when he says it. “Yeah.”

“Fuck. That explains everything.”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Timeo

I CAN'T DECIDE if I want to pull her back over my lap and blister her ass, or if I want to dig us out of here and take her away so I can truly hide her where no one will ever find us.

“Explains what?” she asks, her beautiful eyes luminous and wide, brighter with the blush of her cheeks and the flush of her lips.

“Jesus, Starla. There’s no such thing as an anonymous platform. No such thing.”

Biting her lip, she finally nods. She knows.

“It explains how they knew who you were.”

“Who, Timeo?”

I shake my head. “Our enemies.” It’s more than I should tell her and still not enough. “Someone tipped them off.”

“From... based on what?” she asks, shaking her head. “I never told anyone who I was. I could’ve been any of the thousands of women in New England. I don’t understand.”

“They have their methods.”

We weren’t careful enough. Is anyone ever careful enough? They tried to break me over and over, but I never caved. I would’ve died rather than betray my family.

But when they showed me the picture of Starla...

“We can’t tell Sergio and Eden. They’ll lose their minds, Timeo,” she whispers.

I trace her chin. “I know, baby. But you and I are gonna have to keep a few secrets, aren’t we?”

She can’t continue doing this. She’s gonna have to shut it down.

But when my mouth meets hers in a sigh, we lose track of time and place. My heart beats along with hers, and I return to where I was. I wanted to punish her for withholding this from me, but I know I haven't given her space to really trust me. Not yet.

I will.

"I want you," I whisper in her ear. "And I don't care anymore what anyone else thinks."

"What changed?" she whispers back, her arms around my neck.

"I wanted to protect you." I hold her against me and relish the warm feel of her body against mine. "But I know, baby. I'll protect you no matter the cost. The closer I keep you, the better."

"I... know how we can get even closer. Oh, God. Timeo!"

The panic in her voice makes me stiffen. My gun's in my hand before I realize she's pointing at my arm.

"You're bleeding!"

I'm so relieved I almost laugh. "It's a scratch. Jesus, baby, I thought it was something serious."

"Oh my God," she repeats, pushing herself off my lap. I want to reach out to her and yank her back, but I let her go.

For now.

"Here I am, all but throwing myself at you, and you're injured."

I roll my eyes. "I'm fine. Jesus."

"You're not! You're bleeding!" Reaching for me, her brows draw together adorably. "Let me see."

I let her see.

She stares at the wounds on my arms and neck.

I let her.

I'm not hiding from her anymore.

"I need a bigger gun," she murmurs. Starla's gaze turns icy. "If I ever get my hands on the men that did this to you—"

"You'll fucking run the other way," I growl. "Leave it, Starla, I'm fine."

Tears well in her eyes as she lifts my tee and tosses it. It drapes unceremoniously over a couple of computer monitors in a lazy, messy, heart-shaped loop, like a physical sign we're leaving logic behind and finally listening to our hearts. "I can't change a lot of things, Timeo. So please." Bending down, she brushes her lips against one particularly angry bruise. "Let me have this. I hate that anyone hurt you. I want to take care of you."

I cup the back of her head and bring her mouth to mine in a kiss that can only be described as a claiming. I want to brand her, to mark her as mine, so that no one will ever question that Starla is woven into the fabric of my very being.

I kiss her until she's slumped against me, any fear she has of hurting me gone again. Until her body's flush against mine and her cheeks are blushing pink. I cup her ass and she squeals when I tug her closer to me.

I hold her to me with one arm and clear the desk with the other, haphazardly shoving all the equipment into one messy bunch.

Wordlessly, I lift her to stand in front of me. With her gaze fixed on mine, I strip off her clothes down to her panties and toss everything to the floor.

"Jesus, Starla," I say, as I stroke the length of her body. I cup her bare pussy in my palm and lean in to drag my tongue along the hardened buds of her nipples. "I'd have to kill anyone who saw you dressed like this. Tell me you're fully clothed in those fucking videos, or I swear to fucking God I'll take my belt to your ass."

"I'm clothed," she breathes, bracing against me as I tweak her nipples between my thumb and forefinger. "But I'd be game to try that belt sometime..."

I growl and lift her onto the desk. There's so little to the panties it's an easy job to push them aside. I lean in and breathe the sweet, seductive smell of her

arousal.

“Fuckkkk.”

I want to eat her out until she screams my name. Fuck her until she’s breathless and sated, then hold her to me until she falls asleep.

I want to bring us to that place of intimacy we’ve both craved, the place where we begin and end with each other.

“Touch your nipples,” I say in a low rasp. “Now.”

I love the way she melts and bites her lip as she obeys me. A thrill ripples down my spine as she tenderly touches her breasts, her perfect pink nipples taut beneath her fingers.

Our eyes lock as I reach between her legs, press my thumbs to her inner thighs. She stifles a whimper when I slide my thumbs over her sex. I draw lazy circles and her back arches.

“Oh, God,” she whimpers. She swallows hard, her lips slightly parted. I press the fabric against her clit and continue to circle, watching her reactions. She’s so close, so on the edge, with only a few strokes she’s there. Her body writhing beneath my hands, her perfect nipples grasped between her fingers. I relish the feel of her body spasming in ecstasy and imagine what it would be like if it were me inside her that brought her to climax.

Our naked bodies locked together as we chased pleasure in each other.

I hold her to me when she comes down from her high. She sighs and tucks her head against me.

My lips tip up in a smile until she reaches for my belt.

I have to stop her.

Fuck.

“Not yet. No,” I say, but when her face falls, I have to explain. “I don’t have any protection, baby. Do you?”

She bites her lip and shakes her head. “No, dammit.”

I gotta get out of here. I have to get her dressed and get out of here while the taste of her is still on my lips.

I reach for her jeans and hold them out for her to step into. I fasten them before I snag her top. Starla looks shy and pleased.

I tug her top down and watch with chagrin as her perfect beauty is hidden under the fabric. She's perfection personified. Perfection deserves to be worshipped and adored, not hidden.

We'll get there.

"Let's get something to eat. I need to shut all this down. I'll meet you in the hallway."

I don't know if she's eying me with suspicion or it's just my imagination, but she quietly waits for me outside the door.

With a sigh, I check to see whether I still have cell service. Spotty, but it's there.

I pull up the footage I came for. Attach it to the secure location I was given and hit send.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Starla

IT'S HONESTLY hard for me to think straight right now.

I'm standing in a hallway at Bella Notte while Timeo shuts down monitors — which ones? I'm not exactly sure, but I'm more than a little grateful we won't have video evidence of whatever it is he plans on doing with me.

My heart thumps at the possibilities.

They're... endless.

I bite my lip as I think about the room with the ropes, and all the other rooms we passed on the way here that basically were begging for our attention.

I'm not the straitlaced little prude I was when the Montavios rescued me from the clutches of the fellowship, but I'm also not even close to being... experienced.

I've had opportunities, but I never wanted to be with anyone else that way.

I've wanted Timeo since I knew what those butterfly wings in my chest meant.

I've wanted no one but him since I knew our friendship had blossomed into something so much more.

"Half my kingdom for a steak and potatoes right about now," Timeo says, rubbing his stomach as he joins me. "What do you think they've got here?"

I know it's a common expression, but... I kinda like the idea of Timeo and a kingdom.

I want to be his queen.

I slant him a teasing look. "What will you give me if I find steak and potatoes?"

"Depends," he says, his eyes narrowing on me, a half grin teasing his lips. "Do you know how to cook them?"

“Nothing a good ol’ YouTube video can’t show me,” I say with a nonchalant shrug.

“And if we lose cell service again?”

Shit.

“What did people do in the old days?”

He smirks. “I dunno. Learned from grandparents and cookbooks?”

I shake my head. “The Dark Ages for sure.”

To walk toward the kitchen, we need to pass the main bar area. I pause at the bar where the boxes fell.

Would boxes really make that much noise?

I bite my lip, thinking. I guess it would depend on what was in them, but we were all the way upstairs—

“Are you sure we looked at every possible avenue here?” I stand at the bar, looking around me curiously. “It just seems strange, don’t you think?”

“We’ve swept the place. I checked and locked the kitchen before I came to find you.” Frowning, he jerks his head toward the kitchen. “But it’s most easily accessed from outside.”

The kitchen, located near the main entrance, has both an inside access door and an outside exit.

“In the middle of a blizzard?”

“It’s unlikely, but I want to be safe.”

“Wait. Do you mean to tell me I could’ve been... doing what I did... and someone could’ve been here all along?” My question ends in a high-pitched squeak.

He blows out a breath. “I hope not.”

I breathe that air back in again but keep my shit together. I take out my gun and hold it before I nod. “Let’s do this.”

Timeo nods, his own weapon in his hand as he goes ahead of me.

He looks over his shoulder at me. The overhead light hits his jaw, highlighting the roughness of stubble on his strong chin. “You look so fucking sexy, baby.”

My cheeks flush hot. For years I’ve wondered if he ever thought of me as more than a sister-in-law, more than a friend... but now I know that’s not a question.

“Alright, I’m gonna open this door. You ready?”

My heart pounds, and I have to take a tighter grip on the gun because it’s slippery in my damp hands. “Of course I’m ready.”

Timeo kicks open the door. It flies back on its hinges, but behind it nothing at all moves. He holds his gun in front of him like he’s a detective in a movie, and I imagine I look every bit the part of his hot accomplice, not a hair out of place, my whole body taut as I hold my gun with both hands.

There isn’t a thing out of place. Nothing moves. No one’s been here.

I take a look around the kitchen, poking around in the fridge and finding bread rising. “Eden was planning on baking that today, wasn’t she?”

“Yep. She was on tonight, but we closed the club for obvious reasons.”

When Timeo puts his gun away, I follow suit. No one’s here.

“Looks like a picture in here, really. And it would be a shame to see that bread dough go to waste.”

Eden likes her workspace to be immaculate, and while Sergio has professional cleaners come in, Eden always gives it her own spin.

“You have a gas oven, don’t you?”

Half an hour later, the bread is rising for the second time, shaped into a loaf I’ll bake in a few hours. I’ve got eggs scrambling in a frying pan and plump sausages in another. My stomach churns with hunger.

“Coffee. We need coffee.” Timeo heads toward the coffee maker that looks like a miniature spaceship. He flicks the button on the side of the machine,

but it doesn't light up.

"What the fuck," he mutters. That coffee machine is about to meet a very unfortunate demise.

"We'll make campfire coffee," I say with a shrug. "Easy. I'll show you."

I boil water on the stove, then pour it into a large bowl with coffee grounds, give it a stir, and let it sit. "Give it five minutes."

"What sort of sorcery is this?" he mutters.

"Once the grounds settle, you just pour the coffee right off the top. The key is to make sure the grounds stay on the bottom, so you need a steady hand."

He smirks. "I have a very steady hand."

"And a very dirty imagination, clearly."

"You love it."

He eyes his cup with trepidation. But after he tastes it, he's a clear fan.

"That's fucking delicious. You learn that at the fellowship?"

"Oh yeah," I say with a grimace. "That's all I learned. How to prepare food for a potentially large family or the end times, whichever came first."

"So you mean to tell me, all these years, we've been using fancy things to make coffee and filter it and all I needed was some coffee grounds, water, and a pot."

"Of course. I mean, most things are done for the sake of convenience, aren't they?"

He sits on a stool. Taking another sip of coffee, he cradles his cup and watches me curiously as I turn the sausages.

I decide to broach a difficult subject. "This is kind of... I mean I know you probably don't want to hear about it, but... this is like the whole, like, shtick of my content."

He tips his head to the side. "Yeah?" I hear that warning in his voice and feel

it in my core. I remember what it felt like over his knee.

"It started with this whole thing of me saying, I was like an Amish girl in a city, and I explained I'd only really been kind of raised that way? And I started doing things like... well, things I learned how to do growing up."

"Like what?"

"Cooking from scratch... canning." I finish the eggs, turn the heat off under the sausages, and pile both of our plates high with food. "Baking... yeast bread and quick breads, cookies, biscuits. Quilting. Churning butter. Sewing a few things. I even showed them how to make their own soap and candles."

When he doesn't respond, I go on.

"You know, people think modern appliances make their lives easier, but... there are benefits to simple living, you know? There's this whole press toward mindfulness, and a part of me sort of wonders, would we need to remind ourselves of that if we lived simply to begin with?"

Setting the plates on the table, I wipe the counter down and quickly tidy the space up. When I look up, Timeo's staring at me as if he's just seeing me for the first time. I squirm under the heat of his gaze.

I chatter on. "I mean, here I am with my ripped jeans, and my cropped tops and my dangly necklaces... standing on a step stool so that I can knead bread." I shrug. "They eat it up. I think most people long for simplicity."

When he doesn't respond, I swallow and look up at him again. "What?"

"I can see why you have so many followers."

A flush creeps along my neck and up into my cheeks.

"Can you, um, get us something to drink and I'll grab the forks?"

"Of course," he mutters, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. "You're gonna have to stop that, Starla."

I look over my shoulder at him, confused, my hand poised above the silverware drawer. "Stop... what?"

He doesn't meet my eyes as he takes two bottles of water out of the fridge.

“Your online stuff. It's too risky, and now's not a time when you can take risks.”

I knew this conversation was going there eventually but hearing him say it makes a ball form in the pit of my stomach.

I gather my thoughts.

All he'll have to do is tell Sergio and Eden, and I'll have pressure from all of them to stop.

I think about telling him why I need this, why it's become a part of who I am. But when I open my mouth to speak, all that comes out is, “No. I can't.”

“Starla. Your apartment was ransacked. They took your pets.”

A pang hits my heart. "They probably did that because you're home. They probably want you to come out of hiding, so they have another reason to hurt you." I take a swipe at the lone tear that rolls down my cheek; now is not the time for tears.

"It's my livelihood," I continue, steel in my voice. "And you can't make me take that down. I will not accept your money, or Sergio's, or Eden's. This is my money, Timeo. And this is how I make it. I've been as anonymous as possible, and just because you guys have some pretty bad enemies, doesn't mean I do."

I'm shaking as I turn away from him. I start hand washing the dirty dishes, forgetting there's a dishwasher.

“Come here and eat your food,” he finally says, gesturing at my untouched plate.

But I'm not done. “This is what I do. This is who I am.” My voice wobbles. “This is the only thing I'm good at.”

Timeo tilts his chair back and folds his arms across his chest, giving me that look that only Timeo could ever give me.

Other people might believe lies, but he definitely never did.

"The only thing you're good at?" He thinks about that, his head cocked to the

side. "Pretending to be someone you're not? Hiding anonymously behind a platform? So all those people who follow you don't get to see your face, to talk to you, get to know who you are?" Raising a brow, he still stares at me, his arms crossed on his chest. "That's not who you are. And I'm not saying you can't make a damn good income being an influencer, or whatever the fuck. But there are lots of things you could do Starla, that show who you really are." He gestures again at the plate. "Now get over here and eat your food."

I set my jaw and stare at him. "I'm not hungry."

He considers me with narrowed eyes. "Not what you said a few minutes ago."

I'm starving, but I don't want him to think he can push me around and tell me what to do. I've played that game, and it isn't one I have any interest in playing again.

"Do you have any idea how much money I have saved?"

I pull up my phone to show him but find the cell service is out again. He probably wouldn't be too impressed anyway, since the Montavios are all billionaires.

"I came from nothing, Timeo. I have earned every penny I have. I am not going to let anyone take anything else from me again."

When he doesn't respond but only silently points to the plate, I finally cave. We eat in silence for long minutes. I'm starving but hardly taste it.

Finally, Timeo pushes back from his plate. I lay my fork down, full, and so tired.

Wordlessly, he gestures to me.

I am helpless to fight anything that brings me closer to him.

I go to him.

With ease, he slides me onto his lap and turns me to face him.

"Starla. I'm not trying to take anything from you. What you've been through

makes you who you are. But I've seen the people I love hurt badly by people who want nothing more than their own gain, and I won't let that happen to you."

The people that I love.

"I get that," I say in a little voice. "Um, for now, it's a moot point because we have no service."

"Deal. But we will discuss this again."

I nod and stroke my hand along his jaw. I love the prickly feel of the stubble. He smiles at me, his gaze softening.

"Do you remember that time you were at that party in Harvard Square..."

I groan out loud. "Nope, uh uh, that never happened. We don't need to discuss such things."

He gives me that lopsided grin that makes my heart tumble in my chest. "Oh, it fucking happened."

"Do you remember the time you were at Sergio's bachelor party and got shitfaced and lost? Remember how I saved your ass?"

He groans and covers his face with his hands. "Jesus, I forgot about that."

"Convenient thing, getting so drunk you forget your stupid antics, eh?"

"Very," he says with a smirk.

That was the first time I put my neck on the line for somebody, but it wouldn't be the last. I would do that for Timeo over and over and over again.

I laugh at the memory. "I stole Sergio's car and pretended that I was lost in Boston. He was so mad at me. I think it was the first time he was really mad at me and not just annoyed. The only reason why I did it was so he wouldn't notice what you did to his car."

"Jesus, tell me about it," he groans.

"You know, you were my first friend," I tell him candidly. "I knew people back in the fellowship, women, and girls mostly my age. But they were all

brainwashed. They believed the fellowship was everything and their whole lives were dedicated to doing everything right and following every rule.” I pause. “I didn't really know what a friend was until I met you.”

Kneading the small of my back, he nods. “You were my first friend, too.”

“What? No way. You didn't grow up sheltered like I did.”

“I wasn't sheltered like you, no, but I was absolutely sheltered, babe. It was very different. And yeah, I have my brothers, but I was never able to measure up to them and I got damn sick of the comparisons.” He lifts his hands so they graze my sides, stroking me until I lean in a little closer. “You were the first person I ever opened up to.”

The first who ever saw his vulnerability. The first to know how utterly human he is.

The countless hours sitting on the craggy rocks that overlook the beach behind The Castle, the secret trysts we had in the woods that surrounded it, the nights he would come and secrete me away to catch a movie in Boston or go to a concert. Eden would flip if she knew. There were lots of things I could do with a boy several years older who had a license and money.

We have so many memories together, it's hard to sort through them. Do they mean to him what they mean to me? Does he treasure them the way I do? Like precious keepsakes locked in a box, I pull them out and sift through them with leisurely nostalgia.

Does he remember the necklace he gave me and why? He hasn't mentioned it.

But I know Timeo. Timeo doesn't forget anything.

“Do you remember the time we got stuck in that corn maze?” I say with a laugh. I got it into my head that we all had to do all the fun fall things and make those family memories I never had the privilege to make before. So I dragged Timeo, Sergio, and Eden with me to pick apples, carve pumpkins, feast on apple cider donuts, and go on a rambling hayride at a farm north of Boston. One particular farm had a corn maze.

“Fuck,” he says with that grin that makes my heart squeeze in my chest.

“That maze. Jesus, we were lost for hours, weren’t we?”

So lost, the sun set before we solved it, and Sergio called his crew to find us.

“Every row of corn looked like the next and when we finally got to what we thought was the end, we realized we were right back where we started from.”

“I think they did it on purpose, I swear they did,” he says seriously. “All that attention in the media.”

“I never could understand why Sergio got so mad at you,” I say, shaking my head. “I mean he can be scary, and I know it, but he was only ever like a brother to me, and I thought he had a sweet spot for you, but I swear to God if Eden hadn’t intervened, he would’ve disowned you.”

Timeo gives me a funny look. “You don’t know why? Seriously?”

