



Little
MOUSE

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

EMILY ROSE

Little Mouse

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 Created with Vellum

*For all my dark mafia girlies that love a good chase and a man that will have
you rooting for a villain.*

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CHAPTER 1

Gia



I UNTUCK the hair from behind my ear, letting it fall to cover my face. I don't want to be noticed by the man walking by, even though I know he's harmless. He's a sweet old man, and he comes in here every day to find a new book to read. I've heard him mention to the librarians that he lost his wife a year ago and books give him comfort. He reads everything, from non-fiction to romance. I'll admit, the romance surprised me, but I suppose nothing should.

Secretly, I love romance books. They're a guilty pleasure of mine, but I don't want to share that with anyone. It's for me, and I like that there is a part of me no one knows about. Still, the last thing I want is for someone to even ask me if I like them, because I don't think I could speak to them if I wanted to. Speaking to anyone is dangerous, especially if my family finds out.

I bite my lip as I stare down at the page I am reading, but I'm distracted and I can't figure out why. All day, I've had this feeling like something is coming. Something dark and scary, but no matter how many times I try to brush it off, that sense keeps filling me. I've looked over my shoulder, but there's no ghost or boogie man behind me, no one even glancing my way. I purposely sit in the library where I know the cameras can't see me, so I can rule that out.

I need to get a grip or call the day a wash and go home. It's not like I'm on a time crunch here, or have any place pressing to be. No, instead I'll be going home to my silent apartment, where I'll follow the same routine as always. Where I sit in front of the TV and aimlessly watch lame shows until I finally take a bath and go to bed. All to wake up and repeat the same schedule

all over again.

Most would say that I need to get a life, but they'd be wrong. A life is not what I want. I want my freedom, and the only way I keep that is this boring schedule. I don't drink, I don't smoke, and I never speak to men or women I don't know.

I can't even say I have any friends. I've never been allowed to get close enough to someone to make them. But that's okay, I don't really need them. They'd only be in danger anyway.

I close my eyes and push those thoughts away. There's no need to dwell on them, and doing so only makes me feel stupid. Instead, I pick up my phone and check the time. I usually stay until closer to six o'clock but I'm obviously not getting anywhere with this today. So instead, I close the book and stand to put it back on the shelf. I feel a sharp pang of annoyance that I can't enjoy more of it, but I suppose it will be there tomorrow. And if it isn't, it won't be the end of the world.

I head for the library exit, but pause briefly as I reach the door. I glance back around my sanctuary one last time, before I push open the door and walk out into the dreary day. Though, really, could I have expected any other kind? The drizzle has me pulling up the hood of my sweater, and I tuck all my hair in so not even the smallest strand sticks out.

I head toward my apartment, slightly irritated by the people surrounding me as I make my way home. This is exactly why I avoid walking the streets this time of the day, but I don't live far, so I can suck it up this time.

When I finally reach my apartment, I let out a sigh of relief. The building is an older one with charm, but well maintained. The exterior is the old red brick, with black window casings, but the inside is modern, with an elevator and nice finishings. I was lucky to find this place, and even though some may find it sterile, to me, it's home and it's comforting.

I ride the elevator to my third floor apartment and walk down the hall to my door at the very end. I take my keys out of my pocket, slide them into the lock, and then twist the knob. And as soon as the door swings open, I want to slam it closed again and walk away. Back to my sanctuary at the library, or to any other place. Because they are here, and I already know what's going to happen before the night is over.

I do none of those things though. Instead, I calmly walk inside, closing the door softly behind me, but never once giving them my back. To do that would be stupid. Very stupid.

Their eyes on me are cold, calculating, and full of anticipation. I'll be bleeding and bruised before the night is over, and there is nothing I can do. There is nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. And no one is going to step in and come to my rescue. They would be stupid if they did.

"Uncle," I say softly with a respectful nod of my head. "Cousin," I say to the man standing behind my uncle, who has placed himself in the leather recliner. Out of the two of them, my cousin, Lorenzo, is far scarier. Not because he is aggressive like my uncle, but because he likes to play and toy with me, and is far more unpredictable. He enjoys causing pain, and I have always been his favorite target. For no other reason than it makes him feel stronger than he actually is.

"You were at the library again," my uncle, Giovanni, states. It is not a question.

"I was," I reply. It is one of the few places that I am allowed to go, after all.

He makes a small sound in his throat as he pushes himself to his feet. He is not an overly tall man, topping out at five-ten, his once black hair now turning silver as he ages, and a few more lines forming along his forehead and around his mouth, but he is still formidable. As one of my father's underbosses, he is powerful, and he wears it like a cloak. Every move, every glance, is full of the reminder of who he is and what damage he could inflict when crossed. And I'm no exception to that rule.

I'm a female, after all, and the men in my family view women as lower than dogs unless they can give them the sons they desire. It's the only reason my father has kept me alive at this point in my life. It's surprising I still have not been sold off like cattle to the highest bidder. Though, the more visits I receive, I know that time is getting shorter and shorter. It's why I'm set on enjoying the little freedom I have.

"You waste your time and beauty with your nose in books, niece," Giovanni muses as he steps closer. I don't reply, I wait because I know there's more. "Yet your father gives you this apartment and this freedom, and you waste it away in a dusty library instead of doing your duty." His dark eyes harden. "Or perhaps that is why you want this apartment. Are you whoring yourself out to any man with a cock, Giulia?" His hand comes up and slaps me hard enough to send me flying onto the floor. "You think you can act that way and shame us? I will not stand for it." He lashes out his foot and kicks me hard in the side, making me gasp in pain and curl into myself.

I wonder why I'm not used to this yet? Between my uncle, cousin, father, and brothers, I should be used to the pain and bruises. I should be numb to it all, but instead, my body betrays me each time.

My uncle steps back, straightening his suit jacket, and huffing out a breath of annoyance. Like it's my fault I'm causing him to beat me. I don't argue or try to reason with him. I did it once, and he beat me more. Instead, I lie here as he stalks away. Now it's Lorenzo's turn.

"I don't think my little cousin would be that stupid, Pops," Lorenzo scoffs, and I hear his footsteps as he gets closer. "After all, she knows what would happen if she did." I bite back a cry of pain as he steps on my hair, twisting his shoe so it pulls on the strands. I feel them rip from the roots, and I dig my nails into my palms to keep from moving. "Don't you, my sweet cousin?" he purrs down at me.

"Yes, Lorenzo," I manage to grit out, careful to keep my voice soft. I never raise my voice, never allow any of my pain or anger to show. It would be a death sentence. Being the only female De Luca by birth doesn't award me any favors. And if I don't want to end up with busted ribs, or a broken nose, then I have to keep my mouth shut.

"See?" Lorenzo says happily, removing his foot. I still don't move. I don't dare. "Our sweet Gia would never disgrace us that way." I bite back another cry when he grabs me by my arm and hauls me to my feet. I stare into his cold, dead, dark eyes. The very ones that haunt my nightmares. He gives me a cold, cruel smile. "Because if you do, I'll take great pleasure in killing you myself, worthless cunt." Then he shoves me away, and I hit the couch, toppling onto the leather cushions.

Carefully I push myself up into a sitting position and tell myself that I need to keep calm, even as my anger builds. I'm tired of being a punching bag, of being deemed worthless because my mother birthed a daughter instead of another son. When I was a child, I made the mistake of pointing out it is the father's sperm that decides gender. That earned me a beating so bad I was in bed for over a week. The De Luca's don't take well to being told they are the problem. And they will never allow a woman to be in the right. We are nothing but a vessel to them.

My uncle often lords it over my father that his wife bore him five sons, not a girl in sight. The only reason my father didn't kill or sell me, is because of my grandfather, when he was alive; helpfully pointed out that I am a good bargaining chip to have. Once I became old enough, they could secure a

marriage for me, unite another family to ours and grow stronger. Bigger. More powerful. So they let me live, though at times, I often wish they had killed me. Death would be a sweeter than this life.

“Get off your ass and make me a drink, Gia,” my uncle snaps, glaring at me.

Stiffly, I rise to my feet and move toward the mini bar, built for this very purpose. My father and uncle love to drink and it’s expected of me to serve them when they are in my home. And lately, it is a lot. So much so, I know what is coming. They are no doubt searching for the perfect person to sell me off to, in their eyes, to take me off their hands.

And that will be the day I lose all my freedoms.

I pour their drinks and bring it to them, carefully moving to the window as they sit and talk. They don’t mince their words or watch what they say around me. Frankly, they don’t care what I hear because to them, I’m not smart enough to understand. Or they figure the fear of what will happen if I open my mouth is enough to keep it shut.

They are right, but still, I file everything away, careful to keep my head down and pretend I am not listening.

Finally, they stand to leave. I don’t let my relief show. Instead, I kiss their cheeks as is the custom and walk them out. Lorenzo smirks at me as he walks out the door, but my uncle stops and turns to look at me. “Your days here are numbered, Giulia,” he tells me calmly, his tone, however, hard as steel. “I suggest you enjoy your last moments of freedom, because soon enough, you’ll be some else’s problem.”

“Yes, Uncle,” I say softly, holding his gaze.

I see the violence swirling in their depths, before he gives me a curt nod and strides out. I softly shut the door behind him, locking it and blowing out a breath as I press my head to the door, trembling.

Tonight went smoother than I thought but still, I know I will need to see to the bruises that will line my stomach and ribs. And I will have to check my hair and make sure I find the patches that were ripped out. It wouldn’t do to be seen with hair missing, after all.

My father will probably be here in the morning, especially after hearing my uncle was here. He’ll want to know what was said, to know what my uncle is planning. It’s no secret that my father and uncle are at odds. My uncle wants the power and position my father has as the firstborn, but he’s too spineless to take it. For all his power and bravado, he won’t try to

overthrow my father because he knows he won't have the support of the other mafia bosses around the country, or the popularity. I'm not foolish enough to think he won't still try at some point. His ego will only allow this to continue for so long.

Lorenzo wants my brother's position as our father's right hand man, but he won't want to serve my father. He's far too power hungry, and he doesn't get along with my brothers or have the same ideals. So, he'll wait until his father tries to take the position for himself. My father expects it to happen eventually, and I have a feeling that he's going to try and use me to make sure it doesn't.

I turn and walk back to the window and look out at the city below. And as I stare at the people walking along, I wonder what it would be like to have the freedom of not having a care in the world. And maybe one day I'll know. Until then, I'll watch from my window and wonder if this is what prison feels like.

CHAPTER 2

Nico



I LIFT my gun and fire a bullet into the middle of the man's forehead across from me, watching dispassionately as he falls to the floor. No one else in the room moves, watching with blank expressions on their faces. They know better than to show a hint of remorse, guilt, or anger toward the fucker on the floor. He was a traitor, and I don't put up with traitors. Let it be a lesson to them of what happens should they cross me.

I set the gun down on my desk, still within reach, and sit back in my seat before turning my eyes to my right hand man, Dante. Dante's only acknowledgment is to order the other men in the room to get the body out of here and to summon one of the staff to come and clean up the blood from the carpet.

Once the room is cleared and Dante does an obligatory sweep for any bugs, he sits in the chair across from me, and regards me with cool blue eyes. Dante is the exact opposite of me in looks. He gets his dark skin from his African mother, and his blue eyes from some long lost European ancestor on her side. His father, my uncle on my mother's side, is full blooded Italian. Though he is unrecognized as a member of the Armani family due to his father raping his mother when she was on vacation with her family. Still, the man is family, and has proven himself time again. Including helping me kill my father. He didn't bat an eye when I told him I wanted him to work with me and be my right hand; he just came in and got to work.

It is customary in my family for the children to overthrow their fathers, and in my case, I managed that at the age of twenty-seven, with the full backing of my father's men. After all, he stupidly cut their wages and let

most of them rot in prison for shit he made them do. Such things never build loyalty. Of course, none knew the whole thing was my idea, and it ensured their loyalty to me when I promised to bring them back to their former levels with some extra perks. Until now, I've had no problem, but it seems some are getting greedy, and I won't allow that to continue.

"Sofia is going to have your head for staining the carpet again," Dante remarks, a small smile kicking up the side of his mouth. He rarely let his true emotions show unless it is the two of us alone. He also has a thing for my housekeeper, a stubborn woman of thirty-two who makes sure my home is kept in pristine condition. He thinks I'm unaware of their little relationship, but there is nothing in my world I don't know. I make sure to keep on top of everything, including the affairs of my staff. Still, Dante never thinks with his cock, so far be it from me to step into that shit.

Though the moment things go south, I will have to step in and get rid of her. Housekeepers are a dime a dozen, so she can find another place of employment quick enough. Though, if Dante told her something he shouldn't have, I'll have to kill her. I never enjoy killing women, especially ones that don't really have a reason to be six feet under, but a man of my station doesn't flinch at killing anyone.

"And I should care?" I ask smoothly, wondering if this will be the moment he admits to their little tryst. "It's her job to see to it."

Dante shrugs. "The last time you killed someone in here, she cursed you to your face and told you to stop behaving like an animal in your own home."

That vaguely rings a bell. I found it amusing since she is still living. My housekeepers before her were terrified of me and tried to keep out of my way as much as possible. A few were brave enough to question or contradict me, but they learned the error of their ways. They were soon out of a job or in the case of one man, ended up in the ocean as shark food. Sofia Cattaneo has not yet gotten to that point, but I will only allow so much insolence before I remind her just who runs things.

Still, she is the best housekeeper I've ever had, and to train a new one will be a pain in the ass.

"Knowing Sofia, she was in place to clean from the moment I called him here. Anyway, I don't care to talk about things that don't matter. Are we all set for our meeting this afternoon?"

This meeting will set the stage for big changes here in New York. Especially, with regards to the other bosses. The De Luca family in

particular. Rumor has it there is growing tension between the two brothers, and the younger brother is displeased at how his elder brother is running things. My men haven't been able to get anything concrete, but what I know of Giovanni De Luca, he won't be waiting much longer. Unlike his brother, he lets anger cloud his judgment. A bloody battle is coming, and I for one, will not be allowing myself to be pulled into it.

I have grander plans that involve them both being out of my way. They may start the war, but I will finish it.

"Everything is set," Dante assures me.

"Good. You can go." With my dismissal, I turned my attention back to the reports in front of me. If there is one thing I do better than my father, it's keeping my empire running seamlessly. My men report to me, and I know exactly how much product we're moving, and how much money I'm making. Which is why the others in this God forsaken city are far below me.

My reports are also how I spot those who dare to steal from me. And these reports are secret from my men. As far as they are concerned, Dante is the one who keeps me abreast, and I'm happy to keep things that way because it allows me the freedom to keep information to myself. And it keeps my men on their toes.