I bite my lip and think about it. “I—” And then it hits me with the force of a two-by-four. I’d turned eighteen the day before. I was a legal adult, and the very first thing Timeo did with me was get lost for hours, alone, in a corn maze.

“He thought you — oh my God.” I stare at Timeo with wide eyes. “Eighteen-year-old me would’ve absolutely died of happiness, you know.”

Timeo flattens his palms on my back and hisses in a breath. “You don’t make it easy, Starla.”

I wriggle on his lap again, luxuriating in the control I have over him. “I don’t? Oh. I’m so sorry.” I bite my lip.

“Starla,” he groans, dropping his head back. “Jesus.”

I must confess I am quite enjoying myself.

I shift on his lap again and curl my hands around his shoulders. I move so close my sex is pressed to his hardness and my breasts to his chest.

“Remember when we lost our keys on the beach?” I ask. I barely recognize the seductive tone of my own voice. “You took me out for ice cream because you said you were proud of me.” I laugh.

“Oh God,” he says with a laugh that thrills me. “You pranked Sergio. He was

all super old school and had that chalkboard in his office at The Castle. You snuck in and put baby powder in the eraser.”

I nod. “Yuuppp. And you were like, no one has ever pranked him so thoroughly and so well, and the next thing I knew we were getting ice cream sundaes at the beach. And after giving me shit about my ability to eat a sundae in record time when I licked my sundae cup clean... you then proceeded to lose your keys.”

We’d looked and looked until it was so dark out we couldn’t see a thing, and when we didn’t find them—

“Yeah,” he says, before he swallows, tugging me closer to him. “I remember.”



Three years earlier

TIMEO HAD PROMISED Sergio we’d be back by dark, because something had happened at the club involving one of their friends. I could hardly remember the details at this point, but I knew Timeo and I had just witnessed the wedding between Quinn, one of the members of the club, and Sergio’s closest friend Adriano, one of the men of the brotherhood.

We sat on a flat rock, still warm from the sun, until the streetlights behind us came on and the waves looked such a dark blue, they were almost black just beneath the surface.

“Do you want to get married someday?” Timeo asked. I stared at him, uncomprehending, until it dawned on me that he was only asking the question in general and not... if I wanted to marry him.

“Maybe. You?” I asked him while mentally nursing my wounds. I sat next to him as a lone gull picked at something washed up on the beach.

“I have to.” He tossed a shell at the gull when it got too close to where we sat, but it only flapped its wings at us, undeterred by two shadows on the beach when there were still stray snacks to be found.

“What do you mean you have to?” I asked, sifting handfuls of sand through my fingers. “You didn’t grow up like me, expected to marry a stranger your parents picked for you—”

Timeo laughed mirthlessly. “So I guess no one’s told you yet.”

My mind raced with the possibilities. “Told me what?”

“I’ll have to marry,” he said with a frown. “We all have to, and it’s rarely for love. Quinn and Adriano didn’t marry for love, did they?”

I frowned. “She kind of looked like she hated him.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “Ricco’s marriage was arranged, too. Most of them are.”

That took me by surprise. Minus the religious norms and strict regulations, it made no sense to me, but the worst part was the sinking dread I had in the pit of my stomach. The sudden need to cry.

It took me a minute to even realize why. Up until then I had told myself that Timeo was my best friend. I knew I had a crush on him but assumed it was a schoolgirl thing. But the thought of him marrying someone... especially someone he hadn’t met or even liked... it dashed any hope I had.

I stood. “I have to go home,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “The streetlights came on so it’s getting late and I have a lot I have to do.”

Timeo stood up wordlessly. “Listen, Starla, I— fuck.”

“What?” I looked at him in alarm.

“My keys. They were in my pocket. They’re gone.”

“No! Oh, I bet they fell out when we were walking down toward the other end of the beach. Remember, you gave me your sweatshirt when I was cold?” We looked at the wide expanse of the beach. It went on for miles and was almost entirely plunged into darkness.

Walking along the beach at dusk and walking along the beach after dark were two completely different things. I knew Sergio and Eden wouldn’t be happy, but when Timeo took my hand in his, I didn’t care anymore.

He wasn't engaged.

Not yet.

Maybe he wouldn't be married after all...

We wandered the beach together, hand in hand, and never did find those keys.



“OH MY GOD,” I say with a laugh, covering my mouth with my hand. “Sergio sent you to Tuscany on a job after that. After the corn maze and getting lost on the beach thing. Did he think— we—”

Timeo's eyes go dark as he reaches for me. “Of course he did. Not that I didn't want to, but I knew better.”

“Knew better because Sergio would kill you?”

Timeo cups my jaw. God, I love when he does that, the feel of his warm hand on my skin, the way his eyes burn with intensity —

“No, baby. I didn't want to take advantage of you. You were too young, Starla, too hurt by the fellowship. I needed to keep things platonic between us.”

Heat flares in my chest. I'm struck with the sudden need to smack him. “Is that what you thought? You jerk. I would've given anything to— for you to —”

Bringing his other hand up, he cradles my face in his hands. “Do this?”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Starla

I MELT AGAINST HIM. I'm boneless the second his lips touch mine, my body almost completely out of my control. My mouth parts and he takes it more fully.

"Starla," he growls. "I don't know how I can keep my fucking hands off you."

Every time he touches me, it feels like someone's stoking an inferno. The embers glow red-hot, ready to ignite—

"Timeo," I say, tilting my head back. "We're in a sex club. Do you mean to tell me you can't find a condom somewhere?"

"Jesus, you think I want to wear some heart-shaped condom they used for Valentine's giveaways? Yeah, no, baby."

"Surely the Montavio Brotherhood has a solid supply of condoms?"

He growls. "Gonna earn yourself another spanking, teasing me like that."

We've managed to make it back to the bedroom, but it seems we were safer in the kitchen. Fewer chances for skin-to-skin contact.

Not that it's impossible...

I roll over on his chest and stretch, feeling sated and pleased but wanting so much more. I want him.

In me.

Now.

Frowning, Timeo pulls out his phone. "Still no service. Shit. This is not good."

"Why not?" I stand and head toward the ladies' room to use the facilities.

He raises his voice enough for me to still hear him as I walk away. "I've got business to do and the people I'm working with aren't patient."

“Oh.” Huh. Interesting. “Who?”

He’s only just gotten back. How could he have business to do already? Hardly anyone even knows he’s here.

Except... except the people that brought him back.

I turn back around and look at him curiously.

Could he... have been the one that made those boxes fall? Stacked them in such a way they’d fall after a little while?

Could he have been the one that tampered with that surveillance footage?

“What?” he says, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say, grimacing, because I have definitely watched too much reality TV.

I shut the restroom door behind me with trembling fingers and realize I’ve completely lost my mind here.

This is Timeo. The man I trust with my life. There’s no way he’s done anything to betray his family, or to put me in danger.

No. Way. God, I feel like a kid even thinking he would. Timeo would die rather than betray his family.

I clean up and stretch again and look out the tiny window that overlooks a small courtyard behind the club. I shiver, so I reach for his discarded tee and tug it on. I breathe in deeply. I love the way it smells like him.

The snow’s piled as high as the window, so deep the heavy drifts almost cover one of the cars parked on a street behind the courtyard.

Wow.

It’s eerily quiet in this huge place without guests, though, and only a minute looking out the window has me running back to join Timeo.

“Jesus,” he says, watching me walk back to him in nothing but his tee.

“What?” I pretend I don’t know how I affect him. It’s a superpower, after all.

“Come here,” he says on a yawn. “We won’t escape here anytime soon, you know that. And you’ve about worn me out. Naptime.”

The mere suggestion makes me yawn. “That sounds wonderful,” I say as I climb into bed beside him. “Do I get to snuggle with you?”

“Of course,” he says, lifting his arm.

My heart thumps as I slide onto his chest and wrap my arm around his torso. He holds me to him. With my cheek pressed to his skin, I can hear the steady beating of his heart.

My eyelids grow heavy. I yawn.

“I always wanted to do this,” I say. It’s so warm and comfortable, lying up against him like this in a way I never dared to do before. He’s so warm and comfortable. I close my eyes.

“What?”

“Snuggle with a hot guy, obvs,” I say and stifle a smirk.

He pinches my ass.

“Any hot guy, eh?”

I yawn again. “Of course not. You know it was only ever you.”

My words slur.

I fall asleep, *only ever you* echoing in my mind.



I’M BACK at the fellowship, but I’m the age I am now. I look down at myself and see that while I still have my new tattoo on my left ankle, I’m wearing a hand-me-down dress that’s too short and ridiculously conservative. I look around me and realize I’m standing in my family’s kitchen.

“Eden?”

I want to leave. I have to get out of here. I’m an adult, and I don’t belong here

anymore, and our home under the fellowship was destroyed.

I see it. A door. The door to get out! I rush to it and open it, only to find another damn door.

My heart sinks. I don't see anyone else here, but I have the certain feeling that someone's after me. I know I'm not alone now.

I know I have to escape.

I rush to the next door, and the next, even though by the time I get to the fifth I know exactly what I'll find on the other side. I stifle a sob.

I'll never get out of here.

I'll never get back to the place where I have friends, where I'm loved, where I'm free.

I'll never get back to Timeo.

"You thought you could escape?"

I freeze at the sound of my father's furious voice. I turn to see him sitting in a corner, glowering at me.

"You're not real," I say, shaking my head.

He stands and advances on me.

Not only is he not real... he's dead. He's been dead for years. But that doesn't stop the rapid beating of my heart. I look around me for something, anything to protect myself with, and find there's nothing. The room is bare as always, and my father's holding a gun.

He points it at me. "No daughter of mine will whore herself out and bring the curse of Satan upon us. You know where you're going and that you belong there."

I reach for the door and yank it open, and this time it opens into a room. "Timeo!" I yell into the room. "Timeo!"

"He's a traitor and you're not safe with him," my father says. "Call his name one more time and I pull the trigger."

“Starla.”

It’s Timeo’s voice, soft at first, then louder when he says my name a second time. “Starla.”



I WAKE with a start from my dream. I blink in the darkness of the room and close my eyes as relief floods me.

I’m not in the fellowship.

It was a dream.

“You’re crying, baby,” Timeo says softly, holding me to him. “Are you okay?”

I swipe at my eyes and wipe them dry. “I was back in the fellowship. They were going to kill me. He said I was a whore.”

“Who, Starla?”

I close my eyes, my voice trembling. “My father.”

Timeo holds me close. “Jesus,” he mutters, his arms tightening around me. “It was just a dream. Forget about it. Your father’s dead, baby.” He swallows hard. “You know most of them are.”

“But I didn’t see them. I have no evidence, Timeo. What if they’re still out there, looking for me?”

Timeo lifts me onto his chest so he can look straight into my eyes. “You have my word, Starla. If anyone—anyone—tries to hurt you, they’ll have to come through me first. You get me?”

I swallow at the sudden intensity of his gaze, the sudden vehemence in his voice. I nod. “Yeah.”

I can defend myself, I know that now.

“I know he isn't alive anymore, but it still feels so real sometimes.”

Timeo strokes my damp hair from my forehead. "I have those dreams, too."

"What happens in yours?"

At first, I think that he doesn't want to talk about it. He works his jaw and seems to be contemplating what he wants to say. "Mine vary a lot. I have some where I realize that the men I've killed aren't dead. And they're after me. I have some where my father's back, I'm a kid again, and I'm in the house I grew up in. I'm under his thumb, and there's nothing I can do to leave. But none of those compare to the ones I have about you."

I swallow. "About me?"

"Yeah," he says in a low voice. "I sometimes have dreams someone's coming to get you. And I can't get to you. I can't rescue you. And I know in the dream that they're going to hurt you."

"Wow, we're kind of a mess."

He chuckles, and I love the way my body responds to him. It feels so good to hear him happy.

"Believe it or not, I'm starving. You?" he asks.

"Yeah, we had like eggs and sausage hours ago." I give him a quick hug. "I'm sure we can find something more to eat around here."

"Yeah, I hope so. They were supposed to get a shipment in from the suppliers a couple days ago, but they couldn't get here because of the snow."

I push myself out of bed and stretch my arms over my head. "You know, I know how to make bread from scratch. I can also make preserves from watermelon rinds, and I'm able to make tea by hand out of leaves dried from herbs. Plus, Nonna's taught me some of her secrets. I'm pretty sure I can find something to cook here."

I reach for a pair of jeans crumpled on the floor.

"No." My heart beats faster, and the need to be closer to him shoots through me all over again.

"No, what?"

"I don't want you wearing anything but that T-shirt." I turn around and look at him, a little bemused.

"What changed, Timeo? Is it because I'm older?"

"That's part of it, yeah. But it's way more than that." He rolls off the bed and walks away. And once more I get the feeling that he's hiding something. "Don't you trust me?" I try fruitlessly to make it sound like I'm not asking like a child.

He pivots to look at me and jingles his keys in his hand. "There's no one in the world I trust more than you."

"Then why don't you tell me everything?" I plant my hands on my hips. "I didn't escape the clutches of the fellowship and you didn't escape the clutches of your enemies just for you to give me some lame-ass response about it."

"I told you when I rescued you that I was going to hunt the monsters. Do you remember that?"

I nod slowly.

He talks as if it's past tense, something already done and behind him. But something tells me that's not quite true. "I didn't want to introduce monsters of my own."

"No one can blame you for wanting to keep me safe."

"That's what I told myself. Looking back, I know that I didn't want to deal with my brothers either, so I put all my energy into hunting the monsters."

Of course Sergio knew that because they were the very people that hurt Eden. He gave Timeo his blessing and every possible tool he needed.

If anything, I love them both more because of it.

"I get that." I don't want to rock the boat between us; I feel like I just got him back. "Let's go make something to eat."

We search the kitchen. Eden prides herself on using fresh ingredients, so the supplies of food are actually pretty limited. There are no fresh fruits, no fresh protein, and definitely no dairy in the fridge that I can find. But I do locate

some imported, dried pasta, sun-dried tomatoes, some shelf-stable cream, a wedge of parmesan the size of my head, and a large bottle of olive oil so big I could swim in it. "These'll do."

"Damn right they will do," Timeo says. "I'd have been cool with saltines and some peanut butter."

I smile at him. "I seem to remember you like that. With a dollop of Nona's homemade jam on top." A childhood staple, probably, but it was one of our favorites.

"You know it."

"Oh!" I squeal when I come across another goldmine. I hold up a jar.

"Marshmallow fluff?"

"Eden must've been planning a dessert. She makes some kick-ass fudge with this stuff."

"Oh, yeah? What are you gonna do with it?"

"Dessert too, of course." In this second search through the kitchen I also find a loaf of bread and peanut butter, so I slather a piece with the peanut butter and spoon a dollop of marshmallow fluff on top. I light the broiler.

"What's with you and marshmallows."

I shrug. "They're cute and fluffy and delicious."

Seconds after I put my open-faced sandwich under the broiler, I bring it out for him.

I find myself holding my breath before he takes his first bite. It's so simple, a meal together, alone in the club.

"Okay, this is really fucking good," he says, taking another huge bite. "If we ___"

He's reaching for the jar of fluff when the entire place goes dark.

"Dammit," he hisses. "I was afraid of that."

I open the back door of the kitchen and look out the little windows in the hallway, confirming that every streetlight is out. "You think they'll get the power back on soon?"

"We'll see. No cell service, and no electricity either, which means no heat."

"Great. If we were at The Castle, we could at least build a fire."

"We can build a fire here, but we have to be very careful."

"Good thing it's almost bedtime. I think we need to maybe find some supplies? How long do you think the power will be out?"

I can't check on my phone to see where it's at or why. "We do have a lot of resources here."

"We should act like it's going to be out for a long time, and probably pretend that we are prepared."

"So tell me," I say, my tone hopeful. "Since we'll have to find supplies. Do you think... that maybe it means we get to explore the club?"

It's hard for me to see him in the dark, but I swear I can hear the smile in his voice. "Yeah, baby. That's an excellent idea."

Before we leave the kitchen, we rifle through the cabinets for supplies. It's not completely pitch-dark, because a little moonlight pierces through one of the small windows, illuminating a tiny triangle in the kitchen.

We find matches and meager food supplies, but no flashlight.

"I can use the flashlight on my phone, but it'll drain the battery, and we have no idea how long we'll be in here. I'm not comfortable doing that."

"Yeah, good call. But how will we navigate around here?"

I can only see part of his face, illuminated by a faint stream of moonlight. "I have an idea."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Timeo

“OKAY, WHERE ARE WE?”

I can't tell if she's excited or nervous or on edge when I bring her into the room. I haven't been in this one before. I've not done many things here at the club. She might be freaked out about Eden working here but my brother owns it. My older brother, who was a pseudo-father to me when my own father passed, who taught me how to drive and shoot a gun and put a fucking condom on.

But if there's anything that's clear now, it's that we're alone.

“This is the room for wax play,” I tell her, clearing my throat. “I haven't been in here before, but I've heard about it.”

“So you guys have like...themed rooms.”

It's hard to see the expression on her face in the dark, and I can't quite tell if she's interested and excited or... scared.

“Yeah, and it isn't my club. I'm not you guys.” 1

She snorts. “It's the Montavio Brotherhood's club. What do you think people expect?”

I don't answer. I'm searching around the room for what I know to be here. I haven't ever brought a woman in here but I've restocked it and done surveillance here before. I was always fascinated with wax play.

“Ah, there it is.” My fingers wrap around a box of long fireplace matches nestled in a cylinder with a lid. I scratch one and it flames to life. In front of me is a row of candles.

“Ooooh.” Starla watches curiously as I light the tallest white pillar candle. “This place is amazing.”

I hold the candle up and survey what she sees. Like the previous room, it's sensually decorated, but unlike the other, it also contains various comfortable furnishings— mats, a queen-sized bed, padded tables. That's not where she

looks, though. Her eyes settle on the dimly lit row of wax-play equipment neatly lined in rows— massage candles, wax melting pots and trays, other candles of every shape and size, and large hearthside matches.

“What’s that?” she asks, pointing to a red box in the corner.

“First aid kit, looks like.”

Her brows rise. “Wow. Just like...right there. In the open. What did you call this?”

“The wax play room. Meant to have ambiance, yeah, but more than that, it’s got candles specifically suited for wax play.”

Starla’s eyes widen but she doesn’t respond. Shivering, she wraps her arms around herself. “Any of those candles throw heat?”

“Yeah, we’re gonna have to figure out a way to keep ourselves warm.”

Ten minutes later, we’re surrounded by lit candles lined up in a semi-circle around us. The combined light illuminates the room so well I can see everything now. Starla runs her fingers along the gold edges of the candlesticks, the metal grooves of the trays, and the velvet-covered table in the corner.

“They have blankets ready in the closet, I know that because I’ve been the one to restock them.”

“Why blankets?”

“Some people get cold and shivery after a hard, intense session.”

Her brow draws together. “I...see.”

She doesn’t.

If I have my way, she will.

“You can’t exactly roast marshmallows here, but I feel a little heat.”

“Yeah, we’ll need more than that. Let’s find those blankets.”

We peruse the room and find a hell of a lot more than we bargained for.

“Oh, my,” Starla says when she opens a wooden box filled with items suitable for impact play. Turning to face me, her eyes are lit up by the flickering candles. “If you’d used these, I probably would’ve had, uh...other things to do with my hands.”

She’s holding a pair of nipple clamps in each hand.

A corner of my lips quirks up. “Give ‘em here.”

“Oh, not so fast,” she says, leaning over to look through the others. “I fancy purple, you know, and the pink ones are delightful. Ow!”

Unfortunately for her, I’m standing next to a box of paddles, canes, and straps. The stout wooden paddle gets her attention pretty quickly.

“You planning on talking back to me when I have a bevy of implements next to me, hot wax at my fingertips, and a table with restraints?”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly planning—wait! Where? The table has restraints?”

I give her another sharp crack of the paddle and she jumps.

“Starla.”

“Fine,” she says on a sigh, though I can tell she’s enjoying every minute of this by the way her eyes go half-lidded and seductive. Swallowing, she hands me the clamps. “Maybe I should use those on you.”

“That’s it,” I say with mock chagrin. “Now you’ve done it.”

The wind howls outside as I reach for her wrists. “You really, really want me to dominate you, don’t you?”

I hold her gaze as I slowly remove every stitch of her clothing.

“Not when we don’t— we don’t have—protection,” she breathes as I kiss along her neck and backpedal her until she reaches the table.

I lay her on her back on the table and slide her wrists into the soft restraints above her head. I contemplate the candles beside her and choose the vanilla-scented soy one. Its warmed wax feels good on the palms of my hands as I massage it into her skin.

“You like this, baby?” I ask. The intensity of the heat of the wax varies depending on how close or far I hold it over her. I lift the candle above her and let it drip from a high distance, a gentler approach.

“That’s not as hot as I thought it would be,” she says.

“Mmm.”

I bring the candle closer and drop another bit on her bare skin. She hisses in a breath.

“How’s that?” I ask, my voice husky.

“Um, very good,” she whispers. “Very, very good. God, I love how that feels.”

I take my time, drizzling her with wax in a zigzag pattern. Her bare breasts are pink, hot from the wax and so full I want to lick each one until she writhes and climaxes right here beneath me.

“It’s killing me to not take this further.”

“Same,” she says. “I just — I hate — God I hate this. I mean, no, I love it. Love it. But I’m dying to take this further. Ah!”

I drop wax on her belly, bend, and lick where the hot wax melts into her skin. I press the flat of my tongue to her navel, dragging it down to the tops of her thighs. Whimpering, she closes her eyes. “If you—keep doing that—I’m not going to worry about protection.”

“Naughty girl,” I say on a growl. “You know better than that.”

“Do I?” she asks in a husky whisper. “You sure about that?”

“Starla.” I lift her and reposition her so she’s on her knees, her ass in the air and her hands flat on the table in front of her.

I palm her ass and give her a hard, fast slap where the curve of her ass meets her thighs. I spank her again, until she’s bright pink and warm to the touch, then lift the candle and drip the wax across her fiery ass.

She lets loose a stream of incomprehensible words.

“Touch yourself.”

I’m hard as fuck as she fingers her pussy and rocks my hand, welcoming every slap from my palm and flare of heat from the wax. I build a rhythm with the spanking and wax until the evidence of her arousal glistens on her thighs.

“On your back. Now.”

When she obeys, I gently part her legs and position myself in front of her. I smell the sweet, seductive scent of her wet pussy. My cock throbs. She’s so damn perfect.

“Open,” I say in a low rasp.

The first stroke of my tongue against her pussy makes her hips jerk and a moan fill the room. Her fingers stab into my hair as I swirl my tongue on her clit and groan against the delicious taste of her. I grip her ass as she parts her legs. Her body trembles with nerves and excitement. I take a moment to inhale the sweet, seductive scent of her arousal.

“Fuck, baby,” I groan, my face between her legs. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

She moans and draws in a deep breath, her hips rocking as I lick her lazily, savoring the taste of her.

“Oh, God,” she finally breathes as her head falls back. She’s right there, right on the cusp of coming.

“Come. Come on my mouth, baby. Give it to me.”

With the next touch of my tongue, she shatters. I ride her through her ecstasy, my dick painfully hard, my only focus giving her the best fucking orgasm I can.

Her blissed-out screams fill the room as she gives herself over to me. She’s so uninhibited, and I fucking love it.

It’ll kill me to not fuck her, but I’ll die happy and blissed out just from the taste of her climax on my lips.

I savor this. I'll remember every minute with her.

Once that snow clears and those doors open...once we're out of here again...
I know there's only so much I can hold back from her.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Starla

IT FEELS like we're on some kind of grown-up, kinky sleepover.

Suspended in time, hidden in a bank of snow, away from the prying eyes of our friends and family and all the demands on us... Timeo and I only have each other.

"So, I got a question..." I ask in a teasing voice.

"Mmm?"

"If you had protection right now..."

The power's back on — for the moment at least. He's sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of my homemade hot chocolate in front of him. "I'd fuck the shit out of you then propose...to this cocoa."

I shake my head. "Very romantic, sir."

I turn away because the way his eyes warm at me does all sorts of melty things to my belly, and I need to focus. And did he just say propose?

He was talking to the cocoa, of course. The cocoa, made from cream and sugar, shaved chocolate and just the slightest hint of real vanilla and a pinch of salt. But still—

Focus.

I'm guessing it's late at night, though time's almost lost meaning here.

"And you?"

I take another sip of the cocoa. The hot, creamy liquid warms me through.
"Mmm?"

His dark eyes smolder at me. "If we...had protection right now."

I set my mug down and stare him straight in the eyes. "I've been thinking about it. I don't know if I need protection, Timeo."

“Starla,” he says softly. I let my gaze wander to the way his fingers ever-so-gently cup the mug of cocoa. I remember the feel of those hands on me.

I stare into his eyes, trained on me now, and remember what it was like when he stared at me naked, as if he’d come across the most precious treasure, treasure he’d searched for his whole life, his whole life, and he’d found it.

I watch as he takes a slow sip of cocoa and remember...what it feels like when his lips meet mine.

I shrug. “We’ve been best friends forever. There are complications. But yeah, Timeo. I can do my job wherever.”

I turn away.

Timeo loves control and mastering me. His brothers are the same—traditional men who want to lead and take control, be heads of the house and all that. I know that a part of me should run, should flee for the hills at the slightest hint of any control Timeo wants to exert over me...

But I can’t.

A part of me longs to surrender to him.

A part of me knows that there’s freedom in the letting go... because I trust him. And because he loves me.

Loves me.

There’s a shortage of people in this world who’ve loved me. And maybe we needed a few nights away from everyone and everything to get down to the bare bones of it all.

But can I trust him in the way I need to? The way Eden trusts Sergio? But in a way that’s only mine?

I suspect that I’m not the only one keeping secrets.

“I want you to show me, Starla.”

I momentarily distract myself by putting the mug in the sink and soaking the pot I used for the cocoa. I shrug, my back still to him. “Show you what?”

“Your work. Show me what you show them.”

I could pull up my profile on any of the platforms. Pull up my most viral videos. Give him an insider’s look as to how many views and shares and comments I have. But I don’t want to.

“Alright,” I say softly. I look around the kitchen for what I need and get to work. I mentally gather my list of supplies.

First, the apron. I pull it from a nail on the wall and loop it over my head then tie it behind me. I set my phone up the way I normally would, with the camera facing me so he gets the full effect. “I record and then edit after,” I explain. “And sometimes I do a live because my viewers go bonkers.”

He growls, but I’m not sure why.

I pretend to hit record.

“Welcome back, my friends,” I say with a warm smile they don’t see, but Timeo does. “Today, I’m going to show you one of the easiest, simplest meals to make that’s not only frugal and healthy, but so easy, anyone can do it.”

I take a large wooden bowl from the counter and begin filling it with random vegetables. A large leek, a red onion. A small bunch of carrots, celery, baby spinach that’s seen better days, and a plastic bag of green beans.

“This is a fantastic way to use up what’s in your fridge, too.” I quickly clean and begin preparing the vegetables. Timeo watches me as I slide a cutting board in front of my camera. One of the most aesthetically pleasing things for viewers to watch is a neat countertop and the slow process of chopping.

“Your hands are so pretty,” he says softly. I look down at my hands, small and nimble, but... pretty? I keep my nails short and filed to oval-shapes — it goes with the whole “kinda former Amish” vibe. My fingers are long and slender.

“Thank you?” I say while staring at my very plain hands.

He only watches me while I peel carrots and celery, wash and prepare green beans, and show my viewers an easy way of preventing tears while chopping

onions. “Don’t want to shed a tear over vegetables? Chill your onion before cutting it, or try cutting it under water. You could buy onion-goggles to protect your eyes or wear a face mask, but let’s be real. Everyone needs a good cry once in a while, don’t you think?” I bat my eyelashes. “Or you could just ask your boyfriend or girlfriend to cut it for you.”

I chop rhythmically and imagine what music I’d play in the background if this were live. There are full accounts of people just doing this — chopping vegetables. I have no idea why people love watching it but somehow, they do. Timeo seems like he’s into it, too, as his gaze watches me slice through onion, smash garlic with the flat of the blade, slice slender pieces of carrots on the diagonal.

“Simmer your aromatics first — onion and garlic, celery or bell pepper, depending on your base. Watch the garlic, though, as it’ll burn more quickly than the others. So toss that one in last.”

It smells divine in here while I stir the veggies in olive oil.

I go on as I add fresh herbs and broth with the rest of the veggies.

“After you have all your veggies in the liquid, you want to slide a good lid on.” I swallow, so aware of Timeo’s eyes on me. “And let it simmer for a good long while.” I lift my eyes to his. “Simmering softens everything, allowing the flavors to meld together in a way that a hard boil doesn’t. And when you finally take that first bite, you’ll be glad you waited.”

I turn back to face the camera, which would allow them to watch while I clean up. I would edit the busywork out, but people love seeing counters wiped and dishes cleaned. I don’t know if it makes them feel more empowered to be productive themselves or if they get a vicarious thrill of having completed something, but I’m not here to judge. I have to clean up anyway, so I might as well get the screen time.

“Funny about allowing things to simmer, isn’t it?” I say. And this is the part of the program they’re here for, when I wax eloquent on philosophy and love, friendships and hurt. I’m that relatable girl-next-door with a flair of pioneer. “You know how I shared with you all there was a boy for me, once? Not one my parents set me up with, or elder, or whatever. I told you that he was what we’d call a bad boy.”

I look up at Timeo above the camera. If it was recording, my face would be above the screen. His eyes burn at me, his gaze locked onto mine.

“It’s always been that way with us. A slow, slow, simmer that makes the wait so worthwhile. Have any of you ever experienced love like this?”

Yes. Love. I go there, and I have no regrets. “Shoot me a message and tell me about it. I would love to hear!”

They could engage and respond. I try to bring relatable emotion into what I do.

Everyone sometimes experiences deep, abiding pain that sears their very soul, but they make it through to the other side. And this is why I’m here. Why I do what I do.

I remind everyone that they, too, are survivors.

I lean in toward Timeo.

“And that’s how I would do it,” I say. I swallow when his hand comes toward me. I get one view of his hand on camera, those masculine fingers and the first line of the brotherhood tattoo on his forearm. A shiver skates down my spine.

When I’m alone with him, I’m reminded that Timeo is only temporarily tame.

He reaches for my wrist.

“And this is where I’d shut the video off,” I say, my own gaze focused on his. I swallow and reach for my phone before it clatters to the floor.

My heart freezes. I stare for a few seconds, uncomprehending.

That...can’t be.

I was only pretending to record so he’d get the full effect. There’s no way I would have gone live...here. Now.

But there it is. The flashing record in bright red.

I grab at the phone and stab at the button. But it won’t stop recording.

“What’s the matter?”

“I — I must’ve hit record by accident. And now the damn thing’s doing that swirly thing, like it’s trying to connect but can’t. Shit.”

My hands tremble as Timeo pulls out his own phone. “We lost cell service again.”

“*Dammit*. I was only pretending to record to, like, get in the mood.”

“Maybe it didn’t post because the cell service is out?”

“But if it did?”

My stomach churns. For some reason, knowing that I may have accidentally stoked some fire makes the reality of our danger hit harder than ever.

I try a few more times to take the video down but there is no service. My only hope is that it got hung up somewhere in the ether and no one ever saw it.

“If that posted, we’ll do what we’ve always done,” he says, his hand closing over mine.

“What?” I ask, feeling as if I’m going to cry.

“Deal with the consequences. We’ll handle whatever fallout there is, babe. You’ve done a lot harder things than this.” He strokes his hand down the length of my back. “I loved watching you like that. It was hot as fuck.”

My trepidation begins to melt away. I swallow. “It was hot watching me cook soup. In an apron.”

“You have no idea.”

“You’re crazy.”

But when he slides his palms down the small of my back and pulls me closer, I start to care less about who saw what and more about what next with Timeo.

“You said we were a slow simmer. Is that what you think?”

“Think?” I snort, my palm pressed against the flat of his chest. “Of course we

are. You call this, like, normal foreplay, buddy?”

The thick length of his cock is pressed up against me.

I can't help but feel our time together isn't guaranteed. I tell myself it's because he was taken from me once before, but I fear it's more than that now. What if...this is the last time we really are together?

I breathe in his scent and let myself sink into him.

What if he's right? What if getting any closer to him will do the exact opposite of what I want — and only drive us further apart? What if he's right, that being near him puts me in more danger than I've ever been in?

I kiss his cheek. Take a step back.

I'm not going to let what we have here... end here.

I'm not going to let it end like two teens hiding behind locked doors where no one can see them.

No. Way.

“I need a minute.”

He steps back and gives me space.

I just had an idea.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Timeo

THERE'S no easy way to tell her: Starla has to stop her influencer shit. Of all the things we do to protect her, an online presence garnering millions of views per month nearly negates all of them.

She doesn't want to, though.

I frown at my phone screen. One bar.

Is cell service back up?

I open my messages and hiss in a breath.

It's a picture of two golden retrievers.

You know what we want.

I scowl at the phone and wish I could smash it into pieces. Like that would change anything.

Yeah, I know what they want, and they've got me by the balls, making me choose between loyalty to my family or the happiness of the woman I love.

They know exactly how to push my buttons.

I do know what they want.

I also know what I want. And I know how long and how hard I've worked to get there.

I log onto the server that gives me access to private communication and I send a message.

I need you to release Manuel Hernandez.

The response is immediate.

I can't do that. He's serving four consecutive life sentences.

Not officially. I need you to make it look like an accident. And I promise you...he will not be loose on the streets.

The little dots indicating I'm getting a response pop up on the screen. They start, then stop again.

I swallow hard and type in a dollar sign followed by a series of numbers.

I hit send.

One minute passes.

Two.

Three.

Where the hell is Starla?

I exit the kitchen and call out to her. "Starla?"

There's no answer.

Shit.

My phone buzzes with a text as I walk further into the club.

Consider it done.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Starla

Six months earlier

I walked the length of the pier, my steps light. Timeo told me he wanted to meet me here tonight in private.

No Sergio.

No Eden.

No Ricco.

No Montavios or Rossis or anyone.

Just. Us.

And I hoped...I didn't even want to give voice to what I hoped, and I knew that what I hoped wasn't really very different from any other girl with stars in her eyes and a schoolgirl crush.

I told myself that what I wanted was different, that it transcended an infatuation with a hot guy who paid attention to me...because I knew what it was like to be tied to loveless relationships. I knew what it was like to be used and hurt, abused and mistreated.

And I knew what it was like to be...cherished. Timeo was the one who taught me that.

Every time he laughed at my silly jokes and threw rocks with me off the pier. Every time we roasted marshmallows in the secret of the forest, lulled to a sense of complacency by the flickering flames of the fire and absolute quiet. Every time he taught me something new, held my hand when I confided in him, and promised me that no one, no one, would ever hurt me again.

It was way more than a fantasy, even if neither of us gave voice to what was really happening.

I didn't know the details of what brought us together that day. Eden was

distraught about something that had happened at the club involving Timeo's oldest brother Ricco. It had been "all hands on deck" in an emergency situation involving Ricco's Daniella and her daughter Emmy.

The aftermath saw everyone safe, but left a fire burning in Timeo's eyes I hadn't seen before.

"Starla, we need to talk. Now. Meet me on the pier?"

We'd been to the pier a few times over the summer because it was an easy walk from there to his cousins' restaurants in the North End. There were benches where we could sit under leaf-covered trellises, watch the boats that came in and out of the harbor, hear the street vendors selling T-shirts and cold drinks. I loved it there. And while some recognized Timeo from time to time, there were so many people in and out of the pier we were almost anonymous.

"Hey."

My heart thumped madly at the sound of Timeo's voice behind me. I turned to see him leaning against the pole supporting the archway, his face shadowed beneath a garland of greenery.

I swallowed and cleared my throat. "Hey."

I didn't miss the way he quickly looked me over, though he didn't linger. I wore a cropped pale ivory tee with a simple pair of jeans. My hair was still long, draped over my shoulder in a loose braid. I didn't wear a lot of makeup, but I dabbed on lip gloss and ran a mascara brush through my lashes before I came.

I didn't know what he was going to say, but my hopes were high.

No, I didn't think he'd go to the whole... marry me, thing. That would be a step neither of us were ready for. But a date... yeah. A date would've been nice.

A date with a promise of another.

With a deep sigh I felt in my own bones, Timeo stepped toward me. The sun was setting behind us, but it was an unseasonably warm night. I noticed he

had a black bag, and something tucked under his arm.

Silently, he took the bundle from beneath his arm and unfolded it. A blanket. With a quick flick of his wrists, he spread it on the wide expanse of grass between the benches and the waterfront. Wordlessly, he sat down and patted the blanket beside him.

Timeo liked to talk. He could chatter my ear off when he wanted to, but I could tell something was bothering him, because he didn't say anything as he arranged things on the blanket. Oval-shaped sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, a few chilled bottles of soda, a large bag of my favorite salt-and-vinegar rippled potato chips.

My stomach rumbled. "Oh my God, I'm starving."

"I know," he said, unwrapping the first sandwich and handing it to me. "I bet you haven't eaten since that bowl of oatmeal Eden made you this morning."

I gave him a perplexed look. "How did you know that?"

"Easy," he said, unwrapping his own sandwich. "You were wrapped up in that project you were working on. When you stare at the laptop like that and bite your lip, you're in a world all your own. Wild horses couldn't disrupt your concentration."

He untwisted the top of a bottle of water and handed it to me. "Speaking of. Drink."

He watched me gulp it down approvingly.

"Listen, Starla," he said when I had a mouthful of my sandwich.

"Mmm?" I wiped mustard off my lips with a napkin and noticed he hadn't eaten any of his yet.

Soberly, he put his food down. "We have to talk."

My appetite began to wane at the serious look in his eyes. I finished my bite.

"What is it?"

Timeo lifted his eyes to mine. "I have to go away."

He told me everything. He'd promised Ricco a favor and it would involve him going off the grid.

"When will you be back?" I asked in a small voice, already choked up at the thought of my best friend being gone. I put my sandwich down, the thought of eating inconceivable as my belly clenched.

"I don't know."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, but it only rose again. "Will you be back?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"Timeo—"

"I'll do everything I can to come back," he promised fervently, reaching for my hands. When our fingers touched, something metallic and cold hit my palm. I looked down.

"What's this?" I whispered. If I tried to speak louder, I would cry. It was clear he didn't want to leave any more than I wanted him to, and I didn't want to make it any harder on either of us.

I opened my palm to see a small, delicate locket on a chain. "Oh, wow. It's beautiful."

"Maybe a bit stereotypical," he said with a smirk. "Locket and all that. But I want you to wear it while I'm gone."

I opened it. I smiled at the picture of the two of us together. We looked so young and carefree.

"I will."

"Promise me, Starla. Promise me that you'll wear it, and if anything happens, you'll open it and see me. Alright?"