Dante leaves the room as Sofia enters, and they share a quick glance before she focuses her attention on me. I hold her stare as she puts her hands on her hips and narrows her dark eyes at me. She's an exotic beauty from Sicily with long, curly black hair that she keeps pinned up in some kind of messy looking style. She's wearing her standard uniform of black pants that hug her legs and rounded hips, and a white top she currently has covered with some kind of apron. On her feet are a pair of sturdy black shoes. She's really a gorgeous woman with the kind of spirit some men find attractive, but to me, she's nothing more than a housekeeper and a pain in my ass.

"You couldn't have at least killed him in the hallway?" she demands, scowling at the stain in the rug. "Do you know how hard it is to get blood out of this rug? Or do you just like making me work for hours on end?"

I give her a dark look, one that would have my men shaking in fear and waiting for their deaths. But not this woman. No, she just lifts her chin and glares back at me, completely unafraid. A small part of me admires her. "I think you need to remember who's in charge here," I warn her, my tone sharp and biting. "Or it will be you bleeding out on the floor."

She doesn't even blink at my threat. "Then you'd have to train a new

housekeeper and you hate that. Besides, everyone else is terrified of you, and you like that not everyone will tremble at your feet.”

“And when did you decide this?” I ask.

She arches a brow and says, “The first day you didn’t kill me for talking back to you. Besides, why waste another bullet on me? Now, would you like me to pretend to fall to your feet and weep and wail for forgiveness, acting like you’re the devil himself, or would you like me to clean this up?”

“Just clean it up,” I snap, irritated that I can’t find it in myself to kill her for her insolence. It sets a dangerous precedent for my other staff, but considering I just killed a man without explanation, well, I suppose that will keep any rumblings at bay for a while.

Sofia snaps her fingers to her brow and barks, “Yes, sir!” Then she turns on her heel and whistles, bringing the maids in to get to work. The two women who come in are nothing like Sofia. Both are shy and quiet, completely avoiding my eyes. One of them especially is frightened, shaking as she works, and trying to seem smaller. Fine with me. I don’t need anymore attitude today.

So I focus back on my reports. Everything seems to be in order, though I see room for improvements. It seems that some of my men are getting lazy, and I can’t have that. I make a note to visit some of our locations, to make sure they know I’m always around. Always watching.

By the time we leave for our meeting, I’m more determined than ever to get my men in line. A little fear and intimidation are all I need to make sure my business is running at its best. I don’t have time for lazy bastards that think they can pull the wool over my eyes. When I climb into the back of my SUV with Dante climbing into the front, I pull out my phone and tell him, “I want a meeting set up with each division this week. And no one is to miss.”

“Done,” Dante replies. I don’t even need to look at him to know that he’s read into my intentions. And he’ll make sure those meetings are in places I can spill as much blood as I like.

I ignore text messages from those that I don’t care about. I don’t have time to waste on such things, and as far as I fucking care, they can bug someone else with their problems. I see a couple from a woman I occasionally fuck when the mood strikes, barely pausing at picture of her fucking herself with her own fingers. Considering the angle, she didn’t take that herself, which means some other man probably took it. Not that I care, she knows the rules. Besides, she was a terrible lay. I delete the photo and

message her back that she needs to lose my number. Which of course results in multiple messages asking why. Begging for forgiveness. Saying I wasn't meeting her needs.

All bullshit. If I was more like my father I'd kill her and be done with it. But that takes too much of my time and energy. Anticipation burns in my gut at what happens at my next meeting and the aftermath. If our contact tries to double-cross me or back out, well, I'll make an example out of him and find someone with the stones to fill his shoes.

By the time we reach our destination, I'm more than ready to get this underway. I'm not a patient man and I have no time to delay. Especially with all the plans I have.

Dante comes around the SUV and opens my door, shielding me in case someone tries to do something stupid. As we walk inside, I raise my brow at how small it is. I glance at Dante, who just holds my gaze, waiting for the question. Instead, I ignore him. After all, there must be a reason he brought me here instead of the agreed upon meeting spot he told me earlier. But I won't hesitate to beat his ass if he's trying to pull a fast one.

I follow him through the small cake shop, not sparing a glance at anyone, and none of them look at me either. Good, it seems Dante was smart enough to make that clear before he brought me here. We walk out of the back door and I see an old steel door. It creaks and groans as Dante pulls it open gesturing for me to go inside. I enter, unsurprised to find two of my men waiting, and then leading me through a narrow and barely lit hallway.

When we finally emerge, the first thing that hits me is the smell of paper. I glance around the library. I don't think I've ever set foot in here, and I can tell from the dust on some of the books, that many don't come here anymore either. Which means we should have plenty of privacy. Good.

We make our way through the shelves. As I pass by an aisle, I am hit by something small. I stiffen, and my men round quickly, but I stop them when I hear a gasp and a frightened mumble, "I'm so sorry," in a soft feminine voice that skates over me. I turn slightly, looking down to see a small slip of a woman, blinking up at me in shock, and a healthy dose of fear. And I'm not prepared for the feeling that hits me.

Her eyes are a dark, mousy brown, her nose small, and her lips plump and soft. She has no make-up on and her olive colored skin keeps her from looking too pale. Her hair is a thick, dark brown, almost black, and hangs loosely around her face and shoulders and well past her ample breasts. And I

have an instant image of it wrapped around my fist as I pushed her to her knees and fucked her mouth. I'm instantly hard, but ignore it. No, this creature is far from the women that usually catch my attention. She's exotic looking, but seeing her, I know she's innocent. Yet, I can't help but wonder what it would be like to see her sin in ways that would make the devil himself stand up and take notice.

"All good, *cara*," I tell her, stepping aside to allow her to pass. My men stiffen further, no doubt thinking me crazy, but this woman isn't going to hurt me. No, she's clutching the book in her hand so tight I'm surprised the spine doesn't crack under the pressure. And when she scampers past, she stays as far away from me as possible, lowering her head so her face is obscured. She acts as though she is a little mouse trying to be unseen. Except, I have seen her, and now I'm intrigued.

Still, one can't be too careful. I look at Tommaso, tell him quietly, "Follow her, but do not engage, and make sure you're not seen." He nods, moving without a word. That leaves me with Dante, and my other guard, Davide, as we continue on to our final meeting place.

When we enter the small room, the man I'm speaking with is already there. I keep my face clear, calm as I take him in. I know exactly who he is, and a small sense of triumph fills me knowing I'm going to get what I want.

Eion Fitzgerald is a large man, with dark red hair and green eyes. He's harsh and seasoned, and if it wasn't for the fact that my men will never listen to an Irishman, I'd have lured him away years ago. Still, the fact that he's loyal and now meeting with me means something's changed and I want to know what. I can use the information for myself.

His green eyes are cool and calm on me as he waits for Davide to pat him down. Eion's face never changes, and he waits until Davide steps back and nods at me that he's clean. I move to take a seat at the small table in the corner, smooth out my pants and then look at Eion tensely, unspeaking as he sits across from me. There are no windows in this room, no way for anyone to know who is in here, but his unease pleases me.

Finally, Eion says, "There is a shipment of guns coming into the docks for Seamus to distribute from our men in Ireland. It will come on a private yacht owned by Seamus's cousin, Sean, who isn't in the family business. But he lent the yacht to his wife, who is the daughter of one of Seamus's top bosses over there, and who will make the drop. Seems to me, with this information you can take it off his hands and score yourself a nice profit

along the way.”

I say nothing, mulling it over. I dabble in most anything, including guns, and it's well known that the Gallos have excellent products. And this gives a way for me to force myself into the market and take over. Still, this is one of Seamus's top men. “Why?” I ask simply. There's some kind of motive here, and I wonder if he'll have the balls to tell me the truth. I can find out, but a man telling me himself will let me assess his truthfulness. I can't stand lies, but in this business, it's par for the course.

Eoin's eyes go icy, and my interest piques. It's the look of a man who has lost all care, and is exacting revenge. His jaw hardens, and his fists clench on the table, and finally he says, “He raped and killed my wife.”

Not what I was expecting, but that's not enough for me, “So all of this over a woman?”

His eyes go from icy to hot in a flash, that Irish temper making his face burn with it. “I wouldn't bloody well expect you to feckin' understand,” he seeths, his Irish brogue thick. Dante and Davide inch closer, but I wave them off. This man may be angry, but he's not stupid.

“Enlighten me then,” I order calmly. “Women are a dime a dozen in our world, and while I understand she was your wife, you have sons, and you have a job that gives you access to any women you wish. Are you willing to risk your death over one woman should Seamus find out what you've done?” Love has always been foreign to me. I've never loved anyone. Not even my parents. My mother spent most of her time drugged out of her mind to cope with being married to my father, and my father only married my mother because it was arranged. There was no love there, and probably for the best.

Eoin glares at me. “You don't know what it's like to go home every day to a woman that doesn't care about the blood on 'yer hands and takes care of all the things you don't have time for. Someone who could be your light in a world that's so damn dark you can barely see 'yer way out at times. And while she and I were forced to marry in the hopes of securing her family's loyalty, we grew to love each other, and Seamus saw that. Saw that I would do anything for that woman, and he decided to test me. So he sent me on a job, then took her, raped her, and killed her. All to test me. A man who worked tirelessly for years and never had a blemish on my record. So it's simple. He took somethin' from me, I take somethin' from him.”

“And you're willing to die to avenge your wife?” I ask him again.

He holds my stare. “Yes.”

I regard him quietly. You can tell a lot by a man in how they react under stress, and from what I can see, this man has been put through quite a bit lately. Still, I push a little more. “Are you willing to stake the lives of your sons on it?”

Something flashes in his eyes. Fear? Trepidation? Guilt? None of it matters to me, only that I can use it. “My sons are in agreement,” he finally tells me.

I arch a brow. “Your sons are barely grown, and you think they are ready to end their lives for their mother? Because that will happen once Seamus finds out about your deceit.”

“My boys loved their mother and know the risks,” he says through clenched teeth.

I think he is a foolish man leading his children and legacy to slaughter, but that’s none of my concern. “And how am I to be certain that you don’t have a change of heart and inform Seamus of our meeting?”

“I doubt you would have stayed if you thought that,” Eion replies evenly, holding my stare. “Though if you want a show of faith, name your price.”

Seamus and his men are big on shows of faith to prove loyalty, but considering that Eion isn’t honoring his, it wouldn’t mean much. Instead I give him a cold smile and say, “My price is if you decide to double cross me, your sons will die. All of them. And don’t make the mistake of thinking you can hide them because we both know I have far more resources to find them than you do to send them away. And then I’ll come for you, and your death will be far worse than what your wife suffered. So I will ask you one more time, are you ready for your sons to die for your revenge?”

He doesn’t react to my words, he just stares.

I glance at Dante who gives a barely indiscernible movement of his head. Looks like he believes him, though a man like me can never be too cautious. “Fine,” I announce, as I stand, “But know I will have my men watching, Eion. Double cross me, and your days will be numbered and far more painful than anything you can imagine. Give the details to Dante on the shipment, and be ready for my call for anything else.”

Eion nods and I head for the door, satisfaction burning in my blood knowing I’m about to deliver a blow to Seamus Gallo, the damn Irish bastard. He’s always been power hungry, and he wants to be top dog. Something he will never be. I own the majority of this city, and I’m not having anyone take it away from me.

I follow Davide out the hallway and back to the shop. Davide grabs a box of pastries and a coffee without much pause, before we head out the door. Nice to know he was meticulous with this plan. As far as anyone is concerned, we grabbed a few things from the bakery. As we head for the car, I stop when someone bumps into me again. But before I can snarl at them, the scent hits me and I realize who it is.

I look down at the same little terrified mouse, who babbles out another apology and stumbles away from me, glancing back at me once before walking down the street.

I'm not a believer in fate, but that little woman bumped into me twice today and I refuse to believe it is a coincidence. I look over at Tommaso as he says, "She never so much as moved from one spot in the library reading a book. No phone, no laptop, and no one approached her. She tried to blend in and be unseen."

Interesting. "Follow her and find out all you can about her," I order. He goes after her without a word.

I climb into the SUV and ponder briefly what is it about this woman? She's caught my attention, and I have this inexplicable urge to go after her myself. Is she a plant, someone who is supposed to put a tracker on me? A fed? A cop? Something is nagging at me that it's not that simple. No, there's something more to the little mouse and I want to know what it is.

Everyone has a secret. Something you can exploit in the right circumstances. But mostly I want to know why she makes me so damn curious. A dangerous thing for a man like me. And even more dangerous for a woman like her.

She's caught my attention, and I'm sure she'll come to regret being in that library after all.

CHAPTER 3

Nico



I SIT in my car and watch her, this obsession with her driving me insane. It pisses me off, and makes me feel things I have no desire to feel. But my little mouse has decided to infiltrate my every thought for the past two weeks. Burying in and making herself at home, until I want to kill her to get her out. Something makes me wonder if that would only make it worse. Because she's a puzzle that I can't solve.

My men have not been able to discover who she is. It's like she's a ghost, and that pisses me off yet intrigues me. They know where she lives, and that she has the same routine every day to the letter. She never speaks to anyone, never deviates from her routine, other than an odd day here or there when she doesn't venture out at all. She doesn't appear to work, and she doesn't leave to get groceries, instead having them and anything else she needs delivered.

My men can't even figure out her name. She's not listed on the building directory, and the name on her unit is bogus. And seeing as it's one of the few buildings in this area that I don't own, I have no one on the inside to find out for me. Does she live with a man? Is that why she's so fearful? Does he abuse her and make her fearful to be out? Or perhaps, she is cautious and knows being a woman in this world isn't for the weak. Still, I have my men continuing to try and find out who she is, and in the meantime, I find myself drawn to her. Craving her.

She's a mystery, and one that I intend to solve. No one can hide forever. Even rats and mice who try to hide their little hidey holes can be found.

Rats and mice are vermin. Meant to be eradicated. Or caught and released if you're a gentle soul. I'm neither. I will happily stomp on a rat should they

dare to cross my path and not feel an inkling of guilt. Some might call me heartless. A monster. I call myself an exterminator and do the work that needs to be done. So when a rat crosses my path, I remove it. Permanently.

Except her. The innocent mouse that caught my attention. I wish she would have stayed in her hole because I don't want to give her my attention, but now she has it.

I can't decide if I want to stomp her out of my way, or if I want to capture then release her. I have seen many find a mouse in their home and capture it with a container, place a piece of paper under it and then release them to be free to scurry into another's unsuspecting home. And I can't help but wonder what my little mouse would do if I caught her and put her in a clear cage. One I could look in and see her any time I wanted instead of stalking her. Ruining my concentration and my day.

Would she cower in terror? Crying and simpering? Would she fight? Scratching, clawing and biting her way out? Or would she wait and watch? For that moment when I relax and open the cage, and then try to escape. I can't decide what she would do, but I want to find out, and that stirs emotions in me.

Curiosity. Confusion. Desire. Possession. Anger. Even a small sprinkling of hate. Hate that stems from her distracting me. Something I don't allow. Something my enemies could use against me.

So now I have a choice to make. Do I let my little mouse continue to run free and forget she exists? Or do I take what I want and fuck the consequences?

All questions that I have to sort out soon because war is on the horizon. It's nothing but rumors right now of who would dare to steal one of Seamus Gallo's shipments so brazenly. Seamus apparently hit the roof when he found out, and left the men guarding the shipment dead for their incompetence. Now, he's out for blood, trying to figure out who it was, and plotting their deaths.

Which is exactly why I need to tread carefully. I'll be under intense scrutiny, which is why I can't allow this one tiny woman to be a distraction.

Still, I don't move as she walks into her apartment building, having returned home from the library. I look over at the clock, estimating it will be about an hour before someone arrives with food. She gets groceries delivered every day, and it intrigues me. Most would get it once per week, but not this girl. Just another piece of the puzzle.

As she disappears inside the building, I have to hold myself in place, hands gripping the steering wheel tight. I want to climb out and follow her inside, get answers to all my questions. But I have meetings and things that need to be done. Soon, I'll be making some decisions about this woman that is constantly on my mind.

I start my SUV and drive away. I have half a mind to bring one of my fancier sports cars, wanting the smooth handling, but I don't need to stand out. No, I want to watch her without someone spotting me. Especially those that I don't want to see me.

As I head home, a plan starts to form in my mind as my frustration mounts. This woman has far too much control over my life. And it is going to stop now. Sure, the ideas in my head are far from what a sane man would cook up, but no one has ever said I was completely sane. And by the time I pull through my gate, the more and more I like this idea. First, though, I need to get everything in place.

When I get to my office, Dante is waiting for me, sitting behind my desk with a smug look on his face. While I know he's doing it to piss me off, to test me in his own weird way, I pull my gun out and point it at him, holding his gaze. He doesn't flinch, and he doesn't lose his smug smile, the cocksucker. Family or not, I'll kill him for daring to pull this shit. Climbing to his feet he says, "Shoot me and you won't have anyone to deal with your bullshit on a daily basis." Then he rounds the desk, so confident in the fact that I won't kill him he doesn't even try to protect any vital organs.

I lower the gun and secure it at the small of my back, pissed at myself that I won't pull the damn trigger. It's because if I kill him I'll have to train someone else, and I don't have time for that right now. Though, maybe I could put him out of commission for a little while...

I push that thought aside, reminding myself we have much bigger things to worry about right now. "What's the word on Seamus?" I ask, sinking into my chair, pinning Dante with a hard glare because it's tilted back more than I like.

Again he gives me that smirk but then his face gets serious and replies, "Word is that he's raving mad and the fact that no one knows anything is pissing him off even more."

"Any suspicion on us or on our rat?"

Dante shakes his head. "Our planting of evidence against the Russians seems to be convincing and that's where they're focused. I've also heard

some rumblings that he's planning on hitting the Russians soon."

I bite back my own smug smile. Things are starting to come together, and a hell of a lot faster than I thought. Perhaps Eion has figured out a way to keep him off our tail, but I fully expect Seamus will get wise at some point. I have to hope that it's not right away so I have more time to get things in place before the impending war begins. "Good. Keep your ears open. We need to be ready in case they start asking questions."

"There are also some other interesting rumblings," he adds with a sly look. "This time about the De Luca family. It seems that the brothers are not seeing eye to eye lately on the matter of expansion. Giovanni wants to spread into New Jersey and the rest of the state, while Leonardo wants to stay put. Word is he's content with how things are. He has his territory well under control, and it's making him lots of money."

This wasn't exactly new news considering how much those two fight. The De Lucas are notoriously private, and if it wasn't for the moles I have in place, we'd be completely in the dark where they are concerned. Still, even my moles only know so much. Leonardo is paranoid on the best of days. Hell, word is he killed his second wife for mentioning something offhand about her day that he took as her telling secrets that she shouldn't have. Now, he is on his third wife, and she is young and far more shrewd at how the games are played. At least, she is a bit better at hiding her affairs anyway. "And Giovanni is starting to sound more serious about his beef with his brother on this?"

Dante nods. "There's talk on the streets that Giovanni wants to split from his brother completely and start his own territory and empire. But he needs to get approval from Leonardo as the Boss to do that, and no way is Leonardo going to allow Giovanni that option. He wants him under his thumb, and Giovanni knows it."

"Which means that there's a good chance Giovanni is going to either fall in line, or he's going to do something stupid. Like try and overthrow his brother." I give a soft laugh. "And he's stupid enough to do it."

"I can't see Leonardo letting it happen. And once his sons get involved it will be game over for Giovanni." On that we are in agreement. Leonardo's sons are well known to be as brutal as their father, and they've been ingrained in the family business far too long to let their uncle or cousins come in and screw it up. "But there are also some rumblings that Giovanni has been speaking with one of the Sicilian families about backing him if he can

separate from his brother.”

I know many of those back in Sicily, and a few are in my back pocket should I need them, but they are old school. Unless I have something to offer them, they won't even think about stepping in to anything on this side of the Atlantic. I frown, as I mull it over. “So what does he have that they want?” I wonder aloud. “He has no empire, and no daughters to force into marriage, and I doubt that he would be willing to spill any family secrets for fear of reprisal from his brother.”

“The rumor is for a marriage,” Dante told him, leaning forward.

“Probably Lorenzo and one of their daughters.”

“There are some smaller, quieter rumors, that either Giovanni or Leonardo have a secret daughter they've kept under lock and key since she was born,” Dante finally admits.

I keep my expression unchanged, but I lean forward, arms bracing on the desk. Now this is information I need to have, because something like this, something possibly hidden for so long, could be the exact thing I need to gain the upper hand.

“And how reliable are your sources on this?”

“Enough, I won't discount it. I have our guys looking into it, but so far there are no records of a girl being born to any member of their family. They are a family of boys from all we've gathered. Perhaps there was a daughter, but she was hidden away because she wasn't Leonardo or Giovanni's?”

I shake my head. “If there was even an inkling that this child didn't belong to her father, she would be dead.”

“Leonardo killed his second wife,” Dante points out. “He could have killed the girl at the same time if he thought she was the product of an affair.”

“Possible,” I concede. “And Giovanni is enough of a bastard that he would use a dead baby as a bargaining chip to get what he wants. And then he would find someone to play the role if it came to it.”

“Still, I don't think we should discount it.”

“Keep on it and let me know if you find anything. This kind of information could be useful if we can figure out the truth.”

“On it.”

“And what's the status on the woman?” I ask.

“Still nothing,” he replies with a frown, even as my temper flares. With who I am, the money I have, and the fear I impose, I should know anything I want and here I am chasing my tail. “Whoever this girl is, she's a damn

ghost.”

“It would seem so.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Though perhaps you are not being forceful enough with your team to make sure it’s getting done.”

He doesn’t react to my insult. “Would you have me kill another member of the team to make that point?”

I know he’s trying to bait me, to make some kind of insinuation that I wouldn’t want to kill someone on my team, but we both know that’s not true. “Yes,” I reply simply. “They are easily replaced, so perhaps it’s time they are reminded of that.”

He chuckles. “Perhaps,” he agrees easily. “I’ll get on them. And I have your permission to get the point across?”

I wave my hand at him impatiently. The fact that he even bothers to ask is damn annoying. I don’t know why I put up with his insolence, family or not. Still, the man is gifted at what he does, and the men fear him as much as me, knowing that he has far more authority and control than anyone else in my organization. “I want answers, Dante,” I tell him darkly.

He sobers and stands. “Yes, sir, and I aim to get them.”

“Well, while your team is searching for answers, I want a back up plan in place.” He arches a brow at that, and then listens as I explain my plan. His face doesn’t show any emotion, but his eyes widen ever so slightly, and there’s a spark of surprise in them, and possibly concern. Not that I care.

When I finish, he nods and says, “I’ll get to work on that right away. And I’ll push the men harder to figure out who she is.” Then he heads out the door, leaving me alone.

I turn and look out the window behind me, looking out over the large expanse of my property. I can see my guards patrolling, dogs on leashes with them. No one would be stupid enough to come here unannounced, or leave without my knowing. Which means that once I set my plan in motion, my little mouse won’t be leaving.

Anticipation fills me at the thought, and I turn away from the window and back to the many things I still need to see to before I can stop for the night. I glance at the open file folder beside me on the desk and see the picture of her. It was the clearest shot that my men could get of her. I see the dark look in her eyes, but also a glint of something else. Something that tells me she’s not as meek or mild as she appears.

Either way, I’ll be finding out one way or another. Because my little mouse has no idea what’s coming, but I plan on ending this little game and

nothing will stand in my way.

CHAPTER 4

Gia



One Week Later

“DAUGHTER,” my father says coldly as he lets himself into my apartment.

“Father,” I say meekly, shutting the door quietly behind him and my eldest brother. “Marco.”

“Gia,” Marco says dismissively. Marco is the spitting image of my father, with black hair, hazel eyes, a well maintained beard, and an air of darkness and danger that makes me wary. Out of all of my brothers, he’s the one I worry about the most. He has our father’s temper, and he also is trying to prove himself to Father so that he leaves the empire to him when he dies. A terrifying thought, but one for another day.

My father hands me his coat and I dutifully hang it before I head to the bar to make their drinks. It’s much like when Giovanni and Lorenzo were here a few weeks ago, though I doubt my father would enjoy that comparison. Despite being brothers, they look nothing alike. My father is six-one, with hair a dark silver color, and his eyes the same hazel as my brothers. He wears his hair thick and wavy, slicked back and a hard set to his mouth at all times. At least around me. I’ve learned that my father sees me as an annoyance, nothing more.

“I take it you know why I’m here,” Father says briskly.

I shake my head. “No, Father,” I say softly. “Though you know I always enjoy your visits.” A complete lie, but one that slips easily off the tongue after having used it so many times. I turn and bring him and Marco their

drinks, inwardly shaking at the thought I got it wrong. I've had more than one glass thrown at me for that mistake, and I'm still healing from the bruises Giovanni and Lorenzo left.

He assesses me, but clearly accepts my lie for what it is. Instead he indicates for me to sit, which I do, keeping myself on the edge of the seat. He doesn't appear upset, but that can change in the blink of an eye. He sips his drink, watching me, and I keep my face serene as he sets it down. A small part of me relaxes when he finds no fault with it, but I'm still far from out of the woods yet.

Finally, he says, "I'm here because rumors are starting to circulate about your existence."

I freeze at that, dread sinking into my stomach. One of the things my father has done is keep me hidden. My birth happened at home, the doctor merely handing me to my exhausted mother, and cleaning us up before leaving. No official paperwork was filed, and I was never allowed to leave home until I was eighteen. And even then, it was minute amounts of times. The only reason I'm in my own place is because my father's third wife didn't want the reminder of his second wife walking around. Considering he wants nothing to do with me most of the time he was fine with it. I had to work very hard, and be extremely patient, to get the freedoms I have now. It's why I have such a strict schedule. I know his men watch me, reporting back. I want to make sure they have nothing to report. It's this small taste of freedom that keeps me sane.

"I have kept strictly to your rules, Father," I say carefully. "I haven't spoken to anyone, and I follow the schedule to the letter as instructed."

He says nothing, watching me, as if trying to intimidate me into confessing some grave sin, like admitting that I'm alive to anyone. My heart pounds in my chest, terror gripping me. If he doesn't believe me, will he kill me? Will he sell me off to the highest bidder like Marco threatened for years until my Father told him the only person with that power is him. Finally, he says, "Yes, I've been told. A good thing for you, Giulia." The thinly veiled threat weighs heavy in the air. "Which means we have a rat, and I'll be looking into who they are shortly."

"Yes, Father," I say softly.

"Has Giovanni or his sons been here?" Marco suddenly asks, making me turn to look at him. He's watching me intensely, and I have to force myself not to swallow hard at the look. I hate it, and I want nothing more than to turn

and run. Far, far away.

“Just the last visit a few weeks ago that I reported to you and Father. No one has been here since.”

“You wouldn’t be lying to me, would you, Gia?” Marco asks, clearly not believing me, his eyes getting that same light my uncle and cousin get before they’re about to explode.

“No, Marco,” I say as firmly as I dare. “I wouldn’t dare lie to you or Father. The only person who has been at my door is the delivery man with my groceries, and I don’t open the door until he’s already left as you’ve instructed.” I almost add for him to check the cameras if he doesn’t believe me, but that will only result in him slapping or punching me for being insolent. So I bite my tongue and wait.

“Your sister is telling the truth, son,” Father says impatiently. “By all accounts, our Gia is following the rules, and has not done anything to earn our wrath. However, this brings up a problem we need to see to.” He looks back at me. “Because I’m sure I don’t need to tell you what will happen if someone learns about your existence, Gia.”

I shake my head. It’s been drilled into me since I was a young child, and I’ve learned to keep my mouth shut tight about who I am.

“Good. That is why until we find our rat, you are not to leave the apartment.”

My heart sinks, but I know I can’t argue. To argue would incur their wrath. So instead, I nod, my heart hammering in my chest. “Yes, Father. I’ll stay in the apartment until you tell me I can leave,” I promise. Hopefully it won’t be too long, but I can stay in my gilded prison for a little while longer.

“Good. And to reduce the chance of anyone coming across you, I will have supplies delivered to you for the next two months so that no one will be at your door.” He makes it sound like he’s doing me a great service, but all I see is the bars of my cage getting smaller and smaller. Then he gives me a hard look. “And should my brother or your cousin happen upon your door, you will notify me immediately, Giulia. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.”

“And if you cannot reach me, you will contact Marco or one of your brothers,” he adds.

“Yes, Father.”

“And when he says immediately, Gia, he means immediately,” Marco adds, giving me a hard look. “The moment they enter, you call us. Is that

clear? Not when they are in the room, not when they've left, *immediately*. I will not be pleased if you do not follow that order to the letter. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Marco," I reply in the same tone. "I will phone Father, or you, immediately, I promise."

I barely have time to brace myself before he's across the room, slapping me hard across the face, making my head snap to the side. I blink back the tears that form quickly, locking down my emotions as I look up at him, eyes blank, not even reaching to try and soothe the sting. That will only earn me another slap. "Consider that a mild preview of what will happen if you do not obey, Gia," Marco threatens, stepping back, eyes holding an unholy delight at the ability to hurt me. All the men in my family get off on beating me or any other helpless woman they feel deserve it.

"Yes, Marco," I say meekly. I don't even look at my father. He didn't interfere, nor would he, and I don't want to see the anger in his eyes. I should be numb to it by now, but it still hurts that my own father hates me because I was born a daughter and not a son. I heard many times when I was younger how weak and pathetic I was. How useless. I was kept out of the way, and not long after my fifth birthday, Marco killed our mother on his eighteenth birthday. Not that anyone knows that, considering the rumour put out was that it was Father. Most say our mother made the stupid decision to have an affair, but in reality, I'm sure it was at my father's orders because he wanted someone younger and she had run out of her usefulness.