I nodded, as he took it from me and slid it around my neck. "Yes," I said on a whisper. "I promise."



THERE'S GOT to be something like a women's dressing room here, I know it, and not just the restroom.

Girls need things. Makeup and tampons and socks and deodorant and lip gloss and cell phone chargers and breath mints and those little stick things to take stains off your clothes.

I remember Quinn talking to me about this, right after she married Adriano. She said something...about a room. I wish I'd paid more attention when we were sweeping the club.

Ah.

There it is. Right off the main club floor behind the bar, I find what can only be described as a locker room, only it is not your average sweaty high school locker room. This is high-end shit — large glass containers at a vanity, filled with elegant mountains of cotton balls and Q-tips, amber pump bottles lined up by the sink labeled hand soap and body lotion.

A large, fluffy stack of white towels stands beside a sink on a pedestal.

And there are lockers — thick gray ones with numbered locks.

At the back, there's a small sauna behind frosted glass and a set of showers. Some people come to Bella Notte for a session, and some come for a longer stay, it seems.

In the far right of the locker room, embossed silver plates proclaim **Staff Only** in bold letters. I won't find what I'm looking for there. In fact, I've just about given up hope that I'm going to find what I'm looking for at all, when I notice a white wicker basket in between two oval sinks in the main floor area.

Yes.

Women that come to Bella Notte have each other's backs.

I can only hope... Breath mints. A mini sewing kit. Travel-sized packs of pain meds. And there, nestled straight in the center, exactly what I'm looking for. I smile to myself.

When I return to the bar area, it seems darker than usual. It's strange how of all places, the bar seems to be the most central location of all. That's probably why the Montavios have their meetings here. Whereas the kitchen and private rooms lie beyond the bar area, the heart and soul of the club is here.

Interesting. One would see most of the action right here in this room.

And right here, at the bar, is where the stack of boxes fell. Curious, I take a step toward the bar.

I've never really looked behind a bar before. I mean, I've hardly looked at the front of a bar before either.

Gorgeous liquor bottles of all shapes and sizes stand like soldiers at attention, ready to serve. Neatly arranged on shelves, there's anything one could want. Whiskeys and spirits, liqueurs and wines. Closer to the countertops are a variety of mixers — fruit syrups and sours, soda and soda water.

A long shelf of bar tools gleams under the overhead lighting, and shining glassware sparkles.

There's a mini fridge and a cash register, and a large stack of clean bar mops.

Interesting.

Below the register is a large red button. A call button, I'd assume, for the bartenders to use in case of emergency. I wonder where it rings. But I don't see anything suspicious or out of place, or anything that might give me reason to believe that someone was here at the bar and caused the boxes to fall.

As I turn away, a small white triangle catches my attention. I bend down. It looks like the corner of something stuck under the counter beneath the register. I tug. It doesn't budge.

"There you are."

I squeal and leap back in surprise when Timeo leans over the bar. "I'll take a whiskey, neat," he says in a mocking, husky voice, like some kind of gangster in a movie.

I snort. "Oh, cute, and not at all stereotypical. But this appears to be a self-

service bar, you know. Don't let my apron fool you."

I finger what I found in the locker room, tucked into my pocket, and swallow.

My heart beats faster.

"Tired, baby?" Timeo asks, reaching for my hand.

No, not with the amount of adrenaline surging through me right about now.

I stifle a yawn. "Yeah, we should go to bed."

"We got cell service back," Timeo says, handing me my phone. My pulse races when I see the notifications on my screen. I scan the first few, and my hopes are dashed.

That live video posted alright. It had to.

"Those hands! OMG I would die to see all of himmmm!"

"I know you two are so super super hot!"

"OMG you're back!"

"Noooo." I slump against the bar and delete the live video, but I know it's too late. Who knows how many people saw this before I deleted it? Actually, a quick scan of the data will tell me exactly how many, but I don't want to know.

God.

"It posted," I say on a moan. "And they're all fangirling over you." I feel so exposed, like my privacy's been violated.

Timeo scowls. "And this is why you're shutting it down."

"I did, I already deleted it." I'm a little annoyed he didn't know I'd do that immediately.

"No, Starla. Not the video." I look up from my phone. "All of it."

I stare at him, my jaw unhinged. "Are you serious right now?"

"Of course I am."

“Listen, Timeo,” I begin, shaking my head. “Just because some girls think you’re hot—”

“Jesus, Starla.” I snap my mouth shut. I hate when people interrupt me. It’s so rude. “Not because they’re fangirling over me or whatever the fuck. You know it’s not safe.”

“Do I?”

His eyes flash at mine and he takes a step closer to me. I stand my ground.

“If it was safe, why haven’t you put your face online?”

I have, but it was an accident, and this might not be the best time to share that.

“For privacy, obviously.”

“Exactly. For privacy, because keeping your privacy keeps you safe. You know what’s even safer? No online presence. No posts that people can track or identify in any way.” I always know when Timeo’s getting angry or losing his patience because he does this thing where he presses his lips together, his shoulders square, and his breathing intensifies.

I place my hands on my hips and glare right back at him.

I will not lose my temper. I will not lose my temper.

“I have told you this already and I’m not sure how to make it any clearer. I’ve done the whole ‘living by the rules’ thing. I’ve lived nearly all my life under the thumb of someone else and I’ve followed every rule, every law, crossed every T, and even covered my damn cleavage so I wouldn’t be the proverbial Eve sending Adam to hell. And you know what I think now? I think fuck that. You taught me how to use a gun, so thank you very much. I took a self-defense class on my own damn time when you were locked away God-knows-where, just in case I needed it. I am not going to be controlled.” I take a deep breath and glare at him, not backing down. “And if you think I left the fellowship just to be controlled and manipulated by some other form of patriarchy? You can go fuck yourself. It matters to me that I have my freedom.”

He presses his hands on either side of the bar, effectively caging me in. With his body pressed up against mine, I know that he is holding himself back.

"That's not how it works being an adult."

"Excuse me?" I snap. "Are you telling me you somehow have the rule book on adulthood?"

When he raises his eyebrows, I get the hint.

"You asshole. After everything that I went through, do you think I'm just going to jump in bed with the first guy ready to control me?"

I'm shaking, trying to stay calm, but losing the battle.

"You seem to have completely forgotten that your sister was raised in the same environment as you," he says. "And yet here she is, married to my brother. My brother, who arguably has more restrictions on her than I ever would for you. All that I want is for you to be safe. Don't you know that?"

He has a point but I'm not giving it to him, not now.

Safe, safe, safe...

I can still hear my father's voice, telling me how we stayed within the safety of the walls to be safe. They married off children to be "safe." All of the rules and restrictions were so we didn't fall into temptation.

I lick my lips. My voice doesn't sound like my own. It's lower and huskier. "Maybe I'm fucking tired of being safe."

His eyes hold mine, and I know we're both thinking the same thing.

That's the convenient thing about falling in love with your best friend.

It's more than a physical connection. More than even an emotional one. There's something that transcends logic when two souls are joined at the very core.

I know as well as he does that he has the power to hurt me like no one else ever has. No one. Not the fellowship. Not even my father.

"So who's going to cave?" he asks, delicately tracing the line of my jaw with

his index finger. "I'm the one that doesn't want to lose what's precious to me. You're the one that won't surrender. Which one of us will it be, Starla?"

When his mouth meets mine, I inwardly groan and curse myself, right before I lose the ability to think.

I thread my fingers through his hair and pull. His mouth falls open and I swallow his low, dark chuckle as he grips my ass and lifts me onto the bar. The small silver packet I stole from the locker room falls to the floor.

"I thought you didn't have protection?" His voice is a low growl.

"Protection from what?" I can't help but be snarky with him.

"Starla," he says on a growl as he grips my ass harder. My heart thunders in my chest as he grabs the condom and holds me to him and walks to the nearest private room.

My body tingles in anticipation, my pulse racing madly. I try to swallow but my mouth seems strangely dry.

When we reach the room, Timeo lays me on the bed. "Eventually, when we do this, we'll have some fun first."

I pretend to pout. "Can't we have fun now?"

Shaking his head, he bends down to me and kisses my forehead. "Of course we can, but not the kind of fun I'm talking about."

I shiver. "What kind of fun are you talking about?"

"Ropes," he says in a low voice, lazily kissing me again. "A spanking over my lap that makes your toes curl. My hand at your throat," he whispers, ghosting his hand over my skin where my pulse beats. "Restraints. I don't want fun tonight, Starla. Tonight, I want to make you mine."

His eyes fairly gleam when he looks at me, as if he's spent his whole life searching for treasure, and now he's found it. I'll never forget that look as long as I live.

"How convenient," I say, my voice not my own, part seductress, part witch. "I'm ready to be claimed by you."

I'm breathing rapidly, my mind immediately conjuring up the idea of exploring all of this with him. Of being Timeo's.

But now... now it's about us.

Connection.

Fusion.

With slow, lazy movements, he slides off my clothes. I reach for his shirt and pull it off, admiring the breadth of him, the roughness of healing wounds and battle scars, the rugged maleness of a faint line of dark hair that crosses his navel and goes lower still. I slide my hands over his body, framing him, and inhale the fresh, clean scent like mountain rain. I admire the warm golden hardness of his body.

He kisses the top of my left shoulder, warm breath ghosting over my skin as he makes his way to the right. When he lifts his mouth, I roll over onto his naked body, entwining my legs with his and stretching my toes. His hardened length presses between us. I enjoy the strength and warmth of his body beneath me. I want to savor this.

His low murmur of approval tells me he likes what he sees.

When he tips my chin to look into his eyes, my heart beats faster. "I love you, Starla."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "And I love you."

We've waited for this moment for so long, but now that we're on the cusp, I want to savor this.

There's only one first time.

He moves his hand from my jaw to my throat and cages it, my pulse beating against his fingertips, as he kisses me. My body softens, an insistent ache growing between my legs. Our lips touch and our tongues meet. My pulse races and my breathing grows heavier as warmth and need flood me. Rolling me over onto my back, Timeo pins me beneath him. I love the certain weight of his body on mine.

I love the possessive look in his eyes that dares anyone to come between us. I

want him so much, so badly, and have for so long, I feel as if I almost have to hold my breath so nothing evaporates.

I trace the curve of his bicep and his muscled shoulders. He kisses my collarbone and lower, worshiping the soft swell of each breast. Holding himself above me, he laves each nipple before bringing them between his teeth. I gasp when he bites, but a split second later, arousal teems through my veins like molten lava.

I stifle a whimper as he tongues my nipples, the flat of his tongue somehow connected directly to my clit. My pussy throbs as he plants kisses all up and down my body. Every touch of his lips is electric.

“Someone once told me that before the first time you prepare to make love to a woman,” he whispers in my ear, “kiss her body well and thoroughly.” He slides his hands between my legs and parts them, his thick, capable fingers spreading me wide. “Have I kissed you well and thoroughly? Or should I keep going?”

The way his fingers glide in and out of me effortlessly is answer enough. “I’ve...been ready...forever,” I pant, overcome by the sudden need to be closer to him.

And then my hands are gathered in his and pinned to the bed as he makes his way down my body. "Keep them there," he says in a low growl. He releases my hands and parts my legs.

When he tongues my inner thigh, I shiver and stifle a mewl of pleasure. His hands cup my ass and lift me, granting him full access to me. I part my legs and my body goes limp at the first stroke of his tongue along my clit. Again, and again, a stab of pleasure ripples through me until I'm on the verge of shattering.

His strong fingers enter my channel as he drags his tongue along my clit. Pleasure explodes. I stop breathing as I drown in ecstasy, impossibly intense, impossibly unending, ripples of pleasure following each other until I'm gasping for breath. While I'm still in the throes of climax, Timeo raises himself, fists his huge length, and rolls on the condom.

My hips jerk as he nears, I'm so eager to have him in me.

"Talk to me," Timeo orders, holding my gaze. "Tell me if it's too much. Tell me if it hurts."

"Everything's too much with you," I whisper, my hand on the side of his face. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

With his mouth on mine, he enters me.

I let out a cry of pleasure and rock my hips. I'm full, and tight, but the feel of his cock stretching me feels so fucking perfect. My arms encircle his neck just as he lifts his hips and thrusts again.

The stretching burns but quickly fades as he builds a slow and steady rhythm. He makes a low, masculine sound of approval that resonates in my core. I gasp to feel him holding himself back because I know he doesn't want to hurt me. His body heavy on mine, the rhythm of our lovemaking is steady as he paces himself so perfectly.

I'm reaching a second climax. He thrusts. My head hits the bed, his mouth meets mine, and I shatter into brilliant shards of bliss at the same time he does. Time loses meaning. I can't breathe. Pleasure floods me so thoroughly I didn't know my body could hold so much at once. Above me, his blazing eyes meet mine. This time, we don't need words.

He holds me while I fall into the blissful aftermath, still riding the shocks of orgasm. My body tingles, warm and so thoroughly satisfied, I feel as if I could sleep for days and not wake up, as if I need nothing else at all.

I lazily trace circles along his shoulders.

"I imagined this, you know," he murmurs. I entwine my fingers in his in the dark room. I relish the feel of his skin against mine.

"With me?" I ask, even though I already know the answer to this question.

I need to know.

"Starla," he says, framing my face in his much larger hands. "Of course you. It was always you. Don't you know it's always been you?"

Our kiss is salty, laced with the tears I've shed. I've wanted this for so long, and it's so much sweeter than I imagined.

Because I know the truth now. It's only ever been you.

We fall into a deep sleep, wrapped in each other until early the next morning.

This time, the crash that we hear is definitely not a stack of boxes.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Timeo

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time, and we both knew it. Snow doesn't last forever.

Does anything?

I'm dressed in seconds and so is she. We're both armed in unison. I give her a look of approval.

Good girl.

I'm not pussyfooting around. I throw open the door and head to the main floor. But the people who crashed our party aren't hiding.

She has her gun in one hand. I have mine as well.

We enter the main floor of the club on high alert, looking for anything out of place. Fortunately, there's no one or nothing hiding. My brothers are standing right out in the open.

I don't know why it surprises me to see my brothers. And by brothers, I don't mean one or two but all of them. Fucking all of them.

Sergio, dressed in ski gear like he's about to hit the slopes. Ricco, snow clinging to his beard, wearing a ski jacket and carrying a shovel. Adriano, Quinn's husband, our Tuscan brother we recruited a few years back.

And damn near everyone else.

"You two alright?" Sergio asks, staring right at me.

I don't give a fuck what they think we did. I'm not hiding anymore.

Starla's mine.

"We're fine. Lost power, had to dig around for food, spotty fucking cell service. How did you guys get here?"

Starla gasps, fully ignoring Sergio's punitive stare.

"Oh, my God! There's like an emergency plow thing with all sorts of lights

on it outside. Like the kind of stuff you'd use to dig someone out of a snowy ditch after they broke their leg on a ski slope."

Of course there is. Like my brothers will give up easily.

"Tried to get in touch with you," Sergio says.

"Cell service has been in and out."

"You sure about that?" Adriano asks.

Seriously, brother? Here? Now?

I glare at him.

He's the most loyal member of our club. Loyal to the brotherhood...to a fault.

We're the only family he's ever known and sometimes he lets his loyalty color everything.

Does he know something? Fuck. If I could only explain —

None of them know the choices I've had to make. None.

"Don't be an asshole, Adriano," Starla says, her eyes flashing at him. She's never put up with any of his bullshit.

God, I fucking love her.

Adriano narrows his eyes at her. "You had fun?"

Sergio opens his mouth but Starla dives right into it.

"I haven't brushed my teeth or shaved my legs in days," she says, directing her beautiful eyes right back at him. "But did I get to visit with Timeo? After missing him for months? Of course I did." Sergio flinches but she plows ahead. "And before you get any ideas, we happen to be in the confines of my brother-in-law's sex club. Ew."

Nicely played, baby.

Sergio clears his throat, but Ricco smirks.

"We were nervous," Sergio says. "When we couldn't reach you. I didn't know if you had heat, food, whatever the hell."

"Starla's a survivor. She knows how to make coffee with grounds and water, for Christ's sake. Yeah," I say. "We're fine."

Starla's cheeks flush pink but she holds her head up high.

"Good," Sergio says. "We're opening up the club tonight. First." He looks up at Starla. "Show me how to make that coffee?"

Fifteen minutes later, we're sitting around the kitchen. I'm still wondering what the fuck crawled up Adriano's ass. He's given Ricco shit before, when Ricco was dating his now-wife Daniella. Adriano's old school and believes arranged marriages in our line of business are the best way to go.

"When I couldn't get through, I decided to call in some favors," Sergio says. I swear half the things we do are about "calling in favors."

"Got in touch with a friend, got these plows. Took us a while, but the main streets of Boston were pretty clear so we only had to fight the side streets."

"Got it."

My burner phone buzzes with a text.

And another.

Then another.

"You need to get that?" Sergio asks pointedly.

"The only people I care about hearing back from are sitting right here in front of me," I tell him. I pull out my phone and power it down.

I know what they want, and they'll have to operate on my terms, not theirs.

"Speaking of," Starla says. "How are Eden and the kids?"

She's perched on a stool drinking a mocha with billows of whipped cream she found in the recesses of the fridge, now that the power's back on and she could see the contents. Her legs are tucked under her as if she's about to do a yoga class. God, I love her.

I need to navigate the next few days with efficiency. I have to follow through or everything... everything... was pointless.

“Good,” Sergio says, blowing out a breath. “Went out and built a snow fort and snow woman, I’ll have you know, it was not a man. That’s apparently old school and predictable.”

Starla smiles and takes another sip.

“When are you guys opening up again?”

“Tonight,” Sergio says with a sigh.

Adriano and Ricco’s faces register surprise but neither of them say anything. Every night we stay closed is money lost, but there’s more to it. I wait patiently for them to fill me in.

“You know Boston doesn’t close for anyone. The snow’s being cleared, and we’re following suit with the other businesses around here.”

Still, I watch him carefully. We’ll have to use an army to get the rest of that snow moved. “Any other reason?”

“Yes,” Sergio says. “Tonight, I want all hands on deck. It’s business as usual in Boston, and we have a shipment coming in.”

Starla’s brows shoot up. Adriano stiffens. “Maybe we should talk about this later.”

Sergio gives him a withering look. “With all due respect, you know I will do exactly what I want, when and where I want to.”

Sergio doesn’t take kindly to anyone questioning him. “Starla’s my wife’s sister. She’s probably eventually marrying into this family in one way or another.” She sputters on her cocoa. “Pretending she doesn’t belong here doesn’t become you, Adriano.”

Adriano sits up straighter and looks directly at Sergio. “It’s not Starla I’m concerned with.”

“Oh, of all the goddamn things you’ve said—”

Sergio holds up a hand. “Starla—”

“You guys investigated him! You already made sure he was kosher and all fine and I think it’s bullshit that you guys are doing anything that questions —”

“It’s fine,” I say through gritted teeth. “He can question me. If the shoe were on the other foot, I’d make damn sure to interrogate the fuck out of him.”

I would.

I turn to Adriano, facing him fully. “You want to interrogate me, brother?”

I’m so aware of the fucking phone in my pocket but one of the first rules of making sure no one suspects you of anything is to pretend you have nothing to hide.

Adriano stands. I place my mug of coffee on the table and square off against him.

“No. Fucking. Way. Both of you sit the fuck back down,” Sergio insists. “If you think for one second I’m going to let you two fuck up Eden’s kitchen, think again. I will kick your goddamn asses if you so much as leave a crumb out of place.”