"Marco, grab your sister's laptop and make sure there is nothing on it that shouldn't be," Father suddenly orders, "and her phone."

I use the computer to order groceries or clothes. My phone is only to make sure that I'm accessible should any of my family try to reach me. I need to be readily available for them. I keep still as Marco tosses a few of my things around, smashing and breaking them until he finally sits down to check my activities, scanning them with some kind of device. I don't try to understand what it does, but I can see from the frustration on Marco's face that he's not finding what he was hoping for. Finally, he bites out, "It's clean. Last time it was used was last Friday, and that was the daily grocery order."

Father looks back at me, almost like he too was hoping by springing that on me so quickly that I might have made a mistake so he can punish me. Except I'm well aware of every trick he has, and I'm not about to give him any more reasons to use against me. I'm still on my own, and I'm out from

under his prying eyes. Or my brothers' fists, mostly.

"Fine," Father says, standing, with me following him, moving ahead to grab his coat dutifully. He looks down at me as he take it to put on and says, "I'll notify you once this is all settled, Giulia."

"Thank you, Father," I say. And though I know I'm probably going to risk a slap or beating, I lower my gaze and ask softly, "Would it be too much to ask, Father, if in the supplies you send, a few new books could be included?"

"Books," Father repeats, arching a brow.

"Of your choosing, of course," I add quickly.

"Fine, but I am only granting this request, Giulia, because you have behaved, not because of anything else."

Like a naughty child that has finally done something acceptable. "Thank you, Father," I say with a thankful, but soft, smile. I can't risk him knowing how excited I am, or he will take it away to punish me.

"I will handle it, Father," Marco says with a smug sound. I try not to shiver as he walks by me, deliberately bumping into me.

"Do not go overboard, son," Father warns him sternly. "While I appreciate your annoyance with the situation as a whole, Giulia has been obedient, and I do not believe in kicking a bitch unless needed. Do I make myself clear?"

Anger burns in Marco's eyes at Father's words, and fear clenches in my heart. He will blame me for that. He gives a stiff nod, and he indicates for Father to leave before he rounds on me, slapping me hard enough to send me to the floor. I curl in on myself as he lashes out with his foot, kicking me hard in the ribs. Somehow I manage to keep my gasp of pain barely audible. "Do not think that you will ever amount to anything in our eyes, Gia," he hisses down at me hatefully. "Father thinks of you as nothing more than a stray dog that he feels some kind of responsibility for. If it were me, you would be finished." He delivers another hard kick, this time to my stomach, before he steps back and walks out the door, lock snicking into place after he pulls it closed behind him.

I lay there for a few long moments, trying to breathe through the pain. My ribs throb, and I almost wonder if he cracked them with the force of his kick. I'm just lucky he didn't try to take a headshot like he has before. He'd done it once when he felt I insulted him by not addressing him properly in front of the men with him and Father. He made sure to do it out of view of Father,

leaving me with a concussion for well over a month and a half. Untreated, of course. My father wouldn't have spared his doctor to see to me anyway. A few times I have hoped to just close my eyes and never wake up, to never have to deal with the pain anymore, but here I am.

Slowly, carefully, I climb to my feet, bent over at the pain that spreads through my body. I head for the kitchen, grabbing the large ice pack that I know I'll need, before heading to the bathroom. I refuse to let any tears fall. I won't give them the satisfaction of causing me that kind of pain. In getting any kind of reaction from me, even if they aren't here to see it. I'll know and I can't stomach it. I wouldn't put it past Father or Marco, or hell, any of my brothers, to come beat on me to get out their frustrations. And I will not allow them to find me crying. If they continue to hurt me, I will take it quietly, and without any kind of reaction if I can help it. Though no reaction at all can sometimes make them hit harder, but I've lived through it before, and I will again.

When I reach my bathroom, I turn on the light and look at myself in the large mirror over the vanity. I don't even flinch at my reflection. My lip is split, and a small crust of blood is starting to cover it. My cheek is red, and I'm sure I'll have a bruise by morning. I bite back a sigh and set to work undressing, putting the ice pack against my ribs, and then manage to down a couple of over the counter pain meds to hopefully combat some of the pain. Then I get to work on checking my stomach, which is also red and tender.

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if I had been born to any other family. Would I be treated like a valued family member? Or would I just be in another prison? Sometimes I look out from the window seat in my bedroom at the bustling street below, seeing families. Father's holding their little girl's hand, or mother's cradling their son in their arms. It's so abnormal to me that I have to wonder if they're doing it for show.

At the same time, I know that's crazy. My family isn't normal. We're the strange ones. And I will never escape it, short of death. And as sad as it is, I know there are far worse off people. I may not know much about how the outside world works, but I did live with my family for my first eighteen years. Which means, I know far more about the family business than they realize. The benefit of being ignored is I've learned to be invisible. My father and brothers would forget about me and discuss things in the open. So I know all about their activities. Something I've been very careful to keep as secret as possible so they don't have a reason to kill me.

I move to the bathtub and start to fill it, putting in a small amount of bubble bath and Epsom salts. I put the ice pack down and wait as it fills, looking around the room. Most would love a bathroom like this. It's stark white with marble tiles and vanity, and a luxurious shower that has all the fancy jets. And yet, as I look at it, I can't help but feel like it's bare. Cold. Nothing like I would want. But there's no point in wishing for anything. I need to focus on the now, and keeping my wits about me.

As I lower myself into the bath, I barely hold back a gasp at the feel of the heat on my ribs and stomach. Still, after another moment of adjustment, it settles and I lay my head back against the small pillow I have set there, closing my eyes. And as much as I try to push them back, my emotions fight to rise to the surface. The anger at them all, the desperation to have something change, and the utter loneliness that is my life.

I have no friends, and never have. I was never allowed to have someone to talk to, even when I was young. I tried to talk to my mother before her death, to my governess, to the staff, but they all ignored me, knowing exactly what would happen if they didn't. So I finally just stopped, finding my escape in the books and magazines I was allowed to have. And even now, that's still all I have. I don't exist on anything outside of my family's knowledge, so how can I have friends? What would I say? And fear has always kept me from attempting to break the rules to find it out. Still, it's a dream that one day I will be able to find someone to talk to. I just have to hope that whoever they are, are kind and not someone that my father has married me off to.

I know that my father will eventually tire of me, of the money he spends on me. Instead, he'll either kill me, or sell me off to the highest bidder. I'll become a bargaining chip, and just be trading one prison for another. I'm sure there are some men out there that are decent and would treat me kindly, but knowing my father, and even my uncle, they would want someone with power and connections to grow their empire. Meaning men like them. Someone to marry without argument from me. Become nothing more than a vessel for their heirs.

As much as the world around us wants to believe we're progressive, there are still so many stuck in the old ways I doubt I will ever know anything else. The only way I'll know of a different world is through my books. Even the steamy romances I've discovered. No one pays attention to the books I read, but I'm still careful about my choices. *They wouldn't want me to get ideas in my head, after all. No dreams for Gia,* I think bitterly.

I wonder if this is how my mother felt before she died. Did she wonder what her life would become? Giving birth to a girl in my family is the cardinal sin. They want men, boys they can train to take over the business, to make it grow and secure ties with other families around the world. Women are for nothing more than sex and to look good on their arms at important social functions. I've always wondered why none of my brothers have married yet, but I'm sure my father has specific brides picked out for them. I shudder to think about who those poor women might be, and what they might suffer.

Then again, they could be like Carmen, my step-mother. Carmen is a chameleon and she knows exactly when to change her reactions and mannerisms to fit the situation. Not to mention, she's cold and calculating. Maybe that's why she's stuck around for so long, despite not giving my father any more children. She's still young, only early thirties now, and she knows how to act around my father and brothers, but doesn't shy away from inserting herself when she feels it necessary. My father indulges her because she's the daughter of one of the bosses in Italy. Someone that my father does not want to piss off. Still, I saw her shoot one of the staff because she felt disrespected, and no one blinked. My father had someone clean up the mess and continued on his way.

She's never liked me. She took one look at me, and hatred filled her eyes and she worked at getting me out. I didn't fight her, agreeing when my Father brought it up. I think she hated me because I am the image of my mother, and I was standing in her way. Like she thought I would convince others to treat her badly. It's laughable, but I will never dare to say such a thing out loud.

I sigh, opening my eyes. I've sulked enough, and I don't want to think anymore. I need to get something to eat and go to bed. It's getting late, and tomorrow begins my months-long sentence. I climb out of the bath, drying off and going through my skincare routine. At least Father feels I should look my best, and he supplies me with everything I could need. I know it's only so I can look my best for whoever will eventually marry me, but I love the routine and products just the same.

When I finish, I drain the tub, clean it carefully, and then head to my bedroom, wrapped in my simple black robe. God, I'm tired, and I hope I fall asleep fast. Maybe when I wake up in the morning I'll feel better.

That is my last thought, before I feel a hand slide over my mouth and a sharp prick in my neck. I try to scream, but my vision starts to swim. My

body falls towards the floor, and I am completely paralyzed. Arms grip me before I land, and the last thing I see is blue eyes staring back at me.

Who is he? What does he want? What is my father going to think when he discovers me gone? Or will he even care? Maybe it's better if he doesn't.

Darkness pulls me under and all my thoughts vanish.

CHAPTER 5

Nico



I'M both satisfied she's finally here, but infuriated at the same time that she was seen this way. In nothing more than a tiny little robe, bare flesh on display. If it hadn't been Dante, I would have killed the bastard who got to touch her. No one was to look at her. She was mine, and that meant no eyes but mine will get to see any part of her from now on.

I watch her through the camera that I installed in her suite, and I can see her luscious hair spread out on the pillow. She looks like a doll, her full lips parted ever so slightly as she sleeps, and dark sheets covering her body. I had the doctor examine her immediately after she arrived. Aside from her bruising, he declared her perfectly healthy, stating she should wake up by morning.

I'm impatient. To see her reaction to her new home. To find out her name. Still, I'm a man of much control, and I don't move from my seat. Instead, I force myself to look away from the camera and back to Dante, who is watching me expectantly. "You weren't seen?" I ask.

"No," he replies simply. "I had our men make sure nothing would show up on the cameras."

"And there was nothing in her apartment that could tell us who she is?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "The only things that might have given it away are her phone or laptop, but they're locked down tight. They're with our team now."

I narrow my eyes at that. Well that's surprising, and speaks to the fact that whoever she is, she is either very good with computers, or she's got

someone in her back pocket. “And you saw no evidence of a man in the apartment?” Not that I care. If a man is stupid enough to let someone else take what’s his, he’s not much of a man at all, and he’s also not worthy of her.

“There were a couple of drinking glasses on the bar that looked like they were recently used, but she doesn’t strike me as the hard liquor type,” Dante says after a moment’s thought. “But if a man lives there, nothing that shows it. I only found women’s clothes in the closet, and the bed looked more feminine.”

Another piece to add to the puzzle. My little mouse is a mystery. Now onto the more pressing question. “How did she get the split lip and the bruises?” I ask Dante, watching him carefully. I won’t hesitate to kill him if he touched what’s mine, even if she fought back.

He holds up his hands and says, “Wasn’t me. She was like that when I got there. Saw an icepack on the vanity in the bathroom, so it seems like they are recent.”

Anger burns in my blood at the thought that someone hurt her. Marred her perfect skin, and busted her full lip. I want to find them and slowly cut the skin from their bones. Make them beg for mercy. Soon enough, though, I’ll know. Because I’ll be asking her as soon as she’s awake. “I want to know what’s on those cameras,” I order Dante. “I want to know who left that place and when.”

“The team is on it,” Dante assures me. “We’ll know the answer soon. Perhaps that will help us figure out who she is.” I nod, but before I can give him any further instructions, his phone rings and he pulls it out. “It’s the hacking team,” he announces, swiping his finger across the screen to answer the call. “Boss is here, so tell us what we need to know.”

There’s only a brief pause before a male voice fills the room, and I recognize it as Louis, one of my longest standing hackers. “We have the information you were looking for, Sir. The computer has a special software on it, and we’ve traced it back to a man by the name of Martin Lee. He’s a well known hacker, and he’s employed by the De Luca Family to do their computer security work. Anything you don’t want found, Martin is your guy to make sure it happens.”

“But you were able to get past it?” I demand impatiently.

“Partially, Sir. Just enough for me to know that whoever owns the laptop belongs to either one of the De Luca family members, or one of the families

that work for them. And they would be someone higher up the chain, not just a footman.”

I lean forward. Now that is an interesting piece of information. “Do you have a guess on which family or team member?”

“I don’t want to give you false information, Sir. My guess is that she’s the daughter of one of the higher ups in Don De Luca’s team.”

I sit back, mulling that over. It’s certainly possible, but it doesn’t sit right with me. I look over at Dante, who has the same expression. “Try and break through so we can find out for sure,” I order firmly. “And make it quick. If she does belong to the De Luca family or one of their men, we need to know so we can be ready.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll try and have an answer in the next couple of hours.”

“All information is to come to me,” Dante orders. “Immediately.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Dante hangs up and then looks at me, gaze pointed. “Want to bet that the rumors are correct and she is the daughter of De Luca? And if she is, are you sure we should keep her here?”

I look at the screen briefly, mind turning with the possibilities. If she is Leonardo’s daughter, then there is a very good chance he’ll start a war to get her back. Though, if my men value their lives, he will never figure out where she is. Besides, Leonardo would never win in a war against me, and he knows it. Which is exactly why he’s never tried to overthrow me before. I have connections he can only dream of, and no matter the firepower he has, I have more. Still, is a woman a reason for a war?

Before I would have said no, and dismissed the idea, but sitting here, watching her, the answer isn’t clear. Anger burns at my gut. At her for making me think like this. I should never let a woman have this much power over me. Ever. They are nothing more than property. A pretty thing to have around and see to the matters that I have no interest in in this world. But something tells me that with her, that’s not going to be the case. I hate it. I despise it, and I think briefly of having Dante take her back. None the wiser. Then she will be out of my head and no longer my problem.

Except, she is mine, and her fate now rests in my hands. I will never allow another man to be around her. To control or hurt her.

Finally, I look back at Dante and say, “If she is, then we’ll deal with it, but until then, we continue as normal.”

“Are we sending her back if she turns out to be a De Luca?”

My fury builds at his question, but I force it down, giving him a cold, dark look. “No,” I bite out.

He arches a brow at me as he says, “Alright. I’ll let you know what I find out. You want me to wake you if you’re sleeping?”

“I want to know immediately, no matter the time of day.”

“Done,” he says. Then he gets a thoughtful look on his face. “You know, if we want to know, we could just fingerprint her. See if she comes up.”

I shake my head. “That would alert everyone to her presence here. And if there is no record of her, then there is no fingerprint to check. De Luca, if that is who she is related to, would have made sure of that.”

“Do you think that she could be an illegitimate heir? It wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility that they want her as a bargaining chip, but they can’t let people know she exists until they’re ready. Especially if she’s not a pure De Luca.”

“Assuming she is a De Luca, it’s possible. And would explain why she’s been hidden away. But the question is, who does she belong to? She’s too old to be a daughter of one of the sons.”

“Are we sure there aren’t other girls?” Dante frowned. “I mean, if she is a hidden daughter of either Leonardo or Giovanni, then that means there could be more.”

I wave him off. “One, maybe two, would be possible to hide, but not more than that. There are far too many people who like to talk, and word would have gotten out long ago. Not to mention, Giovanni would never have been able to keep it a secret if there was more than one or two. He’s too hot headed and would have let it slip. Though, now he’s obviously looking to make a move, he could be letting it slip, even without his brother’s permission.”

Dante nods. “I don’t get the sense that she’s Russian, or even Irish. So it’s possible she belongs to one of the other families, but they’re far more open about the women in their families.”

“Irish are big on family, and they would have married her off as soon as she was of age. Russians probably would be the same, but she would probably be back in Russia or in another family here in the States they want to strengthen ties to.” A thought suddenly strikes me and I reach into my desk and pull out my file on the De Luca family. I make sure to keep updated records on all those I need to keep an eye on. I flip it open and go through all the information I have, but can’t find what I want. “I want pictures of De

Luca's wives," I order Dante, looking up at him. "No, make that I want pictures of both brothers wives. Any and all."

Dante pulls out his phone and sends off a message. "Done. We'll get the information shortly."

Before I can say anything else, a sound stops me, making my head swing to look at the screen. I hear a soft moan, though it's fairly faint, and see that my little mouse has moved from her position to curl in on herself. Anticipation fills me. "It looks like my guest is awake. Get me the information. I'll be back shortly." I stand, shrugging on my jacket and rounding my desk.

"You want assistance in case she gets the idea to fight?" Dante asks, his face cool, but his eyes bright with amusement at the idea that a little woman such as her could take me down.

"No." I walk out of the room, without looking back, knowing he won't dare disobey me. Not that he won't watch the cameras, but that's fine. I won't be giving him anything to see.

As I walk down the hallway, I never noticed how well my home suits me. It is large, with a gothic feel. The pointed points, the dark walls, the elaborate carvings in the staircases, walls, and decorations. My mother had the place designed and built long before I came along and updated it over the years until she died. My father never bothered with such things, leaving it as is. I wonder how my little mouse will feel about it?

I reach the end of the hall, heading to the East Wing of the house, where my new guest is residing. It takes a couple more sets of stairs before I reach the top floor, which used to be my parents' wing. Ironic that this is its purpose now, to house someone they would have given their lives to know about. To exploit and use in a way that they could gain more power.

Isn't that what you're doing?

I ignore that. I am well aware of my faults, and I also know how fucked up this whole thing is. The difference is, I don't give a damn. I don't know who she is for certain yet, so until I do, she's nothing more than a curiosity, and someone who I clearly need to work on getting out from under my skin. As much as I see her as belonging to me, my entire goal is to get sick of her before dumping her somewhere far away from me, or sold to someone who wants a meek little wife.

Something dark and dangerous moves through me at that thought, and I curse softly to myself. Even now the idea of someone else having her makes

me murderous. It needs to stop before I do something stupid. Still, if she is one of the De Lucas' daughters, she will be the key in making sure that I get exactly what I want. My personal bargaining chip.

When I reach the large double doors at the end of the hall, I carefully open them, pleased they don't make a single sound. I don't want to alert the woman to my presence. I slip into the darkened room, the only light from the dim lamp in the corner, casting shadows along the floor and to the edge of the bed where she lays, still curled up.

I glance around the room, realizing that I haven't really looked at it in a long time. The room is spacious, with space for a window seat, a sitting area, and a make-up vanity just outside the bathroom. Above me is a large loft, full of books and an office, with another window seat overlooking the back garden and street area. My mother was an avid reader, though I have no idea what kind of books are up there. I glance over at the dark, ornate curved staircase, but then ignore the idea and focus back on the woman in the large four-poster King-sized bed.

The bed is as ornate and gothic as the rest of the room. With a large, intricately carved headboard that is mounted to the wall, and reaches all the way up to the ceiling. It sits between two tall windows, though no light is coming in due to the privacy coverings over them. As I make my way around to the right side of the bed where my little mouse is sleeping, my feet make no sound, the noise absorbed by the large, thick rug. Finally, when I'm standing beside her, I look down at her, taking my time as my eyes move over her.

This close, I can smell the sweet scent of whatever soap she used in her bath, and it makes me want to rip off the blanket and press my nose to her skin, to see if she smells like this everywhere. My traitorous cock hardens at the thought, but I ignore it. Instead, I focus on the pinch of her mouth, and the soft sound she's making as she tries to fight the drugs in her system. At best guess, I probably have another ten minutes. Maybe sooner if she has a strong fighting instinct. And something tells me she does.

As I stare at her, I wonder if she is one of the De Luca's daughters. I take in her features, her dark hair, and recall the brown of her eyes. Her skin is olive color, which speaks of possible Italian descent, and my gut is telling me that she is indeed a De Luca. But the question is how can I make sure that she falls in line with my plans.

It probably makes me a bastard to use her in such a way, but no one has

ever said I was a good man. Nor do I want to be. I enjoy the finer things in life, and the power I have. I like knowing that one day I'll have made myself even better and bigger than my father ever dreamed. And if this woman is my key to that, then so be it.

She makes another small sound of pain, and I pause, waiting. Will she wake up and see me standing here? Thinking I'm some kind of monster that's come here to devour her in the dark? A small trickle of amusement shoots through me at that thought. Because I'm all those things, and once I finally get past my obsession with her, well, I won't have any further use of her. But that's a thought for another time. For now, I need her to wake up, tell me who she is, and then see what she does when she realizes there is no escape.

I look around the room again. It's a pretty cage, with everything she could want. Well, other than her freedom. There are far worse cages for someone like her to be in. It will be interesting to see her reaction. Will she fight to get out? Will she scream and cry? Or will she sit silent, waiting?

Something tells me this sweet looking creature is far more clever than people think. Though, thinking back at how she looked at me, terror in her eyes, maybe that is what she wants people to believe. Maybe she is truly weak, and I'll grow tired of her quickly enough.

A thought that should make me happy, but instead pisses me off. Once again, she is making me think and feel confusing things. I need to get away from her, get back to work, and focus on more important things. I stare at her for another moment, before moving away from the bed, and heading for the door. I'll send someone to see to her when she wakes up.

Just as I reach the door, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, and when I see the message, I hold back a triumphant smile. It looks like I have Leonardo's daughter in my midst. Based on the picture of her mother, she's the spitting image of her. I almost want to be around when he finds out she's gone. Because he'll never find her, and my little mouse will never see him again if I don't wish it to happen.

With that sense of triumph, and the urge to get my plans in place, I send a text to Dante to meet me in my office. It's time to get things underway, and to figure out how big of a war we're going to create. I look back at the woman on the bed, before I leave, locking the door behind me.

CHAPTER 6

Gia



I KNOW I'm not in my own bed before I even open my eyes. I screw them shut, curling in on myself as I try to remember what happened. I remember my father coming, Marco hitting me, and taking a bath but then nothing. Did I drown and someone rescued me? No, that's not possible. My father won't care if I'm dead. He's locking me away for a couple of months, after all. So where am I?

I slowly, carefully, open my eyes, only to find myself in a darkened room, shadows covering everything except for a dim light from a large lamp in the corner. Fear strikes me, but I tamp it down, knowing better than to show it. I need to be calm, keep my wits about me. Slowly, I look to the other side of the room. I can barely make out an open door, and possibly a mirror just outside it.

I turn my head back and close my eyes, taking in deep calming breaths. I assess myself, and realize I still have on the robe I was wearing at home. I frown, moving my hands under the blankets and over my body, checking for anything that doesn't feel right. The only aches and pains I have are in my head, ribs, and stomach. But I don't feel sore between my legs, so that must mean that I wasn't assaulted, right? No, better not to think about that right now. Now I need to figure out where I am, and how to get away.

Slowly, I push myself up into a seated position, making sure to keep my hand on my robe so it doesn't fall open. I feel exposed and I hate it. Though that's probably exactly what my kidnappers want. They want me afraid, and uncomfortable. Well, unlucky for them, I've been that way most of my life, and I can handle it far better than most.

I scoot to the edge of the bed, getting to my feet and biting back a groan when my head swims and my ribs throb. I stand still, waiting for it to pass, and then I carefully turn and feel around until I find a switch for the lamp on the nightstand. Once it's on, I can see a bit more of the room, and I gasp.

It's as big as my apartment, if not more. I don't think, outside my father's area of his house, that I've ever seen something so grand. Almost ostentatious in how luxurious and elaborate it all is. Still, even with all of that, I know this is the last place I want to be. I move around the room, slowly, carefully, until I find the light switch near the large—but locked—double doors. Turning around and staring at it all in the light.

Whoever lives here has money. A lot of it. But there's an undercurrent of danger here. Something that's lurking in the corners of the room makes me shiver. I look around again, not seeing any cameras, but I have a feeling whoever has taken me is watching. I move away from the door, heading for the open doorway on the left side of the room, stopping just inside as I turn on the light. I'm not surprised to find a luxurious bathroom, complete with large glass shower, intricate wood vanity with double sinks, but it's the large clawfoot tub beside the huge, ornate windows and a small ledge just beneath them where there are some fancy looking candles.

I feel like I'm in some kind of castle or something out of medieval times, and while normally that would thrill me, now, it scares me. Who the hell lives in a place like this? I move further into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind me. I look around the room and see a chair in the corner near the tub, and I pull it over to prop it under the doorknob. That way no one can come in here and catch me by surprise.

I move around the room, taking it in, until I find another door on the left side of the room, closer to the shower, that leads into a very large walk-in closet. The lights come on automatically as I step inside. It's full of all kinds of shelves, rods, and even a large island in the middle with drawers all around it. At my five-four height, I'm barely a head taller than it, and a plush bench that looks like you could lay on it and have a good nap sits along the side of it.

And is that a black chandelier in the middle of the room?

I move to the island, curiosity getting the best of me, even as I note all the clothes hanging on the racks and the shoes sitting on the shelves. The first drawer I pull out is full of sparkling jewelry. Gold, silver, diamonds, rubies, it all gleams back up at me. Holy shit. Who needs all of that? I quickly close

the drawer and open the one below it. More jewels. The next two drawers are full of jewels, and one has fancy watches and even a couple of tiaras. Who the hell lives here? A queen?

I move around to open the others. Some are full of underwear, bras, and socks, while some are filled with fancy looking lingerie, and even some silky pajamas. My head is spinning once I finish examining them all, and I force myself to turn away and look around for something that I can pull on. Something that will cover me from head to toe and leave me feeling less vulnerable.

I search, ignoring the dresses and skirts, and even the fancy shirts and jeans. I need something I can move easily in, because I need to get out of here. I'm almost about to give up, when I finally find a drawer full of workout clothes at the back of the closet. I let out a small sound of triumph as I pull out a pair of black yoga pants, a sports bra, and a black top that, even though skin-tight, at least covers me from neck to belly. It hurts to get them on, and I have a moment of worry when I realize how perfectly everything fits, but I push that aside.

Right now, the only thing that matters is getting out. I need to get back home before my father finds me gone; it won't matter to him that I've been taken. As long as he's none the wiser, he won't kill me. I hope. Marco might just take the excuse, but if I can convince Father, he'll keep Marco from snapping my neck. Maybe.

I walk back to the windows, searching for a way to get them open. I curse when I realize that they're for decoration instead of practicality. I tamp down my irritation and look out, trying to gauge where I am. The moon is only a sliver, so there's not much help from it, but there are some lights below that show what looks to be a very expansive garden below. From the height, I'm at least on a high floor of wherever I am, which I guess in one way is better than being in a basement—or dungeon if this place really is a castle of some kind—but it creates a whole other problem. After all, if I'm this high up, there's probably not a great chance of me climbing out the window and scaling down to safety. Or doing the rope sheets trick I saw in a few movies. I doubt, even with as big as that bed is, all those sheets would reach the ground.

I move to the door, move the chair out of the way, take a deep breath, and then unlock it. I open the door, slowly bracing myself. Once it's open wide enough, I look out, but see nothing. No movement, or anyone else in the

room. I don't relax, but I take a cautious step out, bracing for myself to run. When I sense no change, I move further into the room, moving to the door, foolishly hoping that maybe they left it unlocked. Neither handle moves and a small bubble of disappointment settles in my stomach. Foolish, really.

I move around the room, checking under the bed, the windows, the vanity and mirror, and even along the wall for any signs of some way to get out of this room. I found one of the secret passages in my father's home when I was young, and this place seems like it would have something similar. Still, I can't seem to find anything. I huff out a sigh, and then turn to look at the sweeping staircase that leads up to the upper level. Looks like I have only one more place to check out.

I make my way slowly up the steps, gripping the handrail, and breathing through the pain in my ribs and stomach at the jarring steps. When I reach the top, I suck in a breath of shock, and try not to have any other kind of outward reaction.

The entire floor is a huge library. The only open area is to my right and that overlooks the bed, but holds a large circular reading chair, and a desk with a delicate looking lamp. Behind me is a large window with a plush looking seat that overlooks another part of the garden.

Past the sitting area, the walls on either side are lined with shelves of books from floor to ceiling, and a rolling ladder sits at the end. The shelves in some places seem to curve along the wall, and tall columns with carvings of dragons around the tops and bottoms, holding up the ceiling at the deepest curves. A soft light comes from down the hall and I start moving toward it, but my hand brushes along the smooth wood as I go. It doesn't look used, but it's definitely been recently cleaned, which means whoever lives here takes care of it.

When I get to the end of the hall, I stop and stare. This part of the library includes a complete second level, with another spiral staircase that climbs up to a walkway. There are rolling ladders on each level as well, and in the center there is a set of couches, with a coffee table between them, and a reading chaise. Stepping further into the space, I turn around and look up, there are even walls of books and a walkway on that side of the wall as well, just set in deeper. There are no windows, but surprisingly, it doesn't feel claustrophobic. It's almost comfortable looking, and that's what scares me.

I turn around and head back downstairs, determined to figure out a way out of here before whoever has me comes back. Maybe I can pick the lock or

something? I glance at the doors, before going to examine them. If I was strong enough, I'd try to get the doors off the hinges, but there is no way these doors would be easy to get down with them being so tall. And they probably weigh a hell of a lot.

I crouch down, looking at the keyhole, and trying to look through into whatever lies beyond the doors. But it's too dark to tell, so I pull back and look at the lock again. It's old fashioned, but seeing as the metal isn't rusted and looks far too clean and shiny, I'd have to say it's relatively new. Hopefully it won't be too hard to pick. Now to find something to pick it with.