“Now there’s a man,” Starla says approvingly, as she piles a ridiculously high mountain of whipped cream on the top of her mug again. “I like, Serge.”

“Tonight, I’m bringing staff back. We have to open. Also tonight, we meet our contacts at the pier. Starla, you can come back to our place to stay.”

She hops down from her stool and shakes her head. “I’m good. I like it here, and I just happened to find a razor. If the full staff’s coming tonight, does that mean Eden’s coming, too?”

“Yeah.”

“Perfect. I can text her what I need. Have you made any progress identifying who ransacked my apartment?”

“I’m sorry, honey,” Sergio says. He’s lucky he thinks of Starla like a younger sister. “We’ve been holed up like you guys because of the snow.”

She sighs. “Right. I just... it’s my dogs, Sergio.”

I want to tell her that the dogs are fine. I have a time-stamped photo of them from just today. But goddamn, I can't promise they will be okay, and I'd be an asshole to get her hopes up.

"We'll find them, Starla."

She looks at me with total trust and admiration in her eyes.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it.

I finally excuse myself and pull up my texts.

No more updates about the dogs.

Only minor information from my other source.

There's only one message I'm looking for.

He's free.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Timeo

“I HAD A GREAT SLEEPOVER,” Starla says. “Next time let’s paint our nails and give each other facials.”

“I’m not so sure about the nails, but I’m down with the facial.” She laughs at my response and kisses my cheek.

“Mmm. Stubble. I like,” she whispers.

Even though we’re teasing, joking... we both know there’s a seriousness here that wasn’t here before.

We aren’t alone anymore.

We aren’t...safe anymore.

Were we ever?

Not until I make good on my plans. Even though we’ll always have some potential danger that threatens us, it’ll be more of a baseline hum than an actual blaring siren.

Tonight, my brothers will be meeting someone — or several someones, to be more accurate — down by the pier in Boston. As we’re in the heart of Boston, we aren’t far from the wharf.

"Are you actually going to have clients here tonight?" I ask Sergio.

Sergio shrugs. It seems like clients showing up aren’t the number one reason he’s opened the club. We have other business.

"Some, maybe. We have a few clients flying in from overseas, so I need to make sure that we have this place ready. I'm calling staff to come in in three hours. I'm told the snow will be cleared by then." He looks over at Starla. "Your sister would like to see you. Until we clear your apartment and know you’re safe, Starla, you can stay—"

Starla clears her throat. "I'll stay right here."

"Your sister would like to see you," he repeats, his tone harder. "We have

things to do here—"

"She'll stay here." I hold Sergio's gaze. "With me."

To his credit, Adriano looks away. Ricco's the only one who looks on with mild curiosity.

"So all we needed was the excuse of a snowstorm for you two?" Sergio says.

"Sergio, puh-lease. This is your brother. I'm your sister-in-law." She throws her hands up in the air. "We aren't related! And anyway." She shrugs. "You guys need a feminine touch here. If I leave, the next thing you know you'll be putting up antlers on the walls or something."

"Fine, but you're the one explaining this to your sister."

Starla stands up straighter. "Well, yeah, of course."

Conversation over, we all get to work. We don't have time to quibble over details.

Starla arranges the bar, setting out glasses and making sure that things are prepared. Sergio takes the kitchen. They won't be serving meals tonight, but he wants to be prepared and it's Eden's domain. The rest of us go through the rooms, and we make sure that everything is kosher, including setting the wax play room back to rights.

Obviously, Bella Notte isn't a front, but there are times when we need to keep our doors open so that we can continue with business as usual.

I have my own plans.

Sergio corners me in the hallway. "Timeo. Stop."

I draw in a breath and square my shoulders. "Yeah?"

"Something I need to know?"

I shake my head.

"No. Why?"

"When I left you, we thought you had badly bruised ribs. You were barely

with it. And now you're cool."

"Yeah. I'm not a hundred percent, but I'm much better."

He takes a step closer to me. "Starla have anything to do with that?"

I don't know what he suspects, and I don't really care at this point. I know who I am and what I'm doing. And I know why.

"Starla's an adult who can make up her own mind about shit." I clear my throat. "And so am I."

Sergio and I haven't gone head-to-head in a while. We might be due.

He works his jaw. "You know what will have to happen, then."

I do, and it will involve a ring and a date and her last name changing. But she's not ready for that, and I have a few more things to do first as well.

"Yeah. You know I do."

There's no such thing as casual dating in the brotherhood. I've always known that.

Sergio continues. "Is there a reason why Adriano's suspicious?"

This question I have to deflect.

"Adriano's suspicious of the fucking guy that delivers our milk. He's suspicious of everyone. That's his job."

But I don't look Sergio in the eye when I say this. Just because I'm convinced of what I have to do doesn't make it any easier.

Sergio finally nods. "I trust you. I'm glad you guys are alright. We have a lot to talk about, but not now. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't want you here tonight. I'd want you to have time to recover."

We both know I don't have the privilege.

"Yeah."

"Go over protocol and safety with her."

“You know I will.”

Sergio finally nods.

"Are you done giving him the third degree, or do I need to go pretend to dust something else?" Starla says loudly from a few paces away.

This time, Sergio actually smirks. Not everyone gets to talk to him that way, but he has a special place in his heart for Starla.

And I haven't even told him the half of it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Starla

One year earlier

"Okay, I'll take you to the shooting range, but you have to promise to do exactly what I tell you." I nodded my head eagerly because I couldn't wait to get a weapon in my hands.

"Starla," Timeo said with a growl. When he growled, it did all sorts of things to me. I loved it when he got dominant, but I still had to maintain control.

It mattered to me.

"What? I'm listening. Like you said, I have to do what you say."

He blew out a breath, rolled his eyes skyward, and crossed his gorgeous arms across his gorgeous chest. It should have been illegal to be that hot. I looked away from him because I wasn't supposed to be looking at him that way.

"Starla, you say that. You say you're gonna listen to me, but then you don't. I know you're gonna get some wild idea..."

"Timeo, I promise." Before I knew what I was doing, I crossed the distance between us and extended my pinky finger. "Pinky swear. Give me your pinky."

He huffed out a breath but did exactly what I told him. I looked at his finger just before I hooked mine in his.

I knew what happened when I touched him. Electric sparks lit up my body, and my intuition screamed at me.

This one.

A raw, primal need surged through me to cling to him. Seduce him. There was a wide world of men out there, relationships that were sometimes broken and sometimes amazing, children and families and homes, sex and intimacy and...belonging.

I didn't want the wide world of options. I wanted Timeo.

I pretended I didn't feel the attraction. I pretended I didn't see the longing and, dare I say, lust that mirrored my own. Because if I ever found out that he didn't have any interest in me, it would destroy me.

I'd been through a lot of things that didn't kill me, but that... that would.

"Timeo, I know what I'm asking you to do here. I know that it's not easy learning how to shoot a gun, and I further know that Sergio would lose his mind. And Eden... She probably would too, even though she's not quite as serious as Sergio. But I want to learn. I need to learn. After everything I've been through..." I stopped talking because my throat was doing that weird thing where it got all clogged up.

"Alright," Timeo said seriously. "You know that's the only reason why I'm gonna teach you anyway. This is a dangerous world, Starla. And you know that while we ended most of those men in the fellowship? Some of them are still out there."

Some of the elders were in jail, and some of the men that put them up to the abuse were, too. We knew now that the fellowship cult was funded and controlled by the cartel, under the guise of religious freedom and purity.

The more I talked to Timeo, the more I realized that some of the men in the cult were also some of the men in the cartel. It explained why they never attended meetings and why they lived on the periphery of our compound. They took wives, of course, because why not.

"Let's go." I could tell he agreed against his better judgment.

I wouldn't make him regret it.

I knew how it felt now to have firsts. The first ice cream sundae on the beach. The first movie on the big screen of a movie theater. The first time seeing a Broadway show in person. The first time traveling outside the country. When you'd been raised the way I had, there were many firsts. I looked at Timeo because I knew I wanted him to be my first...in everything.

My thoughts came to a screeching halt when I saw the guns. God, they were beautiful. Powerful and strong. I liked seeing the metal glinting in the

overhead light. I liked the idea of holding one in my hand. I liked the sense of...power. But most of all? I liked the idea of being able to protect myself and the people that I loved.

He went over the rules with me, and I paid attention, but I was excited to get that gun in my hand.

He left the gun unloaded, and idly started fiddling with it. He spun the barrel. And my world spun. Nausea swirled in my belly. I fell to my knees and darkness clouded my vision.

"Starla. Starla!" I blinked and stared at Timeo.

What happened? His gun was on the floor, discarded. And he was... holding me.

Timeo was holding me. Against his chest, like I had fallen or something.

"What happened?" My tongue felt too big for my mouth.

Timeo's eyes were wide and frightened.

"I don't know what happened, but it scared the hell out of me. You didn't faint, but it was like you...weren't there."

I shook my head, a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"I was holding the gun," he said softly. "And when I spun the barrel, it triggered you."

Triggered you...

What did that mean? And why did it happen?

I was crying. Sitting on the floor, I hugged my bent legs to my chest, and buried my face against my knees.

Then Timeo did the most beautiful thing. He sat beside me.

When I was younger, before I learned to curb my mouth and follow the rules so I wouldn't get hurt, my father would take his anger out on me. Eden couldn't stop him, although God knew that she tried. She couldn't make it better, and before we grew older, she couldn't get us out either. But she

would walk with me.

I would go to school in the morning, or to get water, or to pick up some groceries from the store. And she would just walk with me. Sometimes she would reach out and hold my hand. Sometimes she would sing a little song or tell me a funny story to make me laugh. But most of all, she just walked with me, and that was the best thing anyone could've done.

Now Timeo was sitting beside me. Not prying, not asking questions, not giving me advice, or telling me what to do. Just sitting with me.

Solidarity was maybe the most beautiful gift you could give someone.

After a while, I stopped crying and began to sort through what had happened. Other people would make you talk at a time like this. Timeo didn't. Eventually, he took my hand and held it. It was the one time I didn't get that friction of awareness that told me male, masculine, danger. My feminine sensibilities didn't even rear their heads. Because this time, it just felt like a friend.

"I hate that you can mentally suppress memories," I said in a shaky voice.

"I know. I agree. It makes you feel like you're not in control of your own thoughts, right?"

I nodded. "It makes me feel like I can't control my own reactions, and that's scary."

He sat there, not replying but taking my second hand and holding them both. It might have been the most intimate thing anyone had ever done to me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lose it like that." Panic swept through me.

Would he be reluctant to teach me now?

"Don't you dare apologize. This is nothing to apologize for, Starla. You apologize when you've done something wrong. Never, ever apologize for being human."

I paused and thought about that. How many times had I apologized for things I didn't need to apologize for? How many times had I taken the blame for something I didn't need to, blame that wasn't mine to bear?

It all began to come back. I needed to tell him, or I would burst. I had to eviscerate the memory.

"Do you remember the day that you, Sergio, and Eden found me?" I was proud of myself that I could say it without my voice shaking.

"Remember?" Timeo said in a voice that was somehow darker than it was before. "Of course I do. How could I forget?"

"They did...things to me there that I've never told anyone." Every once in a while, Timeo got this look in his eyes that made me wonder if he was even human, because there was so much anger and cold calculation. If anyone ever asked me in a court of law if Timeo was capable of murder, I'd have to tell them yes because that look was what made me know.

Luckily no one ever asked.

He had taken lives. And he would do it again, with reason. Was he some unhinged murderer who would shoot people at random? No. He had more self-control than my father did as an older, more experienced adult.

But would Timeo end the life of someone who threatened someone he loved? Absolutely.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked in a deceptively quiet voice.

"I don't want to, no. But I want to learn how to shoot a gun. And it's becoming clear to me that that is going to be harder than I thought."

I swallowed a lump in my throat and let myself feel the comfort of his hands.

Timeo nodded. Somehow, he seemed to be reining himself in. He was a stallion, pawing at the starting gate.

"Did they assault you?"

Abuse against women were two of the greatest sins one could commit, according to Timeo.

"One did."

"Motherfucker."

I swallowed again and cleared my throat. A shiver raced down my spine at the latent violence in his tone.

What could I say? It was sobering to know that the person you loved was capable of justifiably killing somebody.

“So, all of the men of the fellowship were pasty white, older men who barely saw sunlight because they had all of us working for them. But this one man, he was different. He was obviously the one everyone else was afraid of. He didn’t look like any of the others. He was fit, not quite as old as the elders, dressed in more modern clothes and had tattoos, scars.” I swallowed. “He acted like he was in charge. And he was in that room with me.”

Timeo silently brushed his thumb over the top of my hand. I wondered which one of us he was soothing.

“Did he hurt you?”

I didn't know how to answer that question. “He did this thing where he—” My throat closed. Timeo waited patiently.

I swallowed and continued. “He would come in with a gun, show me that there was one bullet in it. And then he showed me how to spin the barrel. He would hold that in front of my face, spin it, then pull the trigger.”

“Motherfucker.”

I remembered how terrified I was, staring at the barrel of that gun. “Russian roulette, right? I didn't know what it was called then, but I do now. He would come in every single day and spin that fucking barrel.” I stared at our linked hands. “And when you did that, I don't know. It just triggered something. I was frozen with terror like I was in that room.”

Timeo still held my hand. “It's called post-traumatic stress disorder. It's a trigger response to trauma. You were scared that he was going to kill you, so when I spun the barrel, the sound of it, the smell of the gun, anything. It's a good response to fear.” He shook his head. “I'm sorry.”

I laughed mirthlessly. “What did you just tell me about apologizing?”

“No, this is definitely something that deserves an apology.”

"But you didn't know I would react that way. I didn't even know I would react that way. I didn't remember that happening until... just now."

I swallowed and pulled my hands out of his. I stood. "I want to learn how to use that gun. I want to be the one spinning that fucking barrel. Show me."



I WAKE up in the middle of the night, covered in sweat. I don't remember what I've been dreaming about, and it doesn't matter. I look around the room.

Timeo.

He's gone.

Sergio has probably decided to cut his losses, and he isn't fighting this anymore. He doesn't want to know the details of what happened while we were confined to his club, and God knows I'm not telling him.

We shared a bed last night. Exhausted, we fell onto the mattress beside each other, tangled up in blankets and sheets and each other's arms, and fell fast asleep.

I stayed asleep.

I sit up in bed. Where did he go?

I glance at the time. Midnight.

Sergio said something about plans tonight, and I have no idea what those details are, but maybe I need to know. Shit.

They say ignorance is bliss. Now I know why.

I push myself out of bed. The night is in full swing at Bella Notte, and several people will stay the night. Though I'm told it's a much smaller clientele than under normal circumstances, I also know that I'm not alone.

The kinksters and nymphomaniacs and sapiosexuals — the free spirits — are here in full swing.

I guess snowdrifts, slick streets, and mammoth snowbanks don't stop the most dedicated. We are in Boston, after all. We hardly close our coffee shops for a blizzard, never mind *Bella Notte*.

I dress in a pair of black leggings and a black top, thinking I'll probably fit in quite nicely here, dressed in all black.

I'm not sure how I feel about being in this club without Timeo here. But I want to find him.

Unease settles in the pit of my stomach. I chalk it up to my history. It always felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop when I was growing up. I tell myself it's because we are no longer alone and secluded in the safety and security of this club. When it was just the two of us, it was almost as if no one else could tear us apart. But now...

Adriano, and even Sergio, seem to question whether or not they can trust him.

Can I?

Is Timeo truly capable of integrating back into his family, and reconnecting with me, after what he's been through? He hasn't even told me what happened, and I doubt he ever will.

I head to the bar because it's familiar, and because I know people here.

Quinn gives me a bright smile. She sits at the bar drinking something hot pink with a cherry in it.

"Well, if isn't the woman of the hour," Fern says with a smile, wiping down the bar. I wish she'd keep her mouth shut. I hardly want to announce my presence. "I heard that you and Mr. Timeo Montavio himself happened to be stranded here?" She puts the back of her hand to her brow with a dramatic sigh. "What's a girl to do? Stranded in a high-end, well-furnished sex club with a hot, tattooed billionaire. It's the end of the world."

I roll my eyes but smile. "Yes, yes, it was. Awful. Torture. But before you get any ideas, it wasn't all fun and games. I mean, I had to make coffee in a pan, and we lost power." I wink at Quinn. "Fortunately, I found this kit in the ladies' locker room..."

She squeals. "Oh! Was that the one I put there in case of emergency? I'm so glad you found it." She gives me a wink, and thankfully doesn't ask which part of the emergency kit I had to use. I love that Quinn did that. It's like a testament to the sisterhood. I've got your back, even when you don't know what you need.

"What's your drink?" Fern asks.

I shake my head. "No, I'm good, thank you. Do you guys know where Timeo is?"

"Honey," Quinn says, leaning in close to me. She holds my eyes with hers as she takes a sip from her drink. "Pro tip," she confides in a husky whisper. "You don't ask out loud where they are. If they don't tell you, they don't want you to know."

I frown, because how is that fair?

"But listen," she says in a stage whisper.

I lean in closer. "That doesn't mean you can't find out. It's a lot easier than you think. Chances are, one of them has told their significant other. So you just have to check in with the other girls."

Am I "one of girls?" Oh my God, I love that.

I feel unsettled and anxious. I fidget nervously. What if Timeo *has* betrayed his family?

I just want to see him. I just want to see once and for all that he *isn't* betraying anyone. That he's loyal to the core.

I won't make a big deal of going...he doesn't need to find out.

I continue whispering right back at her. "So do you know?"

She grins. "Of course I know," she says softly. "They went down to the wharf. Adriano knows that I can't stand the smell of fish, so when he comes home from the wharf, he always takes a shower and gets changed. I saw him pack a bag with a change of clothes and that scented body wash he always uses after he goes to the wharf." She shrugs. "It turns me on, it's some kind of mountain sandalwood pine thing. All masculine and shit. So anyway, since

we're staying here tonight, he had to pack his bag, and I would bet a gazillion dollars that that's where they are.”

“Sergio said something about that,” I say, frowning. “I don’t feel right about this.”

Fern slides a frosty cup of sparkling water with a wedge of lemon in it to me. “Here. No alcohol, just water.”

“Thank you.” I take a little sip, not realizing how thirsty I was. “It’s freezing out...”

“You need a coat?” Quinn says with a smile. “Honey, call me your fairy godmother. In the locker room, pink locker, take your pick.”

I give her a hug. “Thank you,” I whisper in her ear.

“You're very welcome, and you can thank me by maybe not mentioning to anybody that I had anything to do with you leaving. But if you want to leave? You wanna go out through the dance studio. All other exits are going to be monitored, but you know there’s a way to sneak out...”

Fern comes over and takes a sip from her own drink. “Okay, girls, are you talking about trying to find out where they are on your own? Because there's no way on God's green earth I would do that. Are you kidding me?” She shakes her head and gives me a concerned look. “Starla, you know Timeo. You know he does not want you to leave the club tonight. Just stay here, where it’s safe.”

She might be trying to convince me to stay, but her little speech has the opposite effect.

I have to go.

Ten minutes later, I'm wearing a sleek, charcoal-gray peacoat, a black hat, black gloves, and a black scarf. Yeah, there’s a certain theme.

I flag down a car with an Uber sticker in the window. “Can you take me, please?” I hand him a wad of cash so he forgives the bypass of hailing one on the app.

“Get in.”

I want to see Timeo. I want to prove to myself once and for all that he isn't a traitor. That he would never betray his family, and therefore... me. It's not his fault that I have trust issues.

But as I draw closer to the pier and feel the reassuring heft of the gun that I packed... I'm not sure this is the best decision. I'm a decent shot but not great, and I'm much smaller than most strong men. My past would tell me this is not the best combination.

But I have to know.

Large banks of snow are pushed to the outermost edges of the waterfront, the pier and docks clear. The ocean effect means Boston proper gets less snow than neighboring cities, but the boats and docks are still frosted with slick ice.

I use the brightness from my phone to get to sure footing and a spot where I can hopefully be unnoticed, then tuck it into my pocket. I don't need to be seen. I wait patiently, allowing my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Maybe he isn't here after all. Maybe Sergio rescheduled the shipment and Timeo didn't leave to come here. Maybe—

Footsteps echo down the pier, heading in my direction.

I stand still and hold my breath.

The bitter cold night wraps around me like a vice, and my breath hangs in the air, half frozen. The waterfront stands silent and desolate, and the icy grip of the ocean breeze chills me to the bone, but I remain hidden, my heart pounding with anticipation. Each passing second feels like an eternity as I wait for a sign, a glimpse of Timeo.

Cautiously, I take a step forward, my footsteps muffled by the snow-covered ground. My heart races as I strain my eyes, hoping to catch any movement in the darkness. The waterfront remains eerily still, the only sound the gentle lapping of waves against the frozen docks.

A silhouette emerges from the shadows, a figure wrapped in a heavy coat, trudging through the snow. My heart skips a beat as I recognize his profile, the familiar clothes he wears.

Timeo.

Relief washes over me, and I take a steadying breath. He's here, just as I hoped. Now, all I have to do is wait for him to draw nearer, to reveal himself fully, and show me he's here for his family.

Timeo is loyal to the Montavios, but I need to prove this to myself, to prove that he's loyal to me.

I don't feel very good. My head is a little fuzzy, and my throat hurts. Anxiety?

Breathe, Starla.

I had anxiety attacks back when I was younger, and haven't had one in years, but I know that they can mimic illness.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be watching any of this. I should know better.

Can I trust him?

Tires crunch over the icy surface of the pier, followed by the sound of a car door opening and closing.

Car door? It was supposed to be a shipment — on a boat, not someone coming in a car—

Footsteps approach Timeo. Two men. One has a hood up, his head hanging low as if he wants to avoid notice. He has a second man in his grip. Fairly shoving him at Timeo, the hooded man says something in a low voice.

Timeo takes out an envelope and hands it to him as the second man stands beside him. Even from here, I can see that the man is cuffed, his shoulders hunched, but there's something...familiar about him.

I'm not breathing. My head feels lighter than air. I swallow and give myself a little shake to clear my head.

Turn. Turn toward the light so I can see you.

“There you are.”

The voice is so near me I stifle a scream. I reach for my gun.

“Don’t even think about it.” Cold metal presses to my side. “Don’t turn around either.”

It’s a woman’s voice and familiar. Who the hell is this?

“I want to see you while you watch. See who the man you fell in love with really is. Go ahead. Watch. Turn around and I pull this trigger. Don’t try anything funny. You’re surrounded.”

My heart races so quickly I feel lightheaded. Or am I lightheaded for another reason?

Timeo —

What will happen if I yell out? How many people are here?

I’m shaking as I watch.

Timeo removes the cuffs of the man in front of him. How strange.

Clouds shift, illuminating their faces. I stand staring, held frozen in place with the gun to my side.

Tears clog my vision. I can still see the barrel of the gun in front of my face. I can still feel the paralyzing fear when he said pull that trigger.

I stare in horror as Timeo shakes the hand of my torturer.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Timeo

I STARE into the face of the man that tortured Starla and nearly salivate with the need to end him. To make him feel the same type of fear that she did.

And I have to pretend we're friends.

Not for long.

I bring him into the clubhouse on the pier and hand him a bottle of beer like we're fucking bros. Meanwhile I don't know if I ever hated someone so much in my life.

Took fucking years to find his identity. Locked in the state penitentiary in solitary. Escaped the fucking holding place for Starla before we ransacked it.

"How the fuck did you spring me from jail?" Manuel says, his voice oily and low. I'm reminded of a slithering snake.

I shrug. "Someone owed me a favor."

Of course I don't tell him that my end of the bargain means making sure that Manuel Rodriguez no longer has to serve two life sentences... because he's six feet under.

He fucking deserves it.

Manuel tips back the beer and drinks it in long gulps. He belches, tosses the bottle into a nearby trash bin where it shatters into shards.

"Fuck that was good."

Enjoy it, motherfucker. That was your last.

Footsteps sound outside. I expect him to be on the defensive, but his face registers no surprise.

Jesus.

"Boss, it's me."

Boss...?

I cock my gun.

“Put the gun away, Montavio,” Manuel says. “She has instructions to shoot and kill your woman.”

She?

The door opens.

Fern walks in with Starla, a gun pressed into her side. It takes me seconds to put it together before my vision blurs with sudden rage.

The fucking traitor.

Starla’s eyes are unfocused and her steps wobbly. Is she drunk?

“Fern, what the fuck are you doing?”

But Fern isn’t looking at me. Her eyes gleam when she sees Manuel. “There you are. He did it, didn’t he?”

I promised I would end this man. I promised he would never walk the streets without repercussions. And now... I have to protect Starla.

"Good girl, baby," Manuel says. “He did. Did Montavio deliver what we asked for?”

She rolls her eyes. “In a half-assed way. Didn’t give us anything I couldn’t have found out myself with a little digging.”

“Of course not, the fucking pussy.” He shakes his head at me. “Thought you’d be able to hoodwink us, Montavio?”

“I gave you what they asked for.”

More than I wanted. I told myself it didn’t matter, because I knew Manuel would be dead before he got a chance to deliver any of the intel.

"Let her fucking go," I say to Fern. "She's got nothing to do with you."

But she doesn’t even pay attention to me, her gaze fully fixed on Rodriguez. There are two reasons people betray others: money and love. Now that I see

Fern with Rodriguez...I'm wondering in her case if it's both.

I grit my teeth. "You have an issue with me, not Starla. What does Starla have to do with this?"

She glares. "Everything. You think just because you boys played rescue heroes to Eden and Starla somehow everything would be magically perfect? And you could just go on worshiping her? Fuck that. I know you're a traitor, Timeo. I have all the evidence. I don't need to kill you. When your brothers know what you've done, they'll do it for me."

Starla won't even look at me. She probably thinks I'm a traitor.

"I know who really appreciates me."

Manuel crosses the distance between them, reaches for Fern, and kisses her.

No.

It all comes to me in a rush.

Fern was working with the cartel right under our noses.

She came to us after we ended them, with an iron-clad resume and references. Sergio vetted her and she's worked for us tirelessly for years.

And all this time...

"So you're jealous of Starla." If I keep them talking, I can make a plan. The door is behind me. If I knock Fern down, I can easily overpower her and get her gun.

I need to shoot Rodriguez.

"Watch him," Manuel says. "He's a sneaky motherfucker. Our ride is almost here."

If they get us on their boat, our chances of escape are slim. Starla's clumsily cuffed, which means if anyone pushes her into the water, she's dead.

My mind races.

Manuel narrows his eyes at flashing lights outside the window.

“Someone called the harbor patrol,” Fern grumbles. “We have to move.”

The flashing lights grow nearer. I want to distract them, but I'm going to have to let them get the upper hand if Starla's going to be able to get away.

Fern's smaller than Manuel. I have seconds before they put us on their boat —

I grit my teeth and hold my breath as they yank us through the exit, the door slamming shut behind us. The wooden pier lays in front of us, mostly darkened, one meager bulb overhead casting dim light onto the planks. Now's my chance.

“Starla, pay attention.”

Manuel jerks his head toward me. I shake my head with a mirthless laugh. “If I were you, I'd be looking out at the water. You never know what creatures lurk in the deep, do you?”

Manuel narrows his eyes, and within seconds, is dragging me toward the waiting motorboat tied to the dock, barking at Fern to bring Starla along. He doesn't trust me.

Good.

Strong hands grab me as the boat that came for them prepares to cast off.

“Go, go, go!” Fern shouts.

They make the mistake of putting me on first.

When Manuel moves, I pivot my full bodyweight into Fern and shove Starla up onto the dock.

“Run.”

Fern stumbles forward onto the pier and reaches for Starla, but Starla's too quick.

“Let her go,” Manuel grates. “We only needed her to get to Montavio. She'll blab but by then it'll be too late.” He reaches for me and yanks me toward him, fury in his gaze. “You thought it would be that easy?”

"Go! They don't need you. Go, Starla!" She looks at me, her eyes wide and teary as she stumbles on the pier, watching Fern jump back on the boat as it leaves the dock. I reach up to my throat and squeeze. It's my last recourse.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Starla

I STUMBLE ONTO THE PIER, disoriented. My mouth feels like someone stuffed it with cotton. I grip my throat, half expecting something to be around it after Timeo's last gesture toward me.

He betrayed us.

Their boat quickly becomes enveloped in the dark without so much as one light on board. They planned it this way, I realize, as the boat slinks far into the night, leaving me behind. I wouldn't be surprised if another one of Manuel's men were to appear out of nowhere, but the only activity is the flash of emergency lights from the harbor patrol cutter coming into view too late.

A booming voice on a loudspeaker at full volume makes me jump. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

"Get that boat," I say in a groggy voice. It sounds like I'm talking through a tin can. I blink, suddenly blinded by the flashlight beam of the harbor patrol officer peering at me.

"Ma'am, are you intoxicated?"

I shake my head. "No, I was drugged. I was fucking drugged. Go get him!"

The officer doesn't respond. I don't know why he's not responding to my plea for them to go get them now.

"Get who? Let's take it easy now. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

I have no idea what I can tell them.... but I know who I am.

I look him in the eyes. "My name is Starla Soul. And I need to speak with Sergio Montavio. Now."

The officer takes a step back. He knows exactly who Sergio is. "Of course," he says in a hoarse voice, looking at the wake of the boat that left. As if he didn't know they were taking off.

They don't interfere with mafia war.

And he also knows that if I asked to see Sergio Montavio, he has no choice.

Sergio's on the line. "Starla. Where are you?"

"I'm on the pier by Longwharf. Sergio, Fern betrayed you. And they took Timeo, Sergio." I swallow. "He betrayed you, too. "

"I... You're on the pier where?" I look around at my surroundings.

"At the waterfront. I can see the cruise ship, and restaurants. I think... I think I'm near the North End."

I hand the phone back to the officer, exhausted. I hate feeling this weak. Fern drugged me, I know she did.

My head is spinning from everything that just happened. I knew that man, I knew those cruel, merciless eyes. It makes me sick to my stomach to realize a woman I thought of as a friend is working in conjunction with the man that gave me nightmares.

How much does Timeo know? And why did he reach for his neck?

Thank God I only took the smallest sip of that seltzer. I would've been passed out by now, on that boat with Timeo. Timeo...

I knew that I couldn't get on that boat, because the only way I could go for help was if I escaped. Timeo and I had the same thought.

A car pulls up. I freeze and the harbor patrol officer flashes a blinding light in the direction of approaching footsteps.

I've never been so happy to see Adriano.

"Quinn was right," he says. "Starla, are you alright?"

Adriano may have been an asshole before, but it feels so good to see a friendly face, I almost burst into tears. "They took Timeo, Adriano. I tried to get these guys to go off after them."

If he betrayed us, why does it still make me want to weep at losing him? Timeo is a traitor, I know that now.

Adriano shakes his head. "The harbor patrol won't interfere in a mafia war. Come with me. Timeo can take care of himself. We'll find him."

Going with him seems like the best decision right now. I choke on a sob and pull my shit together. I sink against the passenger seat.

"Tell me what happened. And we will put out a search party for him."

Search party? God. Isn't that what you do when you're already desperate and need to begin sweeping the beach for evidence of a body?

"Did Fern serve Quinn a drink tonight?" Adriano gives me a sharp look.

"What are you talking about?"

I swallow hard. "She was a mole. She's on that boat with Manuel Rodriguez." I swallow. "He's cartel."

Adriano narrows his eyes.

"No, don't get the wrong idea, I'm not saying that Timeo's cartel, though I'm not sure he wasn't working with them."

"I figured as much. It was too simple. They had no reason to let him go. So you're telling me he's now in the middle of the ocean with Rodriguez and Fern, and who knows who's driving that boat."

"Yeah."

Adriano pulls up his phone, and I let my fingers delicately touch my neck. I remember what it felt like when Timeo held me...

I finger the locket he gave me.

Wait a minute.

Inside the locket is a picture of the two of us from years ago. We were so much younger.

I want to yank it off my neck and throw it out the window.

Timeo, how could you have done this to me?

I feel like I've already survived so much. And all this time, he was lying to

me. He never intended on being mine. He never intended on marrying me.

I swipe the tears on my cheek and finger the locket while Adriano and Sergio talk on the phone. I am vaguely aware of them sending a helicopter with night vision out to find Timeo. Of course they are.

With a shuddering sigh, I open the locket.

Inside is the picture as I remember it. I stifle a sob. Even now, just looking at him makes my heart do a somersault in my chest.

I don't want this anymore. I want to get rid of it.

My head feels so fuzzy. I wish I could snap out of it.

I look at the picture nestled inside my necklace. It blurs in my vision. I pull it from the locket, start to rip it, but drop it because of my trembling hands.

It falls into my lap.

Something catches my eye. I turn it over in the palm of my hand, and gasp.

"Starla, I put Sergio speakerphone, he wants you to tell him everything."

"Wait a minute."

"Starla."

"Adriano, pull over. Give me your phone."

"What the fuck?"

"Give me your phone!"

Sergio blows out a breath over the car's speakers. "Pull the car over."

Adriano reluctantly pulls over with a growl and parks the car, motioning for me to talk to Sergio through the Bluetooth.

"Starla, we need to know—"

I talk to him in a rush of words.

"Sergio, right before they took him on board, Timeo grabbed at his neck. I had no idea what he was doing." I swallow and shake my head. "I didn't

know what he meant. But then I remembered this.” I touch the locket he gave me. With shaking hands, I turn over the picture. “Timeo gave me a locket a while ago. There's a QR code on the back of the picture that was in it.”

Adriano looks curious. "Go ahead, scan it."

He hands me his phone and I scan it, then touch the link it brings up.

There's a video of Timeo with a triangle to hit play.

"I need to listen to this alone," I say, my voice choked. "Find Timeo."

I step out of the car, leaving it to Adriano to explain to Sergio what's happening. The bitter cold snaps at me like a rabid animal. I shiver and pull my coat around me, huddling for warmth. But I can't watch this in front of Adriano. I have no idea what Timeo left for me.

With a trembling, freezing finger, I touch the link. I can tell Timeo must have filmed it a little more than six months ago, before he was taken — he's clean-shaven and his cheeks are fuller.

He smiles and my heart does a somersault.

Dammit, Timeo.

“Starla, if you're getting this video, then I'm probably either dead, or close to it.”

My stomach drops to my toes. Adriano is watching from the car but leaves me to watch alone.

As Timeo continues, my heart races. He's sitting in a dark room, all alone, hands folded in his lap. I swallow the lump in my throat.

“You'll see a second code pop up in just a few seconds. But first I wanted to tell you. If I'm dead... Starla, I love you. I love you more than I ever thought any human could love another person. I would never hurt you. No matter what happens in the next couple months or even years, I want you to know that.” He clears his throat. The second link pops up, but I don't touch it yet because I can tell from the video link he still has more to say.

"The day that I found you. The day that we rescued you and brought you

back to Boston. It was obvious you'd been abused." His eyes on the camera darken. Even though he's staring at me from a place in the past, it feels as though he's staring straight at me now. "Sergio and Mario said that monsters had hurt you. And I made a promise then that I would hunt those monsters."

He leans forward in the video, forearms on his knees. "That's exactly what I've done for the past few years. We killed some of your oppressors when we got to the compound, but some of those monsters were hidden. Some of those monsters had different identities. And when I promised my brothers I would go undercover to repay a favor to the cartel...I knew it was my chance." He swallows. "Click the second link."

I do.

"The link after this one is a dynamic link which I keep updated as I gain information. It's on a highly secure location that no one but you and I can access. That information is everything I've compiled on my monster hunt. I want you to click it when this video is over. I want you to know that everything I've done is because I love you. This isn't just revenge, Starla. Revenge is bitter, and sometimes necessary, but it doesn't keep anybody safe." Taking a deep breath, he pauses before he continues, giving weight to his words. "This is about making sure that no one ever hurts you again. I love you."

"Timeo—"

The video goes black. With shaking hands, I click the final link.

I brace myself, but it isn't enough. When the pictures and data begin to populate, I have to lean against the car for support.

Robert Johnson.
46 years old
Executed at the compound

I... I knew these men.

I'm gasping for breath as I scan the names and faces. I close my eyes. I push forward.

David Anderson
69 years old
Executed at the compound

The man who abused me in the fellowship.

James Wilson
68 years old
Escaped. Sent to jail.
Executed via hit in jail.

My schoolteacher who told me that my place was under my father's roof.

William Soul
55 years old
Executed at the compound

My father. Killed that day at the compound.

Timeo did this. He hunted and he killed them. And he told his brothers that he was going undercover, but all the while...

I scroll through the pictures, my stomach queasy.

Executed.

Executed.

Executed.

My heart is thundering in my chest as I go through names that I found out later were the cartel, men I only vaguely knew who lived on the periphery of the compound.

Marco Hernandez
29.

Executed

Carlos Lopez

33.

Executed.

Executed.

Executed.

Executed.

The words blur as I read them, marked in red. But at the very bottom of the page... there's one still in green.

I stare at the picture of my torturer, the man I saw not ten minutes ago.

Manuel Rodriguez.

52.

At large.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Timeo

"FUCK, it feels good to get out from behind bars," Rodriguez says, like he's a man on vacation. He gives me a sidelong look, satisfied that I am cuffed to a chair in the main cabin of the boat as Fern sits across from me. A couple of his men wander around but I don't recognize them.

"Why did you do it?" I ask her.

She shrugs. "They paid me better than you did."

"Nah," I say, denying her statement. "People don't stoop to this level of betrayal easily. Not for money. You could've done shit all for money. What was the real reason?"

"Don't talk to him," Rodriguez snaps. He slides up to her and puts his hand on her lower back. The way he holds her gives me an idea.

"Did you drug Starla?"

She blows out a breath and laughs.

"Of course I did. Imagine my surprise when I came to the bar tonight and found a corner of the envelope with all my intel on you just sticking out under the counter beneath the register. It looks like somebody was trying to get it out, Timeo. Would you happen to know anything about that?"

I raise my brows and smirk. "Wow. Kept it at the bar. What a great idea."

I want to antagonize her, make her angry. She loses control of herself when she gets angry.

Like a fish led to bait, she snaps. "I wasn't exactly going to take it with me wherever I went. I spent more time in the bar than anywhere else. Don't you dare mock me."

I turn away from her as if bored.

"Rodriguez, you're going to have to release me if you want me to give you the intel that I promised. It's a thumb to thumbprint identification to get onto

my phone, where it's stored. And there's nobody else that can access it because I constructed the format myself. "

Rodriguez rolls his eyes. "Well, that isn't the easiest trick in the book."

Of course it is, but I'm not done yet.

"I've set it up with biometric readings, so it won't be accessible if I'm stressed, under pressure, or you cut off my thumb and use it to access it."

"Of course you fucking did," he says on a growl, then comes to a sudden halt.

"Boss, you hear that?"