I get back to my feet, groaning softly at the pain, before heading to the vanity to root around and see what I can find. Of course, nothing is in there but expensive make up and brushes. I huff out a soft grunt of frustration, before turning and heading for the bathroom. Surely there is a bobby-pin or something around here I can use. Or a paper clip? I think I saw someone use one on TV before. Then again, that is TV, so maybe this isn't going to work, but I'll try anything.

It takes me a bit longer, but I finally found a package of bobby pins in one of the bathroom vanity drawers and take out a couple, gripping them tight in my hand. Time to try and get out of here.

I make my way to the door, uncaring if there are cameras. Still, I don't see any cameras, so maybe they're not bothering since they think I'm probably cowering in a corner somewhere. Hopefully by the time they realize I've gotten out of the room, I'll be finding a way out.

I might be scared, but I won't trade one prison for another willingly. At least with my Father and brothers I know where I stand. Here, it's unknown, and for all I know they could be worse than my own family. Which is a terrifying thought.

I crouch down and get to work.

I'm not sure how long I work at it, before I finally have to stop because the pain in my ribs is too much for me to concentrate. I lay my head against the door, before stiffly getting to my feet and stepping back. Now what?

I glance around and then back up at the library above me thoughtfully. I wonder if there are any books up there that could be helpful. Surely whoever has taken me must have used some kind of knowledge on how to get me out without being seen, so maybe they had a how-to manual or something.

It's a silly idea, but I don't care. I'll try anything. I head for the stairs, but my mind is already planning out other ways to get out of here. Surely,

someone will have to come in here soon enough. Maybe I can hit them over the head and get out that way. My gut clenches at the thought of hurting someone, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Let's just hope it doesn't come to that and I can figure out a way out of here without too much violence.

CHAPTER 7

Nico



A RUSH of amusement moves through me as I watch her. This little woman thinks she's going to read her way out of her cage? Won't she have such a shock when she realizes it's futile. Like I haven't planned for any attempts she'll make to get away. Still, it's amusing to watch her try.

Dante and I watched her wake up, and then check out her surroundings. Though, I did snarl at him when she started to change, which only made him roll his eyes at me and look away. I'll have to deal with his insolence later. It seems an ass beating is in need for people around here. When I turned back to the screen, the little mouse had already pulled on the underwear and pants, leaving me with only a view of her dark hair falling down her back, and the briefest flashes of skin as she worked to pull on the sports bra and shirt. Though, from the struggle and the pain on her face when she finally got them on I could tell it had to hurt.

The most interesting part, though, was her trying to pick the lock. I figured that she was going to try and get out a window, or maybe try and smash one, but no, she decided to take the calmer route, though a lot less easy. Because as much as those doors look easy to pick, I made sure that they were state of the art, and unpickable. The only way in or out is with the key that I currently have in my pocket.

"Are you going to go in and see her?" Dante asks me, pulling me away from watching her.

"Eventually." My whole plan to try and stay away from her is getting shorter by the minute. I have this inexplicable need to go in there, and see her reaction. Will she know who I am? Being Leonardo's daughter, I would think

he would have told her these things, but then again, she didn't seem to recognize me when she bumped into me in the library or outside by my car. So perhaps not. "Any luck on getting her name?" I ask Dante, forcing myself to look away from the screen.

Dante shakes his head. "She's a damn ghost. No one knows anything about her, and even our informants are mum. Which means that either Leonardo has heard the rumors about her existence spreading around, or he's realized she's missing and put the fear of God into everyone he employs to find her."

"I haven't heard anything that indicates he has," I say, pulling out my phone. "Something of that nature would make some waves."

"Not unless they don't want to alert anyone of her disappearance," Dante reasons. "After all, if Giovanni promised her to someone in Sicily and they find out she's gone, that would blow whatever deal they're making."

He has a point. Before I can reply, a sharp knock sounds on my office door, with Dante calling out for whoever it is to step inside. Sofia walks in, shoulders back, head high, and mouth pinched in displeasure. I notice Dante take her in, eyes narrowing slightly, but not saying a word. The damn fool is probably going to go and fall in love with her, if he hasn't already. Their little tryst hasn't cooled in the past few weeks, so I have to assume it's serious.

"Is there a reason you're disturbing me?" I ask her, scowling.

"And I'm here to ask you when I can serve our *guest* something to eat. I'm sure she's starving," Sofia says calmly, though I don't miss the sneer in her words at the term *guest*.

I narrow my eyes at her in warning. She's been pushing her boundaries, and I'm about ready to shove her right back down to the bottom if she's not careful. "Our guest is no concern to you."

"Oh, and how are you proposing on getting her food and things then?" Sofia demands, unconcerned. "Because I'm the one who instructs people to prepare the food, and it's my job to make sure it's served. Unless you plan on cooking and serving it yourself?"

I clench my jaw, despising that she's right and grit out, "Fine, send up food, but not you. Make sure whoever sends it up doesn't speak with her. And send a guard."

"I'll go," Dante offers.

I want to tell him no, but that would be foolish. After all, Dante is the only man I trust. "Fine." Then, deciding that it's about time to remind them

that I know everything, I add, “And if you two go off to fuck in a random corner again, I suggest not. I’m liable to kick your ass out, Sofia, and Dante, I’d just cut out your tongue to keep you from whining all the time.”

Neither react to my news, other than to glance at each other. “Who knew you were such a voyeur?” Sofia taunts, smirking at me. “What, you have a problem with the help sleeping with your main man?”

“I have a problem with women that don’t know their place,” I snap.

She scoffs. “And we have this same argument a few times a week. You like that someone talks back to you and stands up to you. Otherwise you’d find it boring. Not to mention, unlike your father, you have some respect for women, which means you won’t fire me, and you won’t hurt me. Now, I’m going to go and get this meal ready for our guest and then I’m going to bed. And when you finally let my man come to bed, try not to sneak in to watch, huh? I’d hate for you to see what a real woman sounds like when she’s actually enjoying herself instead of pretending so she can get access to your money.” Then she turns and sashays out, hips swinging.

I turn my head to see Dante trying to hide a smile. “I wonder what she would say if I killed you now and was done with it?” I ask him tightly. “One less headache to deal with.”

“She’d probably find a gun and shoot you.” Dante smirks. “Seems that someone around here likes me.”

“No accounting for why,” I huff. I glance back at the screen and see my little mouse is slowly and carefully going through each book in the hallway portion of the library. At this rate, it will be tomorrow before she gets through them all. I look back at Dante. “And just so we’re clear, you work for me, and I don’t give a damn about your relationship with Sofia, as long as it doesn’t interfere with your job. Think with your cock once, and I’ll make sure it’s the last thought you ever have. Got it?”

“Got it,” he replies seriously, but I notice the way his eyes glint with humor. That ass beating is sounding better and better. Has everyone forgotten who I am around here? “Now I better go and get ready to see our guest. Want me to ask her anything?”

“No one is to say a word to her. Just leave the food and go.” I want the first words she speaks to be to me, no one else. And I want to be the one who hears her name. But not before I’m ready. I hand him the key to the door and try not to be angry that he’s going to see her.

What the hell is wrong with me? What kind of man obsesses over a

woman this way? Especially when I don't know her name. Or the fact that she is the daughter of my enemy? I have lost my goddamn mind. I now understand why my father always told me to never let a woman get to me, or I would fall just like the rest of the idiots before us.

Well, there is no danger of me falling in love. Eventually I'll find a suitable woman to marry and have a few heirs with, but for the most part, I'll have nothing to do with her outside of public appearances and the odd fuck. Cold, detached, and exactly the way my father was with my mother. The way I need to be if I want to grow my empire. Which is exactly why I need to keep my eyes on the prize and figure out a way to get rid of this obsession with my little mouse. No distractions.

I head out to the west wing, which is my area of the house. I never wanted to leave it, even after my parents died. It's mine, and it's exactly how I want it to be. I glance at stairs that lead to the east wing before continuing on to my room, determined to keep her out of my mind.

When I reach my bedroom doors, I quickly throw them open, slam them shut and lock them behind me. I don't want any interruptions. I glance around my room, seeing that Sofia at least had someone come in and clean today. The bed is freshly made, and any of the clothes I left on the floor are gone. I glance around the room, taking it in and comparing it to where my little mouse is currently trying to escape.

My mother decorated it in the same gothic style, but where hers was dark, mine is a mixture of dark and light. An amusing comparison if you ask me, because I'm about as good and light as they were, but I suppose my mother may at one time hoped I would be a better man than my father. And it's easy to see how well that worked.

The bedroom is large, with tall intricately carved ceilings, with a circular, almost medieval chandelier above the ornate bed that is close to the large floor to ceiling window much like in my parents' room. The headboard and footboards of the bed are intricately carved with a mixture of lions and dragons, a battle of sorts that I've never really paid much attention to. On either side of the bed are matching nightstands, and another table by the window with some fresh flowers that was Sofia's idea to give the room a little freshness. Personally I don't give a shit, but today she put in some red roses. I have a feeling there's a message with that choice, but I ignore them and head for the walk-in closet, passing my sitting area complete with a large screen TV and desk area in case I work in here. A rare thing, but I have the

option.

When I walk into the closet, it's completely different from the bedroom itself. I boast a lot of clothing, and when I took over, I had this entire room, and the bathroom redone to meet my tastes. While the bedroom itself is darker and ornate, the closet and bathroom are modern. The closet has multiple sections, with perfectly divided racks and shelves so that I can easily find anything I want. In the center is where I keep any watches or jewelry I have with clear cases along the top, and then closed drawers on the bottom.

I quickly strip down and pull on a pair of black sweatpants and a black t-shirt, before moving to the back of the closet to the door that opens into my bathroom. Stepping in, I glance around and see that Sofia also had this cleaned because the damn glass shower looks like it's sparkling. At least it's nice to know that Sofia is still doing her job when she isn't fucking Dante all over my house. The bathroom is also modern, with luxurious natural stone floors, a double vanity, and a separate deep soaker tub.

I make my way over to the vanity and splash some water on my face, giving me a quick jolt before I turn around and head back to the closet.

The other benefit of this house is that my father was a control freak and he planned for every possibility. Meaning the house has many secret passages, hidden doors, and even a couple of escape routes and bunkers should they ever be needed. When I took over the house, I had some adjustments made, so now, I can get to any room in the entire house just by the secret door in my room. The only person who knows about it is Dante, and considering how heavily secured it is and full of cameras, I know he's never used it outside of the few rare times with me.

I head to one of the smaller shelves along the inner wall at the front of the closet. A clever thing suggested to me by my contractor, most people would look at the back of the closet or in the bedroom for any secret doors. This one, however, is only accessible by the scanner seamlessly built into the wood. It makes no noise as I press my hand to the shelf second from the top, it pops open and lets me push it far enough so I can squeeze through, before it shuts silently behind me, clicking into place. Not a sliver of light comes through before the hallway lights up with the sensor lights that fill these passageways. I know them all like the back of my hand now, so I immediately head for the door that will take me outside the gym. But just before I reach it, my phone buzzes, and I immediately pull it out to look, despite knowing that I shouldn't.

I grit my teeth as I watch Dante enter the room with Sofia and her tray of food. Neither of them speak, just walk in and place the tray down on the bed, before turning toward the door. I'll be having a word with Sofia about going against my orders as soon as I can. Still, I watch and wait for another minute, waiting for my little mouse to come down and demand to be freed, or try to escape. Only, there's nothing.

I frown and switch the camera view to the last place I saw her in the upper library, and arch a brow when I don't see her there. Well, now, that's interesting. Where did my little mouse go? I switch to another camera, one that shows me the hallway and the sitting area, but again, nothing. I narrow my eyes as I move through each view, still unable to see her. What the hell? Where the hell could she have gone?

I'm just about to turn around and head over there to find out for myself, when I see a small, very small, flash of movement on the camera in the bedroom. So quick that if I hadn't been staring at the screen so carefully I'd have probably missed it. As the bedroom door goes to fully shut behind Dante, I watch as her little body tries to squeeze out.

Of course, Dante seems to have expected that she'd try to escape, because he immediately blocks her way and stares down at her. I can't see his expression, but based on her face and the uncertainty, as well as fear, that flashes over it before she tries to lash out at him to get past, I'd say that it wasn't a kind one. Dante merely grabs her by the upper arms, kicks the door open, sets her down inside, and slams the door shut, locking it behind him.

I switch back to the camera in the room, but I don't see my little mouse kicking or screaming the door down. No, she stands there, staring at it for a moment, before she turns and heads right back up the stairs and into the library, her expression carefully blank. I narrow my eyes, because that's not normal behavior for a captive. Shouldn't she be trying to figure out another way out?

I follow her on the other cameras, watching as she goes back into the library and right back to perusing the shelves. What the hell is she looking for? I watch her for another few minutes, before I finally tell myself she's not going anywhere and to forget about her for now. I'll blow off some steam, clear my head, and then be ready to handle her.

I switch to the camera outside the hidden door, see no one in the halls, and then I block the feed for the thirty seconds it takes me to open the door and walk out into the main hall, and make sure it closes shut behind me. This

one is made directly into the wall, behind a full length painting of a castle that my mother had commissioned on a trip to Europe one summer when I was ten. It's ghastly, but I suppose it has its uses.

I walk down into the gym, and the air in the room immediately changes as my men see me. There are three of them in the ring, and two more lifting weights. I see Davide in the ring, and Tommaso lifting weights. I never took time to learn the other's names. Davide and Tommaso nod at me, while the others give me wary looks. Good, they should fear me.

I walk straight to the ring and climb inside. "After some sparring, Boss?" Davide asks, straightening.

I look at the smallest of the two men beside him and point. "You, get ready." Then I turn around and head to my corner, cracking my neck. We don't do mouth guards or gloves. I want them to feel the pain I'll give, and the pain I'll take with each punch.

When I turn, he's the only man in the ring. Davide and the other man are hanging on the ropes on the edge. I motioned for the man to come forward, and I see him gulp as he does. I nearly sneer and tell him to leave, because I don't want a fucking pussy-assed fight, but perhaps a lesson is needed.

I don't go easy on him, pounding into him, making him groan and curl in on himself as I beat him down. But I have to give him some props that he doesn't tap out. He takes it, until I land a punch to his temple, sending him to the floor, knocked out cold. I motion for Davide to drag him out, and he quickly does so. The other man climbs in, clearly understanding I'm not done.

I repeat the sparring session with him, and one other man who is either brave or stupid enough to volunteer. I pour every ounce of frustration into the fight, feeling the rush of adrenaline as I land hit after hit. I love a good fight. I was born for it. I've trained ever since I could walk, and I've never let myself slack. But it's also had the effect of me chasing that high every time I fight. That desire to know I've won, and feel the blood dripping from my hands.