He slams his palm in the air.

Silence.

Then the faint sound of a chop chop chop, growing louder.

My heart soars. The harbor patrol isn't coming.

My brothers are here.

The sound of a voice on a loudspeaker rises above us as a beam like headlights illuminates the dark around us. "We have in our possession Javier Perez and Eduardo Ramirez. Release Timeo Montavio. We repeat, release Timeo Montavio and you will get the information you are after."

Rodriguez may have suspected the harbor patrol would follow him. He was banking on my family never finding him.

But he didn't know the Montavio fucking Brotherhood has a helicopter with night vision and weapons with military precision. They hadn't gotten very far.

"You have ten seconds."

"My God!" Fern says. "They don't lie. You know that. Give them what they want, or they'll kill us!"

"Stop panicking. They're bluffing."

Machine gun fire erupts into the water. Windows shatter. Someone's an

excellent shot.

Rodriguez throws his arms up in surrender, but I know him. He's not surrendering. He's not going back to jail. He would rather die than do that.

Thump.

Thump.

My brothers have boarded the ship.

Boom. Rodriguez grabs Fern and tries to barricade himself in a room, but Ricco is quicker and pulls Fern away from him.

Rodriguez points his gun at me, and I kick it out of his hand. "Ricco, he's fucking mine."

I don't want to use a gun. I want to beat him with my bare hands.

Ricco severs the rope around my wrists right before Rodriguez tries to slam into him. Ricco ducks just in time and tosses Rodriguez to me.

My head hits him in the solar plexus, and the wind goes out of him.

He's already punching, pummeling with his huge, furious fists. I deflect his hits, but one lands straight in my rib cage and winds me.

With my hands now free, I come up swinging. I knock him in the jaw. When he hits the ground, I kick him. I hit him again and again, adrenaline surging through me as I punish the bastard that tortured my woman.

When he's slumped beneath me, I pin him in place with my knee on his chest. I uncap my gun. Point it to his head. "You tortured Starla. She had nightmares for years because of you. You will never torture her again. And you will die with the knowledge of what I told you. Because no one will ever get it. That was my intention from the beginning, Rodriguez. I hope you enjoyed your last moments on this earth."

I force him to his knees, execution style. I dislodge the barrel of the gun and show him. "Look. You see, I'm going to make it easy on you. We could play Russian roulette all night. Or I can make you pull the trigger." I give it a spin. "Here you go," I say pleasantly. "Now do it. Pull the trigger."



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Starla

AT THE LAST SECOND, I look away.

The final *thump* is all I need. I feel Timeo reach for my trembling hand and give it a squeeze.

It's strange to have two competing emotions warring with each other, but I can't help it. I'm relieved but shaking. Exhausted but wired.

Timeo and I huddle under blankets while the Montavios want all the details. Someone takes away the body.

Timeo answers all of them. Now that Rodriguez is gone and Fern is apprehended, they want to know everything.

We're in the back of some kind of SUV, and it feels like we're driving with the president or something. The windows are tinted, and it glides along as if lifted on some sort of high-end suspension system. I'd bet anything it's armored as well.

I can tell Timeo isn't telling them everything, though.

"I fed them information that was irrelevant or easily refutable," he begins. "Nothing that would give away trade secrets. I promise."

"Explain why you were behind the supposed infiltration of The Castle," Ricco says. Ricco's a nice enough guy, but right now, I would not want to be Timeo. I fairly quake under the look he's giving him now.

Wait, Timeo was behind that? Though he doesn't seem surprised they figured it out. "I wanted more security at The Castle. I took advantage of the damaged bush outside when I arrived and made it appear worse than it was, because I knew if I gave Romeo reason to believe they were being watched, he'd up his game. I promise it was only a covert way of getting more security on deck." He swallows hard and rubs a hand across his brow. "The Castle was Starla's home. I knew they'd eventually come."

"They did," Ricco says on a low growl. "They didn't get very far."

Timeo blows out a breath. “Good.”

“We have questions, brother,” Sergio says seriously. He looks from me to Timeo. “And we want answers.”

“You’ll get them,” Timeo says. “All of them. But I’m going to ask that you give me one thing.”

Sergio and Ricco exchange a look. Ricco nods. “Everything he says matches what I found. We accessed the burner phone he gave Adriano. Nothing he sent makes us vulnerable.” Ricco looks at Timeo. “What is it that you want?”

Timeo looks to Sergio when he answers. “One night.”

“One night?” Sergio’s brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“I want Starla alone for one night. Before we begin any debriefing. Before we get into anything else. In a place where there’s a fucking coffee pot and room service. I want one night at a hotel in Boston where we don’t have to answer to anyone or anything.”

I stare at him, my eyes wide. I’m not sure how I feel about this.

Timeo looks at me. “I want to talk to you alone. Privately.” He exhales and slumps back in his seat.

Sergio finally nods. “I’ll grant you one night. Tomorrow, we debrief. But I have one question.”

“Yes?”

“Not for you,” Sergio says. Instead, he looks at me. “Starla, is that okay with you?”

I swallow and nod. “Yeah,” I say in a husky voice. “Not sure Bella Notte is my jam. Like, no offense, but I’d like a quiet night without questions myself.” I frown at Timeo and toss Sergio a bone. “But make it a double. Two beds, please.”

Ricco chuckles and Sergio winces. Timeo doesn’t respond.

We have a lot to talk over.

I want him to explain to me what he did and why, and I am not super cool with letting Sergio think we're jumping in bed with each other anytime soon.

My phone rings. It's become almost routine now to ignore the notifications from my friends and followers as I answer the call. I know that Timeo wants me off social media and I'm not sure what I think about that myself yet.

I need time. Space.

"Hello?"

"Oh my God," Eden says. I can tell she's crying. "Your dogs are here, Starla, and they're okay. I'm not sure who found them or how, but the kids are going crazy. And I'm so, so glad you're okay. I heard that Fern turned on us and that you were in danger, but Sergio says he has you now."

"Oh thank God! Thank you for taking care of them, please give them lots of hugs for me. And I'm fine," I tell her, even though it's a lie. I'm not fine at all. I'm alive, yes, but my emotions feel like they've been tossed into a blender and spun on high. "I promise. I need a little downtime tonight, and I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

We pull up to the largest hotel I've ever seen, with ornate columns, huge potted plants, and valet parking. Though it's late at night, the bright lights of the entrance speak of opulence and wealth.

I hardly notice it. Sergio exits the car with us and gathers me in his arms. I want to sob against his chest, release all the emotions I have pent up inside me, but I know he'll only worry about me. And when he goes home to Eden, he needs to tell her I'm alright.

So instead, I only hug him, and kiss his cheek. "Tell Eden I love her," I say in a husky voice. "And I love you, too."

He kisses my cheek and releases me. "I will. Stay in touch, sweetheart." He presses cash into the palm of my hand. "And get yourself something to eat."

"Thank you."

A bellhop comes toward us dressed in a uniform. I expect him to lead us to the front door, but he doesn't. Timeo doesn't seem surprised at all as we're

led to a hidden entrance on the side of the building. “This way, please,” the bellhop says in a hushed voice.

A thick red carpet greets us as we enter the private entrance, as well as a large team of security personnel. “You may take the private elevator to the privacy suite,” the bellhop tells us.

And then we’re alone.

Timeo stands on one side of the elevator and I’m on the other.

“I love you so fucking much,” he says in a husky voice. “And I’ll explain everything.”

All of the words I wanted to say die on my lips. I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

The elevator glides to a stop and the door dings when it opens.

I step past Timeo and enter the hallway. The carpet feels good, thick and plush under my feet. Between whatever Fern gave me and the crash of adrenaline, I could crawl into bed and sleep forever. I’d be willing to bet Timeo has similar thoughts.

Even though we came up in a private elevator after entering through a secure door, Timeo sweeps the place before he does another thing. We’ll be old and in a nursing home, and he’ll sweep the bingo room before we get our cards.

I step out of my shoes, almost beyond the point of caring if there is anyone here, as long as they’ll just let me sleep.

When he’s finally satisfied we’re alone, he nods toward the bathroom.

“Bathroom. Strip.” When I open my mouth to protest, he shakes his head. “I promise I’m not going to do anything. I want to wash tonight off, Starla. Give me that.”

I purse my lips. “Sounds like a thinly veiled excuse to get my clothes off,” I retort.

His eyes smolder at me. “If I wanted your clothes off, sweetheart, I wouldn’t be asking.”

Thump.

Goddamn him and his wily charms.

I look toward the bathroom. “Shower sounds nice, actually, but only if we order food, first.”

“Bath, not shower, we have a lot to discuss. I’ll order food while it fills.”

Stepping past me, he heads into the bathroom, weary but determined. I watch as he turns on the faucet and dumps half a bottle of bodywash in.

“Oooh,” I murmur. “Bubble bath. Nice touch. Do we have a menu?”

“Get in the tub, Starla. I know what you like.”

I have to give it to him. When I strip off my clothes and sink into the hot tub filled with fluffy bubbles, it feels amazing. I sigh so deeply it sounds like a moan.

Timeo’s out there ordering enough food to feed a small army.

“Did you get fries?” I ask, as I sink below the surface until the bubbles hit my chin.

“Each kind.”

“Chocolate something?”

“Mousse and cake.”

“You’re forgiven,” I say, just before I sink below the surface of the water.

When I resurface, he’s standing beside the tub, naked. It isn’t fair how gorgeous his hard, golden body is. I half forget why I was mad at him.

He joins me.

“This tub’s big enough for a barge,” he mutters, as he sinks into the hot water with me. “Fuck, that feels good.”

I reach for his hand. I can’t help myself.

“Yeah,” I say with a nod. “I may fall asleep. Don’t let me drown. Start

talking, please.”

As he talks, he strokes my back. “Dip your head into the water again.” I obey. He takes my hair in his hands and pours shampoo into his palm, beginning to lather my hair as he talks.

“You watched the video?”

“I did.”

“So you know I began hunting the men who hurt you the first day we found you.”

I shiver and nod. It feels so good as his strong fingers work the shampoo into my hair.

“I do.”

“When Ricco needed a favor, it was my opportunity. I went undercover to repay a favor to the cartel, but I didn’t know I’d be taken prisoner. When I was there, I found out everything I needed. Manuel Rodriguez was the last piece of the puzzle.”

I nod. “You killed them.”

He rinses my hair and I reach for a bar of soap. His eyes momentarily widen when I don’t lather myself but instead lather him.

“I did. It took a very, very long time to find them all and even longer to find ways of executing them without blowback to my family.”

As the warm water laps against my skin and I stroke his back, the exhaustion from the evening begins to ebb away.

“You did that for...for me,” I whisper.

Timeo slowly lowers my hand into the water. He turns to face me. “I did it for you, Starla. Because I love you. And I want you to be safe.”

I blink back tears. “I don’t want any more secrets between us, Timeo. Because I love you, too.”

My head begins to clear. I breathe in the cleansing warmth of the steam that

rises from the bath. “Is it over now?”

He reaches for my chin and raises my eyes to his. “We’re so close, baby,” he says before he leans in and kisses me. “Tonight, Rodriguez lies dead. But even though he was the last piece of the puzzle, it turns out he wasn’t the end of the chain.”

My heart begins to beat a little faster.

There’s a reason Timeo insisted the two of us come here alone tonight.

“Oh?”

“I got his phone, Starla. No one knows yet that Rodriguez is dead. Fern’s been taken captive and the rest of his men taken prisoner. Rodriguez was reporting to someone. And he’s been in direct contact with his superior since he left jail. The last message he sent was five minutes ago.”

I stare at him. But Rodriguez is—“You sent it?”

“I did.”

I straddle Timeo in the tub. I stare into his eyes. “What does this mean?”

“I’m going to hunt him down, baby. The man behind it all. The puppeteer. The one who ran the show at the fellowship. I’m going to end him, once and for all. And no one, *no one*, will ever hurt you again.”

My head spins.

Timeo did it all...for me.

He was held hostage. Beaten. Willing to put up with his family’s belief that he was a traitor. Willing to let me think he was a traitor.

All for me. But there’s only one problem.

“Timeo...I can’t ever thank you for all you’ve done. I can’t tell you how much your protection has meant to me. I’m safe because of you. I sleep well at night because of you. And I love that you want to finish the job. But I’m the one who was abused and tormented. I...I need to be a part of this.”

Timeo frames my face in his hands and holds my gaze.

“I get that. Do you trust me?”

It isn't the first time he's asked me this, but the answer to that question has never had more weight.

“I do,” I whisper. “I trust you with my life, Timeo.”

He leans in and brushes his lips to mine. Hope surges in my heart, even as I fear what he'll say next.

“I have a new plan.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Timeo

MY BIGGEST FEAR in all of this was losing Starla.

I feared that she'd find out bits and pieces of what I've done and turn away from me because I'm a murderer.

She didn't. Her eyes shone with love for me.

I feared she'd conclude I betrayed my family and her, that I'd turned traitor.

She doesn't now. She knows who I am and said she trusts me with her life.

There's both freedom and gravity in knowing you're in love with a woman who not only trusts you with her life but is willing to give you everything.

After what we've both been through, there isn't much I'm afraid of anymore.

"We go dark," I tell her as she holds my gaze in the steam-filled room. "At first I was thinking we could fake our deaths but—"

"That would kill Eden and Sergio. I can't do that to my sister."

"Exactly. So we go dark for a few days, but I have a way to signal Sergio. He'll know we're alright, but he won't tell anyone else." Sergio's a fucking vault.

Starla nods, her eyes shining.

"I have one question."

I brush her wet hair out of her face. I lean in and kiss her forehead. I love her so much my heart aches.

"What's that?"

Quirking a brow at me in that adorable way that makes my heart melt, she asks, "Does this new plan involve me getting to use my gun?"

I lean in and nibble her ear. "I'm not. And you're going over my knee for your completely reckless disregard for your safety."

“Timeo,” she groans. “Also, answer the question.”

“I love you, you little brat.” My heart feels lighter than it has in years. “Not only do you get to use your gun, but because I’ve wanted you to have an upgrade, I’ve bought you the slickest, most compact, sexiest gun you’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, hell yes! I love you so much. I mean, even if you didn’t buy me a gun. Where is it?”

A knock sounds at the door. We both still. This is our life now. We take nothing for granted.

“Probably room service, but let’s see.”

We exit the bathroom wrapped in fluffy white robes, but I’m armed. I go to the door and peer through the peephole.

Room service.

Still.

“Leave it by the door, please.”

Starla’s behind me, her feet planted shoulder width apart, hands on hips. I watch through the peephole again as they leave the food on a large silver tray.

The hallway’s empty.

“I’ll get the food, you cover me,” she says.

“Perfect.” I open the door, looking in both directions, my gun poised and ready to shoot. I give a nod. She steps in front of me and picks up the tray with a groan.

“Oh my God, are we expecting company? An entire football team, perhaps?”

I grunt in reply and as soon as I confirm there’s still no one in the hall, take the heavy tray from her and kick the door shut.

“So. This is our life now?” she asks, grabbing an enormous glass dish of chocolate mousse. “We pull guns when the room service we ordered actually comes?”

I set the tray of fries, wings, and cake down on a side table and slide it over to the edge of the bed.

“For now, yeah.”

She grins. “Where’s that sexy gun?”

“Hard for me to take you seriously when you have chocolate mousse on your lips.”

Rolling her eyes, she sticks out her tongue and laps it up.

“Fuck, if I wasn’t so tired—”

“Let’s eat. Finish forming our plan. Take a little nap,” she says with a wink. “Give me my gun.”

“Say please.”

With a sigh, Starla folds her hands. “Please, please, pretty please can I have it now?”

I point to her plate. “Finish your dinner first.”

With a pleased little smirk, she inhales the food with my help.

“Alright. It’s time.”

I hand her the Staccato 2011 CS I got. When I saw it at the gun store, I knew it was made for her.

“Whoa,” she breathes. I’m hard as fuck seeing her with the sleek gun in the palm of her hand. “You weren’t kidding.”

I lean back against the pillows. “Show me how you hold it, baby.”

When she poses and shows me, practices, and I’m convinced we’re fully prepared to use it, we finally crash in bed.

Tomorrow, we take care of business.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Starla

I WAKE EARLY in the morning. Through the small crack under the shade we pulled last night, faint blue morning light peaks in.

“Morning, beautiful.”

I roll over and cuddle close, my cheek pressed up against him. Wordlessly, his hand rests on the back of my head.

We don't talk. Sometimes, there are no words for what has to happen.

Leaning down to kiss me, he cups my jaw and touches his lips to mine. I sigh into him, swallowing his kiss and his own deeply male moan of pleasure. His tongue touches mine, and pressure builds between my thighs when I feel his length grow hard between us.

I kiss his cheek and he kisses my shoulder. We're lying naked, flesh to flesh, our robes long discarded. I silently slide myself onto his chest and his arms come around me, holding me in place. He once kissed me nearly to orgasm.

It's my turn now.

I languidly kiss his stubbled cheek, rugged and masculine, the faint scent of snow-capped mountains mixed with the satiny soap of last night's bath still lingering. I kiss his shoulder, his tattoos, the bulge of his biceps and corded forearms. I kiss his chest and when I lick his nipple he hisses in a breath and palms my ass, hard. I squeal but keep kissing.

The flat of his stomach, his muscled legs, the base of his thick shaft.

If we had more time—but we don't.

It's funny now to think that we put off sex because we needed protection. On the cusp of what we're about to do, it's the furthest thing from my mind.

I want his babies.

I've waited for him long enough.

He moans, the head of his cock glistening with a drop of pre-cum. I swallow

and hold his gaze as I position myself over him and line up the head of his cock with my warm, wet entrance.

The first thrust feels like heaven. The second makes angels sing. By the third, I'm given over fully to sheer primal pleasure. I could weep with happiness that we're back together.

He's mine.

I love the way he cups my breasts while I ride him.

I love the way the walls of my pussy clench around him.

I love the way his eyes go half lidded when he groans with pleasure as my own body rocks with the first spasm of ecstasy.

I come with abandon, riding his cock. I'm drowning in bliss as he comes inside me. We rock our hips and chase our ecstasy. I shatter into shards of brilliant light, blinded, ecstatic. I forget to breathe.

When I come back to earth, we still don't speak. I give myself only seconds to bask in the warm afterglow of our lovemaking. Cupping my face in his hands, he kisses me.

"I love you, Starla. It's go time, baby."



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Starla

"I DON'T KNOW how much you know about what we're about to do, but I'm gonna start from the ground up. The best way to avoid notice, so that nobody gives you a hard time about anything, is to pretend like you belong here."

Okay, alright.

I nod my head. "Because I look like I fit right in, don't I?" God.

"Baby," he says with a smile. "I'm the one that belongs in the cartel. You are the one that belongs with me." Since he puts it that way...

My heart is thundering in my chest. I've never killed anyone, and I'm not sure that now is the time I'm going to. But I'm ready. I am so fucking ready. "Got it. I'm yours. That's not very hard to pretend at all."

Rodriguez's boss is in an underground bunker accessed well beneath the city streets, behind cement walls in the heart of Boston. I didn't expect him to be so near, but apparently, he likes being able to access the international airport here and has insider friends in the Boston Police Department.

So does Timeo.

"Combining multiple biometrics makes it more secure," Timeo explains. "I made friends with their artificial intelligence."

He knows exactly what to do.

We're standing at the door to the bunker. A fingerprint scanner captures his prints, while a second scanner analyzes his irises. Palmprint identification is next, but he's accounted for everything.

At least I think so.