By the time he falls to the ground, out cold, nose broken, and eye already swelling shut, I manage to step back enough to know I'm done. Any more, and my hands won't be much use for a while. "Have the doc see to him," I order Davide, who nods and drags the unconscious man out, while I climb out of the ring. My muscles are tired, and my mind is finally, blessedly clear.

"You want the doc to see to your hands, Boss?" Davide asks with a jerk of his chin toward my swelling and blood covered hands.

“No,” I say dismissively as I head out of the gym. I don’t bother with the secret hallway considering my men are now milling around the halls. Though I’m not surprised when Dante falls into step with me as I head toward my wing, neither of us speaking.

When we reach my bedroom, Dante follows me in when I unlock the door, making me give him a scowl. “Shouldn’t you be in bed with my insolent housekeeper?”

He gives me a smirk and replies, “I will be as soon as I see to your hands. Don’t need you bleeding on the sheets and then hearing about it tomorrow.”

“Why the hell are you sleeping with her?” I demand, heading for the bathroom. “If you’re that desperate to get your dick wet, I’m sure we can find you someone who isn’t liable to bite it off if you piss her off.”

“I have my own ways of dealing with her if I piss her off,” he replies, and I don’t miss the glint in his eyes when I glance back at him.

“Don’t come crying to me if she tries to kill you. And if she succeeds, just know I’m going to give her a raise because then I won’t have to deal with your annoying ass.”

“You make me feel so warm and fuzzy with your words, Boss,” he drawls silkily.

“Fuck off,” I huff as I grab the First Aid Kit from under the sink.

“I think that’s my line to you,” Dante replies easily, grabbing the kit and opening it. “And before you go and see our guest, you might want to hide these or you’ll scare her.”

“That’s the point,” I remind him sternly. “She’s not a guest, she’s a prisoner. And seeing how dangerous I am will keep her in line.” He gives me a pitying look but doesn’t say anything. Instead, he quickly and efficiently sees to my hands, wrapping them, then sets the key to her room on the counter, and leaves without a word.

I grit my teeth as I head for the bathtub. As soon as I sink into the warm water, I immediately grab my phone and pull up the screen to watch her. My eyes never leaving it until my body registers that the water has gone ice cold. As I climb out and dry off, I realize my plan to keep from watching her is long fucked.

My obsession with this woman isn’t going away. I just sat and watched her scouring through books for over an hour. All because I can’t seem to get her face out of my mind. So I do the one thing that I told myself I wouldn’t do.

I dress, grab the key from the bathroom, and head for my closet. It's time for me to pay my little mouse a visit, and time for me to see if I can get some answers. I want her name. Unfortunately for her, it doesn't matter what my plans are, because she will never be free of me.

CHAPTER 8

Gia



MY EYES ARE bleary as I tell myself I need to stop. I have looked through almost three quarters of the books in this space, and nothing tells me of a possible way to get out of here. It's a fool's dream, I know, but at this point, it's clear they're not going to let me leave of my own free will. Not that I really expected anything else. After all, when I tried earlier, the giant man just picked me up and set me back in, slamming the door in my face, and locking it from the outside.

Neither he nor the woman who came in with the food said a word to me. Well, not that I gave them the chance. I long ago learned how to sneak around unseen, and even though I hoped to get past them, I wasn't quick enough. My damn ribs and stomach are to blame for that. I'm moving a little too stiffly to be agile on my feet. But the way he treated me also makes me think that he's not the man in charge. If he was, wouldn't he have spoken to me?

Still, there's something that's familiar about him that I can't place. Like I've seen him before. I'll have to think on it. It's not like I don't have the time after all.

When I get back downstairs, I look at the food on the tray that's long gone cold now. Still, even cold it looks delicious. There's a plate of spaghetti and meatballs, with a piece of garlic bread that looks homemade, and a glass of red wine. An interesting choice to give a captive. Still, should I eat it? They could be trying to knock me out again. Or poison me. But my stomach growls as it reminds me it's been a very long time since I've eaten anything.

I hesitate, wanting nothing more than to refuse the food, but my common

sense tells me I'll probably need the calories and the strength if I'm going to try and escape again. Maybe next time whoever they send won't be as big or strong as that guy. Hesitantly, I walk to the bed and climb up, carefully reaching out to grab the bread from the plate. I sniff it, but nothing smells off, so I put it to my mouth and take a small bite. I barely manage to bite back a moan at the taste of it on my tongue. Damn, whoever made this knows what the hell they're doing. I have never had anything as delicious as this, even ice cold.

I eat a few more bites before I chance trying the spaghetti. I'm not feeling dizzy or sick, so hopefully means that they're not trying to poison or kill me. Of course, the spaghetti is also just as delicious, and if it was still hot, I'd be stuffing it into my face a hell of a lot faster. Whoever the chef around here is, they can cook like no one's business. Even better than my father's chef, Gorgio, who was trained by some of the best back in Italy.

By the time I'm finished, I feel a bit sleepy, though that could be the wine. I don't normally drink wine, mostly because it goes to my head too fast, but I needed something after all that food. I climb off the bed, pick up the food tray, and set it on the nightstand, before heading into the bathroom to clean up. I manage to find a hair tie and pull my hair back into a thick braid before I head back out into the bedroom.

As soon as I walk out into the bedroom though, I freeze, because I instantly know I'm not alone. I carefully look around the room until I spot him, and a chill moves through me as I stare. He stands beside the bed, a dark and imposing figure from the low light of the room causing shadows to shield most of his face. He's wearing a long sleeved shirt, with a couple of the top buttons undone, showing off the silver chain around his neck and a glimpse of tattoos beneath. His pants are a pair of dark khakis, and his shoes are black, but are so shiny that in the low light, they're still reflective.

This man is pure danger, and I know immediately this is my captor.

I don't move, waiting and watching him. One of the things I learned with my family is to never move first. Never give myself away or to show any fear or weakness. I shouldn't be grateful for that knowledge, but at this moment, I am. Because this man is a predator far more scary than my father, brothers, uncle, or cousins. This man is a panther, one who is patient, and waiting to strike.

I'm not sure how long we stand there, staring at each other, until finally, he gives a soft chuckle. A sound that moves over me in a way that sends a

shiver down my spine. It's smooth, like a fine wine, but it makes my insides quiver. Who the hell is this man? I don't have long to wait because his voice, much the same as the chuckle, says, "Don't worry, Little Mouse, I'm not going to bite. I just want to talk."

I don't reply, staying rooted to the spot. I don't know why, but that voice strikes a cord in my memory. I know him from somewhere, but where? I never speak to anyone other than the older man that sometimes frequents the library, but his voice is soft and raspy, older.

When I don't move, I hear the man give a soft sigh of annoyance, and I subtly relax my entire body, ready to move at the slightest provocation. Finally, he turns and moves to the door, turning on the light. I blink at the sudden change, but it also lets me see exactly who I'm dealing with, and as soon as he turns back to me, I jolt in shock. Wait, I do know him.

It's the man I bumped into at the library, and then again outside of it. The man that I knew the moment he looked into my eyes was dangerous and I did not want him to notice me. It looks like he noticed me after all. I stare at him, taking him in.

He's extremely handsome now that I have a good view of him. His dark hair is mussed, and he has a couple of cuts on his jaw and cheek. Like he's been in a fight recently. His five o'clock shadow gives him a rough look, but also an air of sophistication, and also highlights the slight downturn of his mouth. He looks like the type of man that likes to brood. I move my eyes down to his hands, which are bandaged and swollen, not that he seems to care.

I've seen my father and my brothers with hands much the same after they spent time in the gym or in the back building on the property I never dared enter. Which means this man has just spent some time hurting someone else. The question is, is he planning on doing the same to me?

"I see you recognize me," the man remarks, stepping away from the door and moving to the sitting area, taking the lone chair and motioning for me to sit down. I don't move, just watch him. His eyes spark with irritation and he says tightly, "I'm not going to ask you again, Little Mouse. Have a seat or I'll put you there." I gauge him and his threat, but something tells me that this man isn't bluffing. He is used to being obeyed. The question is, how far will he go to make sure that I do? And how far do I want to push him? After a moment's thought, I move cautiously toward the sitting area, my eyes never leaving him, until I take a seat on the small loveseat the farthest away from

him, but conveniently closer to the door. If I need to run, I have a clear path. I keep myself on the edge of the seat, watching him.

“I suppose you’re wondering who I am. And why you’re here.” I don’t reply, just stare at him. “I can answer one of those questions for you,” he replies with a slow smile. One that sends a shiver of worry down my spine, but I keep my face blank. “You’re here because I want you here. So I took you,” he tells me bluntly.

I don’t react to his statement, but my mind is already working to try and figure out what he means. He took me because he wanted me. Why? You can’t just take a person. Is he looking to ransom me? Does he know who I am? All these questions and more are swirling in my mind but I doubt he’ll answer them even if I was inclined to ask.

As my mind is working through all these thoughts, he smirks and says, “It’s your own fault, you know. You bumped into me twice, that day at the library, looking so small and scared. But, you see, then I couldn’t figure out who you were. There is no record of you. Not at your apartment, no photos, nothing. It was weeks of research, of following you around, to see what could be dug up. Imagine my surprise when I found nothing. Nothing. You definitely had my attention. And here you are. But you see, while you were sleeping, I was able to do some digging.” I stiffen at that, but don’t reply. “Ah, you already know where I’m going with this then.” He pauses, and a slow, smug smile pulls across his lips, giving him a sinister look. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. De Luca.”

I don’t react to the use of my last name, but something sinks inside me and my blood turns to ice. My father was right. Someone leaked who I am, and my location, and now, this man, whoever the hell he is, has gotten all the confirmation he needs. I’m in a very dangerous position, and this man has me completely at his mercy. I don’t confirm that he has my last name correct. I just watch him.

The less I say, the better.

Of course, he’s not satisfied with my silence and says, “I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me your first name then?” Again, silence from me. After a moment he shrugs, but I can see the impatience in his eyes. “Fine, have it your way, but I’ll figure it out eventually. And until I decide what I’m going to do with you, you’ll remain here. Someone will bring you food a few times a day.” Then he stands, and I slowly stand as well, quickly stepping around the arm of the couch and back toward the wall, my eyes never leaving his.

His eyes roam over me again, before coming back up to mine. He takes a step forward, and I take one back repeating this action, until my back hits the wall and I realize I've gone too far. Shit. I brace, but he keeps enough distance to let me run if I need to. But I know it's a ruse. This man will catch me no matter where I run. Because this isn't some fat old man that's looking to get revenge on my father. No, this man is something far more dangerous. He's an unknown kind of predator, and one that I don't even know his name, or what he wants with me. Sure, he wants my name, but clearly he's already figuring out who I am, so there has to be something else.

Finally, after a few more tense moments of silence, he says, "As long as you behave yourself, no one will hurt you while you're here. But try my patience one too many times..." He lets that threat trail off and hang between us. If he expects me to be afraid he's about to learn differently. I have lived with men that would beat me for fun, so more violence won't surprise me. "But I suppose based on the state in how you came in, you're used to that," he continues, staring at me. He steps back and heads for the door, but stops when he reaches it. "Oh, and if you're going to try and escape again, we'll be having a totally different conversation." Again, there is the threat, but I don't rise to the bait. "We'll talk again soon, Ms. De Luca," he tells me, opening the door.

Despite knowing better, and despite every warning flashing bright red in my mind, I ask softly, "Who are you?" And as soon as the words leave my mouth I want to yank them back. I silently curse myself, but my curiosity gets the better of me. I want to know who this man is, and maybe it will give me a clue on a way out of here. Or at least who I'm up against.

He turns his head and his gaze holds mine for a moment. There are so many things going through his gaze right now, that I can't catch them all, but in them is a small bit of triumph that makes me want to scream at him. Angry that he's managed to get something out of me. Still, better to know your enemies than to let them surprise you later. Finally, after a moment he says, "You'll find that out when you tell me your name." Then he's gone, the door clicking shut behind him, and I hear the snick of the lock when he turns the key on the other side.

The room is deathly silent as I continue to stare at the door. Apparently this man isn't the only one keeping secrets, and it only makes me more determined to get out of here. While I was sleepy before, I'm wide awake now, and I need to get back to work. If I can't find a book to tell me how I

can find a way out of here, or at least give me an idea on a way, then maybe I can find something that will tell me who he is and where I am. Something that can give me some kind of leverage.

Because I'm not going to go down without a fight. He called me a little mouse, but he's wrong. I might be small and scared, but I'm not going to hide away. I'm going to get out of here, and then I'm going to figure out what to do next. The idea of going back to my family doesn't sit well, because nothing good awaits me there.

Still, trading one prison for another is not an option I want to choose. But I know one thing. If I get out of here, I'm not going back to my family ever again. And if I have to die to make sure that happens, then that's something I'll face when the time comes.

I head back up to the upper library, determination in every step. I need to get to work.

CHAPTER 9

Nico



“SHE WAS UP ALL FUCKING NIGHT,” I grumble as I stare at the camera on my phone. I forced myself to go back to my room and set my phone down, despite wanting to stay up and watch her for as long as I could stand before I passed out. Now though, it’s a new day, and this stubborn woman has been up all night, trying to find some book that will help her escape. I can see the exhaustion on her face, and the way her head droops forward as she tries to stay awake. I have half a mind to go put her in the bed, but I ignore it. After all, if she wants to sleep on the floor, then what do I care?

“Still no name for her, huh?” Dante asks me, pulling me out of my thoughts. I look over at him sitting at the smaller desk on the far side of the room. He rarely uses it, but today apparently he’s decided to spend the day irritating me with his constant presence.

“No,” I reply tightly. “But I’ll find out eventually.”

“And you didn’t give her your name, huh? Surprising. I figured you would want her to know who you are.” He gives me a questioning look, clearly hoping I’ll explain it to him.

I don’t bother answering. I have my own plans, and I don’t need his annoying ass opinions on it. Ms. De Luca might be scared, but she’s also determined. I figured she would have given up by now and gone back to trying to pick the lock, but apparently she’s planning on using her brain instead. Intriguing. My little mouse is a mystery. For now though, I need to put her out of my mind and focus on my work.

“Has there been any rumblings from the De Lucas?” I ask Dante.

Dante shakes his head. “I have a guy sitting on the apartment building and hasn’t seen anyone in or out. But then again, no one ever clocked any of them going in there, so they’re probably getting into the building another way.”

All possible. And smarter, if you ask me.

“I want to know immediately if anything changes,” I order Dante. “Now, where are we on Eion?”

“Still nothing new,” Dante replies. “But apparently Seamus is still on his rampage and is suspicious of everyone. Eion said that he hopes to have some more intel for us soon. But from what I can gather, Eion isn’t high on the suspect list.”

Then it seems our rat has made good on his word. “Make sure to remind him of what will happen if he double crosses us,” I say absently, turning back to my computer. “Oh, and, someone has been skimming.”

Dante scowls as he pulls out his phone. “Any idea who?”

“It’s either Alonso or Carlo. Both’s numbers are up despite product production being low.” I have a heavier suspicion on who it was, but I’ll see how things play out.