"Emiliano Roja is here," Timeo promises me, as a series of beeps and flashing lights grant us access.

Emiliano is an older man, but ruthless, with no less than three dozen deaths and the terrorizing of untold others on his conscience.

"He's too proud to give anyone below him power," Timeo says. "Rumor has it he believed his own son was going to usurp the throne, so he slit his throat. He has no heirs beneath him. The entire structure of his group collapses with his death. And they know it, too."

I nod. "Which is why he's here."

"Yup."

"What does security look like?"

"I've hacked through Rodriguez's information and adjusted it to mirror mine. Roja will likely try to fight. That's where you come in."

I swallow and nod. Got this.

"Starla...this man is responsible for brainwashing your parents. He's responsible for the molestation of children within the fellowship. He's responsible for the abuse of the women in the group, the women that you've personally helped." He narrows his eyes. "He would've killed your dogs if we hadn't gotten them first."

He's reminding me of all this because he knows I don't want to kill anybody, but this is an act of war. With Roja still walking this earth, there's no telling the damage that he will do, the lives that he will destroy, the horrors that he will perpetrate in the name of what he believes to be right.

"No more, Timeo." I shake my head. "No more."

His eyes blaze into mine as he grabs me, pulls me to him, and kisses me fiercely.

I swear to God, if he hadn't fucked me this morning, I'd be turned on right now just watching him access security. The utter competence with which he orchestrates the break-in is like watching a master artist.

It's time to push that last domino and watch the rest of them fall.

I hear the footsteps only a second before the voice gets my attention.

"Who the fuck are you?" I spin around and stick my gun into the throat of the man behind me. Didn't even hear him.

I'm on instant alert. "Shut your mouth or I pull the trigger."

I am so fucking ready. Timeo's even more ready than I am. There's no warning, no hesitation. One pull of the trigger and he shoots directly in the T-spot, the place dead in the center of one's face that causes instant death. He told me about that, too.

The second guard comes straight for me and wraps his hand around my throat.

In one fluid, ruthless motion, Timeo pulls the trigger again. This time, I help.

When both bodies lie slumped over each other, I stand motionless in shock for a moment, heart racing, then scowl at Timeo. "You do not get to have all the fun."

"No way," he says with a grin. "You got this, baby."

Maybe later on I'll regret it. Maybe later on I'll relive the way his eyes flared with fear before his life left his body. But right now, all I feel is the rush of adrenaline and relief. Enormous, crashing relief.

"This is it, baby. This is it."

The internal door opens.

"You can put my tray on the bedside table," an older, oily voice snaps.

He thinks we're here with his lunch.

Cute.

Timeo slams the door behind us with finality. Roja looks up from his desk and his nostrils flare.

No surprise. Nothing but recognition and fury.

"Ah, Starla. How nice to see you. I'm surprised you made it this far."

I'm not. The full fruition of Timeo's life purpose was getting us here.

He pushes back from the desk and gives me a curious look.

"A gun, is it? Interesting. We don't believe in violence at the fellowship."

I take a deep breath to clear the rage that threatens to choke me. I counseled enough women formerly in the fellowship to know this as the patent lie it is.

“How cute, holding a gun.” He tuts at me. “Your father would’ve been so disappointed.”

Timeo stands behind me. “Don’t let him bait you.”

“Who?” I ask with a mirthless laugh. “Is someone speaking to me?”

A muscle twitches in Roja’s jaw.

“Your family was so easy to manipulate,” he taunts. His jowls sag as he shakes his head from side to side, his beady little eyes watering. “It’s too bad your father was killed by your boyfriend. It’s awfully disloyal of you, isn’t it?”

“Blah blah blah,” I say to Timeo. “Blah blah blah. Is there a bug on that desk?”

Roja’s face grows red.

“Put your hands in the air,” I snap. I raise my gun. “I want to see them.”

I’ve endured unimaginable suffering because of this man. I want revenge and justice for what he’s put me and countless others through.

“Adorable,” he says to me. “You’re almost threatening.”

I pull the trigger. The bullet smashes Roja’s computer screen.

“Yessss,” Timeo says in a low growl. He shoots Roja’s cell phone, the charger, and a glass-encased shelf behind the desk.

Roja puts his hands up and his eye twitches. I hold my gun in front of him.

“Your henchman tortured me with Russian roulette. He died, a victim of his own circumstance.” Roja stares. He didn’t know Rodriguez was dead. “I was beaten in the name of teaching me to obey. I was stripped of my innocence. Robbed of a childhood. Taught to fear and taught to hate.”

“If you only truly submitted yourself to the teaching authority of—”

“Lies. They. Are. All. Lies.”

He shakes his head. “Only weak people are capable of being manipulated, Ms. Soul. You had your choice.”

It happens so quickly it’s a blur. Roja dives across the desk but doesn’t go for me— he goes for Timeo. I notice a drawn blade in the palm of his hand.

I pull my trigger.

The first bullet hits Roja in the shoulder and shoves him back like a giant’s smacked into him. The second hits him in the solar plexus and drops him to his knees. He growls, clutching at the rapidly spreading red stain on his chest when my third shot hits him straight between the eyes.

There’s...so much blood.

No one comes to save Roja in his last hour.

Timeo stares at me, pride shining in his eyes. “You did it, baby. You knocked over that last domino. Now watch the rest of them fall.”

I never knew how much I adored the sound of quiet.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Timeo

THE DEATH of Emiliano Roja and Manuel Rodriguez does exactly what I hoped.

Roja's absence causes a power vacuum, as factions split off and high-ranking members fight for control. Infighting and violence are at an all-time high, just as I predicted.

Assassinations. Turf wars. The smaller factions formed after the deconstruction of the fellowship can't sustain themselves. They self-implode in a matter of days and what few remain are easily picked up by the authorities.

I take Starla back to the hotel and manage to convince Sergio not to come for us. Not yet.

We take three days for ourselves, living on room service, reveling in each other, and finding every possible way to explore each other's bodies.

And we sleep.

Starla exits the shower three days after Roja's demise and ties her robe around her waist.

"Don't tie it that tight," I mutter. "Only gonna take it off."

She grins at me. "Alright, Timeo. I'm ready." She nods.

"Ready?"

"To leave. To go back to see Eden and Sergio and my dogs." She sits on the edge of the bed. "To go back to normal life again."

"Yep. But first, I have a surprise for you."

I pull up the picture of the house. It's small but adorable with two rocking chairs on a wraparound porch, a clothesline in the back, and a wooden swing set.

"Oh that's beautiful."

“And it’s ours.”

She stares, her mouth agape.

“I was nervous about you going back to the apartment...and I want a place big enough for all of us. It’s south of Boston, on the South Shore and not far from the ocean. There’s a private beach in the back and—”

“I *love* it. Oh it’s so *us*.”

She’s still flipping through pictures of the house when I reach for a small box on the bedside table and hand it to her.

“What’s this?” she asks in a whisper.

I get on one knee. “You weren’t going to live in sin in that house, were you?”

She groans. “Too soon. Too soon to make jokes like that for crying out loud. My God! But no.” Her eyes shining, she curls her fingers in a “gimme” gesture. “Well?”

I grin at her. “Marry me, Starla. I love you. I want to marry you as soon as we can and start the rest of our lives together.” My throat gets strangely tingly in an unfamiliar way. I go on, my voice husky. “You’re my best friend and I want to spend forever with you.”

“Yes,” she breathes, nodding her head. Her eyes shine like stars in the night sky, twinkling and bright. “Yes. And we’ll live in this house where I’ll record my videos—”

She waits for me to respond but I only narrow my eyes at her.

“Kidding. This is the final post,” she says. “It’s...somehow lost its appeal now.”

I slide the ring onto her finger. She takes a short video and narrates it.

“He came back to me, my friends. And we decided that we’re making happily ever after our reality. I’m taking a short break and returning with new content shortly. But in the meantime, friends, hold onto your dreams and remember: happiness is only a heartbeat away.”

“Aww,” I say, as she posts her last video and powers down her phone. “No

wedding shots?”

“Wedding shots?” she asks, as if I just asked her to take her vows while doing a headstand. “Nope. I say we skip the big wedding. We come back to Boston already married after we find an Elvis in a white suit in Vegas or something.”

“You want to elope?”

“Oh fuck yes,” she says, flinging her arms out. “I do not want anything big and exciting and loud.” She sighs. I gather her in my arms and hold her close. “All I want is you, Timeo. All I’ve ever wanted was you. Let’s...keep one more secret for a little while?”

I kiss her full on the lips and bend her backward until she squeals. “One more secret. Our secret.”



EPILOGUE

Starla

“I JUST WISH the dogs were here.”

I had full visions of my pups wearing bows and carrying our rings to us at the altar, but the logistics of taking two golden retrievers from Boston to the West Coast was a bit much.”

“Well, I got them presents.”

I grin. “You did?”

“Yup. Two one-way tickets to Obedience school,” he says, his eyes twinkling at me in the mirror as he adjusts his tie.

“Timeo!”

He grins. “I got them chips for tracking and high end collars that will keep them near us. I don’t ever want anyone using them as leverage against us again.

“Oh, I love that.”

Timeo will be a good daddy. We’re not ready to go there yet, but we both want to and will when the time is right.

I would love a wedding reception that included my dogs. Anyone that wouldn’t might not understand what it’s like to be unconditionally loved by a furball who licks your face as if you are a walking deity when you walk in the door. I love my girls, and when I finally got them back, I spent a few days doing nothing but cuddling, kissing them, taking them for long walks, and lavishing them with treats. They were no worse for the wear, thankfully. It’s strange thing that people will hurt others, it takes special kind of person to hurt an animal.

We left my pups happily content with Eden and Sergio, and their growing brood of children. They get all the attention they want, and we get to tie the knot.

I suspect Eden knew something was up when we announced our trip to Vegas

and took no one but one guard, Mercedes. But they left it alone.

There's something about the lights, the city that never sleeps, the entertainment, the food, and the excitement of all that's so radically different from the way I was raised, I love it.

Timeo gleefully takes care of all the wedding details, which is fine by me. Apparently., There's no waiting period in Nevada, which is one of the reasons why people get married there so often. We get our marriage license. On the same day we applied, we chose a generic little chapel, with nothing religious about it, decorated in flowers and whites. And we had nobody come with us.

We didn't even tell our family where we were going. I just told Eden, "we need a little time alone away from everything." She understood, of course. I don't know what the conversation between Sergio and Timeo was, but when I left, Sergio held me a little longer than he normally did, and kiss my cheek when I parted.

"I'm so happy you're happy." Sergio is kind of the king of understatement, so this means a lot to me.

I look at myself in the mirror and smile. I am all women choosing their own clothes, for designing how they look, and for not living under the thumb of a man. But I also believe that if my man's eyes shine at me when I slide into a dress that accentuates my cleavage, the flat of my belly and the curves of my hips, and makes me feel like a million fucking dollars? That's the dress I get married in.

You could blind someone with my diamond, and I find myself staring at it, looking in the rearview mirror of my car, taking subtle pictures to post online.

Somehow, posting and sharing about my past has lost its appeal. It served its purpose for time, but now that I am marrying to Timeo, I don't feel the need to share much about my life anymore.

I crave privacy, togetherness, quiet.

And surprisingly, the little wedding venue is perfect. It's adorned with flowers of every kind, and smells like I'm living in a bouquet.

"You look stunning, baby."

So does he. He's healed completely, now that enough time has passed between his confinement and everything we've gone through. I make him drink green smoothies, we go to the gym together, and we walk the streets of Boston, hand-in-hand, reaping the benefits of sun, exercise, and sleep. So much sleep. We sleep entwined in each other's arms, and we love our bed.

I love the feel of his hand coming around my naked belly, or when he cups my ass. I love the possession and total ownership. He cherishes me. And when he sees my body, he loves what he sees. He makes that abundantly clear.

I can't get the zipper to work on the dress.

"Come here," he says softly when I can't get my zipper to work.

I like the way it feels with his fingers at my back when he tugs the remaining length of the zipper. I like the way it feels when he reaches for the pearl necklace and clasps it.

We head to the venue in an almost surreal state. It all goes so quickly, it feels like we're being seated in a restaurant for dinner.

The officiant stands in front of us with a smile. "You have good energy," she says. I look over to see Timeo to wonder if he's going to roll his eyes, but he doesn't care. Instead, his eyes are shining at me.

"She does." He winks. "You have good everything."

Mercedes functions as our witness, because the law requires we have at least one, and the only other person in the room is a photographer, who's under strict directions to send pictures directly to Timeo and only take pictures when given a cue. Timeo gave him enough money, he's more than happy to oblige.

The officiant smiles at us. "You have no guests and you got your marriage license yesterday, so I'm going to assume you want the sweet, get to the point version of vows?"

I nod. "Let's get straight to the I Do's."

We've spent years on the formalities. Now it's time to make it official.

"Excellent." She adjusts small wire-framed glasses on her nose and recites

from memory. “We’re gathered here today in the city of Las Vegas to join Starla Soul and Timeo Montavio in the state or marriage. They have chosen to take this step together, and wish to express their love.”

She turns to Timeo first. “Timeo, do you take Starla to be your lawfully wedded spouse, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?”

Timeo looks at me when he answers. “I do.”

I swallow. My turn.

“Starla, do you take Timeo to be your lawfully wedded spouse, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?”

I imagine Timeo holding my hand when I’m giving birth to our babies, holding the hand of a little toddler at a playground. I imagine cooking together in the kitchen and doing all the boring, lovely domestic things couples do.

I imagine the better and worse, the richer and poorer, sickness and health, and my heart surges with eagerness to love him more.

“I do.”

The officiant grins. “Excellent. By the power vested in me and in accordance with the laws of the state of Nevada, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may seal your vows with a kiss.”

Timeo leans me back and kisses me so perfectly, I feel my very toes curl and someone whistles in the background.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to present to you Starla and Timeo Montavio, now joined in marriage. May your love and commitment to each other grow stronger with each passing day.”

It is simple, but lovely.

Like us.

We don't need pomp and circumstance and a blare of trumpets. We have everything we need.

“I love you, Starla. Time to replace that locket photo. I want to see *you*. Just you, baby.”

We head back to Boston where our family waits. Where my dogs will greet us with undying affection and our friends welcome us with open arms.

We have a job to do. Timeo's identified every last enemy that threatened our safety and made damn sure no straggling details would come back to haunt us. My pups are secured, Bella Notte is safe, and while I'm under no impression our peace and happiness will last forever, I know one thing. Whatever comes next – whatever happens.

There's no more facing it alone.

My past has met the present, and this is where I'll stay, forever.



BONUS EPILOGUE

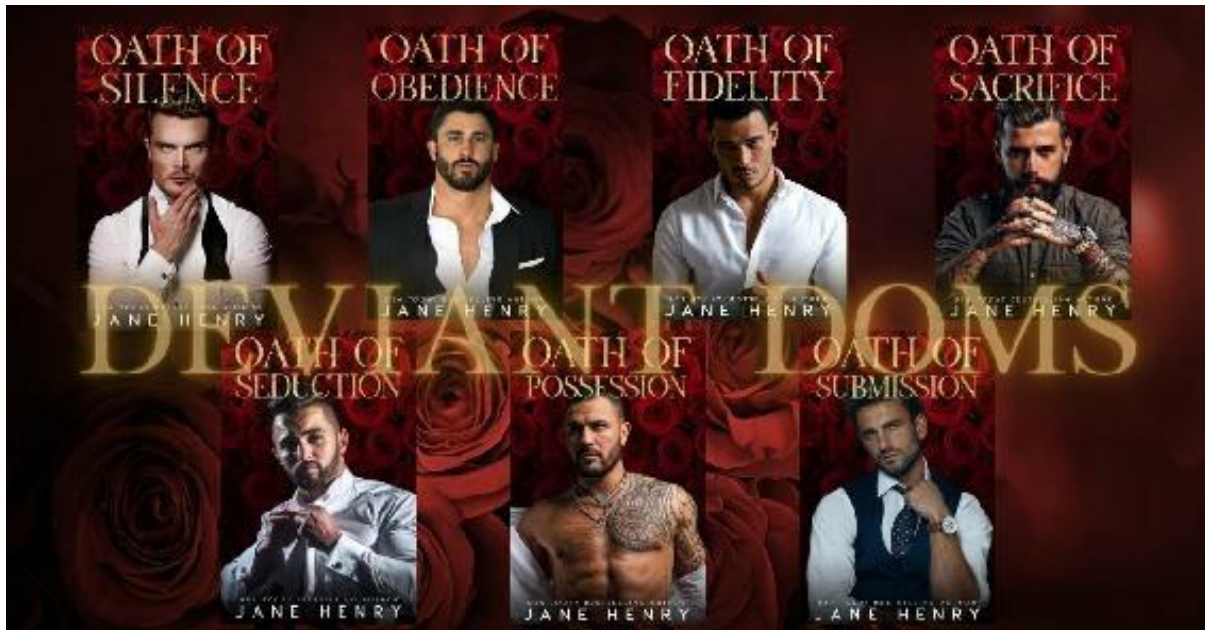
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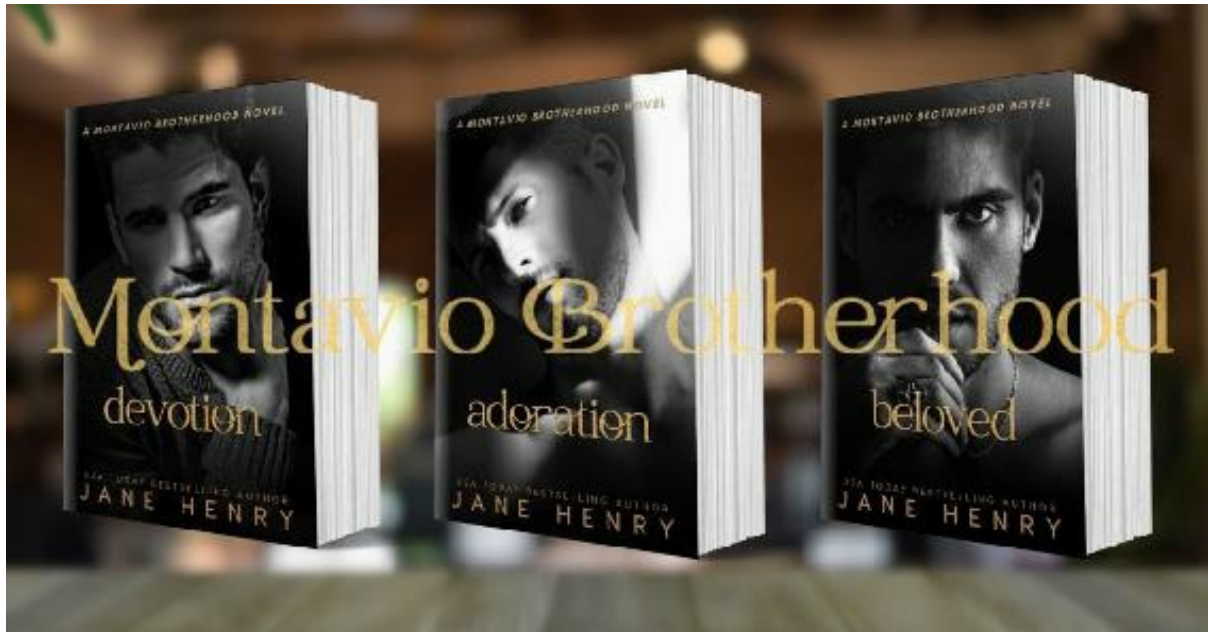
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