“Alonso is a slimy motherfucker,” Dante sneers. “Carlo has his moments, but if I was betting money it would be Alonso. When do you want to meet with them?”

“I want it to be a random stop. The last thing I need is for them to get wise to it and hide whatever they’re trying to do.”

Dante nods, putting his phone away. “Fine, we’ll leave whenever you’re ready to go.”

We lapse into silence as I get to work, though my mind and eyes keep straying to the separate monitor that I have to keep an eye on Ms. De Luca. And as the hours pass, my frustration grows. She’s half asleep now, but she still manages to keep on going. Any other time I might find her stubbornness amusing, but right now, it’s hindering me from focusing. She doesn’t even move when Sofia and Dante bring her food. No attempt to escape, she’s completely focused on whatever she’s doing. But the final straw is when she decides to climb up on one of the ladders and nearly topples off because she’s so tired she’s unsteady on her feet.

I’m moving before I can tell myself it’s stupid. Dante doesn’t even move when I snatch the key from his hand and storm past him. He knows better than to follow me. Even Sofia keeps her mouth shut as I stalk past her,

though she does arch a brow. By the time I reach the large double doors and shove the key in, I've worked myself up to pissed. I storm inside, slamming the door behind me, uncaring if that scares her. Because I want her to be scared.

I storm up the steps to the library area, and down to the middle of the hall where she's standing, frozen as she watches me stalk toward her. Her eyes widen, but before she can try to evade me, I reach out and grab her, hauling her by the arm toward the steps. For a moment, she doesn't resist, just following along, but all of a sudden, her instincts kick in and she digs in her heels. "Let go of me," she snarls, all traces of exhaustion gone from her voice.

I ignore her and drag her down the stairs. When we reach the bed, I wrench her around and fling her onto the bed. She lets out a small screech, but as soon as she lands on the bed, she tries to scramble away, fear clear on her face. I grab her by the ankle and yank her back, before I bark, "Enough!"

Maybe it's the force of my voice, but she stills, and the terror on her face is clear. I should probably feel bad for frightening her, but instead, all I do is yank her even closer to me, while also wrenching down the covers. "No," she whispers, her entire body trembling. "No, I won't let you do this."

"I think you're forgetting your position here, my little mouse," I tell her coldly. "You are completely at my mercy, and if I wanted to fuck you, you couldn't stop me. But lucky for you, I have no desire to deal with a scared little virgin today. I'm putting you to bed since you're too damn stubborn to do it yourself."

Her eyes widen at my words. "What?" she whispers.

I refuse to repeat myself. Instead, I let go of her ankle and force her into the bed, pulling the sheets over her. "Go to fucking sleep," I order. She doesn't move, just stares up at me. I give her a hard glare, before I step back. I barely make it three steps before I hear the sheets being flung back. "Get out of that bed and I will tie you to it," I warn her, turning back to see her pausing in the act of swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

There's a flash of something across her face before it smoothes away into the cool, flat expression that she gave me last night. Defiance? Probably, but unluckily for her, I'm far too annoyed to find it amusing. Instead, it pisses me off and makes me more determined to make her obey. We stare at each other for another moment, and then I let out a harsh sound when she decides to press her luck and gets to her feet. "Touch me, and I'll scream bloody murder

so loud that your neighbors will come running,” she warns me, quickly moving away from the bed.

I give her a cold smile. “Scream all you like, *topolina*. No one is coming to your rescue. You think you are the first to scream in these walls?” I follow her, stalking her, until she finally makes the mistake of backing herself into a corner. She realizes it as soon as her back hits the wall. She tries to wait until I get close and then foolishly lashes out, but I expertly avoid her attempt, grab her wrists, lift them over her head and pin them to the wall. She struggles, but stills when I lower my face so that it’s close to hers. I can feel the pulse pounding in her wrist, and can see it fluttering in her slim neck, and I feel a flash of power and desire rush through me at the sight. Having her at my mercy, is fucking perfect. “What are you going to do now, Ms. De Luca?” I purr softly.

She doesn’t say anything for a long moment, her chest heaving as her breathing picks up speed. I can feel the small tremors in her body, until she finally says, “Just let me go.”

“I’ll let you go as soon as you promise you’ll get in that bed and go to sleep,” I reply.

“No, I mean—”

“I know what you mean, *topolina*,” I interrupt, “but you see, that’s not going to happen. So I’m not going to waste any of my time arguing with you. So, it’s up to you what happens next. You can climb in that bed and sleep like a good little captive, or you can try my patience again. Maybe I’ll tie you to the bed and leave you there until I’m good and ready to release you. So what’s it going to be, little mouse? Because I know which one I want it to be.” I flex my hand on her wrist to make my point.

Her eyes are wide and dark as they stare into mine. It’s fascinating to watch as she tries to think of a way out of this. Her face gives nothing away, but if you pay close enough attention, her eyes tell you everything you need to know. Which is exactly how I know the moment she plans to try and fight her way out. I bite back a chuckle, and instead, I block the leg she lifts to try and knee me in the balls, wedging my knee between her thighs, making her gasp. “Just let me go,” she grits out. “I don’t know what you want, but I’m not going to give it to you.”

“Aren’t you?” I taunt, gripping her wrists tighter. “I imagine that if I really wanted to, I could have you telling me all kinds of things. And you’d do it with a smile on those pretty lips. Or, depending on my mood, you’d tell

me with tears falling down your cheeks. But lucky for you, I don't have the time for either of those options. So for now, I'm going to put you in that bed and you're going to get some sleep. Defy me, and I'll end up coming back down here and it won't be as nice as this time. Do you understand, *topolina*?"

There is apprehension in her gaze now, but not fear. Interesting. Perhaps she thinks I'm bluffing. An unfortunate thing, because I never bluff. She finally says, "Fine, I'll get some sleep. Will you let go of me now?"

I don't move, instead I watch her for another moment, trying to figure out if she's lying to me. Her eyes don't move from mine, and that's when I see that fire underneath. The kind that wants to curse me to hell, but she won't. Those words will never leave her pretty lips. Instead, her eyes return to being flat as she stares up at me. I smirk at her and say, "If I have to put you in that bed, it's not going to end well for you." I let the mild threat hang there for a few extra seconds, but she doesn't react. I release her and step back, watching her carefully.

She doesn't move for a moment, but then finally steps away from the wall and around me, but careful to never give me her back. A practiced move if I've ever seen one. I follow her, watching as she climbs into the bed, and lays stiffly close to the edge. She arches a brow at me, as if to ask if I'm happy now. How a woman can be so damn sassy without saying a word is a skill I'll never understand, but instead of saying anything, I head for the door, carefully listening for any sounds of movement. I'm almost hoping she will defy me, because tying her to the bed will give me some goddamn peace. Something I haven't had for weeks because of her.

When I reach the door, I glance back and see she hasn't moved, her eyes staring at the ceiling. Something tells me it won't be long before she's either out cold or she's up and defying me anyway, hoping I won't notice. I walk out, locking the door behind me, and move halfway down the hall before I pull out my phone and look at the cameras. Surprisingly, she hasn't moved, though that could be because she knows I'm waiting on the other side.

When she doesn't move after another few minutes, I head back down to my office and find Dante waiting for me. I'm far too restless to sit and work now, so I bark, "Let's get going." Dante doesn't question me, just calls for my car. I leave the office to head for the entrance to the underground garage, but stop when I see Sofia instructing one of the staff on something. The young woman's eyes widen when they see me, but I give her a cool look that has her scrambling to walk away. Sofia gives me a look of annoyance, which

I also ignore and I order, “No one is to enter the east wing. Understood?”

She gives me a curt nod. “Fine.”

I narrow my eyes at her in warning. “I’m losing my patience with your sass, woman. Perhaps it’s time for me to remind everyone around here, including you, just who is in charge.” Her expression doesn’t change, and she just stares at me. I let out a low snarl before turning and stalking away. I’ll deal with her later. Right now, I have more important things to focus on.

When we are in the car and speeding out toward our destination, I pull up the camera feed. Anger burns in my gut when I see the bed empty once again. Looks like my little mouse didn’t take my warning seriously. I’ll have to make sure she sees the error of her ways when I get back. I scroll through the different camera feeds until I finally land on her. I pause when I see where she is, a slight frown pulling at my lips.

I figured she would be back up in that damn library again, but this time I find her in the walk-in closet, a blanket wrapped around her small frame, and curled into the very back of the closet. If I wasn’t looking for her, I’d probably have missed her. Her eyes are closed, and she looks like she’s not that comfortable.

I suppose she’s sleeping, but what I want to know is why is she sleeping in a damn closet instead of a large, comfy bed? But that’s a problem for later, because right now, I need to put her out of my mind and focus on the task at hand. I put my phone down and see that we’re approaching one of our stash-houses. A cold determination settles over me as we pull into one of the dark alleys. I exit the car quickly, before Dante or Davide can even get to my door. I’m impatient to get inside.

No one steals from me, and before I’m done today, I’ll know if one or both of the men are guilty of it. And if they are, one or both of them will be dead before the day is out.

I quietly open the door and walk inside the stash-house. I hold back my snarl of displeasure when I see that there is no guard at the door. Anyone could just walk inside. Not to mention the fact that the majority of people in the room aren’t even aware of my presence the moment I step in. They’re all laughing and joking, and if I’m not mistaken, there is two of them snorting some of my drugs, and two women in the back grinding against each other, clearly high. I look around for Carlo, but don’t see him, which infuriates me even more.

I don’t even look at Dante as I move further into the room. That’s when

people start to notice my presence. People scramble back, trying to blurt out anything to get me to focus my attention elsewhere. Blaming any and every one for their fuck ups. “Silence!” I roar, the room falling silent. I look coldly at the women near the back of the room, who I see are completely naked. I turn my attention back to the rest of them, and demand, “Where is Carlo?”

“He left, told us to have fun,” one of the men squeaks, as he swipes at his nose to erase the evidence of the product he’s just stolen.

“And where did he say he was going?” I demand impatiently.

“He didn’t say,” another man said cautiously. “But he stormed out of here pretty pissed off.”

“And you decided to just help yourselves.”

No one replies. Until finally one of the women whimpers, “We were just having some fun, Nico. We’ve been working so hard.”

I pin her with a stare that has her physically shrinking back. “Fun?” I repeat. “Fun by stealing product from me? Davide, make sure they and everyone else in here gets back to work. And if one of them even tries to get a whiff of it, kill them.” Davide nods, but before anyone can move, I pull my gun from my back, lift and aim, killing both men that I saw snorting the product. They fall to the floor and I turn and aim the gun at the two women. They scream and cry, begging for mercy, but I show none as I pull the trigger twice, killing them both. I look at Davide who looks at me expectantly. “Get this cleaned up, and make sure they get back to work. I want a call the minute Carlo walks through the door.”

“Yes, sir,” he replies, turning to give a cold eye to those still standing there.

I turn away and head for the door, where Dante holds it open for me. I climb into the car, while Dante climbs into the driver’s seat and we head out of the alley. We’re quiet for a few moments, and I’m still seething those bastards dared to steal from me. And as much as I wish I would have kept them alive to torture them over it, I don’t have the time to waste on people that don’t matter. I’ll be getting that money back out of Carlo and the rest of them. With interest. And if they know what’s good for them, they won’t dare to try that again.

“You think Carlo ran?” Dante finally asks me.

“If he did, he knows I’ll hunt him down like a dog. But something tells me there is something else going on here. And I plan to find out what it is.”

“I already have the men looking for him. He won’t be getting far.”

Dante's face is set in a grim look.

We say nothing else as we drive to the second stash-house. I pull out my gun and reload it, making Dante smirk. This stash-house is in the middle of the downtown core, and from the outside looks like a simple pub, but I made a deal with the owner a long time ago to use his basement as an area for our operation. The bartender, a pretty, young blonde, gives me a flirtatious smile as she leads us to the back. I'm not sure if she's brave or stupid considering the don't fuck with me vibe radiating off me, but at least she has some smarts not to say anything to me.

I wait impatiently as Dante shoves the large bookshelf out of the way to reveal the sealed door we installed. Don't need any nosy busybodies working here to get any stupid ideas. And our workers use another main door, and most of them don't know this one exists. Thankfully, it opens up into a large closet area, so it's not easily seen. Dante swiftly inputs our passcode into the secure lock and then opens it, stepping back to allow me through, and moving the bookshelf back in front of the door to keep anyone out before he shuts the door behind me and we walk out into the main room. I narrow my eyes at everyone, but none of them stop working, though I notice the nerves that cover their faces once they realize I'm standing there.

I head toward the back of the room, hearing Alonso's voice through the quiet. I stop just outside the door, careful to not alert him to my presence, letting him finish whatever conversation he's having. But when I hear Carlo's voice, my blood burns hot and I have to force myself to remain still. If these bastards are cooking up some kind of scheme, they'll be dead before long.

"I will not take the fall for you, fucker," Carlo snarls. "You stole my product, you fucked with my operation, and now you've tried to sabotage me by having your damn people sneak in and use the product. You really think that when Nico finds this out he's going to let it go? You'll be fucking dead."

"The only one who will be dead is you, *cazzone*," Alonso sneers. "You can't prove I did any of that, and who do you think Nico is going to believe? A long time employee that has served both him and his father? While raising profits, I'll add. Or some no good chump that came from the streets? You are barely Italian. No honor, and no loyalty."

Carlo doesn't rise to the bait of calling out his parentage. Instead he snaps, "You only got more profits by stealing it out from under the other guys noses. Stealing their product and having Nico or Dante kill them. Giving you a bigger piece of the pie. You think I'm an idiot, but I figured out what you

were about the moment the product went missing. You really think that Nico won't eventually figure it out? Or Dante? They're fucking smarter than that old fucker that used to run this show."

Alonso, obviously feeling cocky, scoffs and says, "So what? You really think he's going to believe you? I've proven my loyalty five times over. So what if I skimmed for a while, or made sure to make up any losses by taking it from people too stupid to be careful? That's how you get ahead in this world. We're fucking criminals, Carlo, not damn businessmen."

I don't give Carlo a chance to respond, my anger burning hotter than before. This fuckwad thinks he can steal from me? He's about to learn a deadly lesson. I nod at Dante and then stalk inside, slamming the door open. Both men jolt, turning, and reaching for their guns. Smartly, they don't pull them, but I can see the panic on Alonso's face, and the resignation on Carlo's. I focus my attention on Alonso. His face is ashen. They dart desperately around, trying to figure out how to escape, but I just turn to Dante and order, "Take him."

"No!" Alonso screams, but Dante moves swiftly and hits him in the head with the butt of his gun. Alonso is out instantly, and slumps down in his chair. Dante pulls out his phone to call in some back-up while I turn to Carlo, who watches me warily.

I raise my gun and point it at his head. "Your absence today cost me product," I tell him coldly.

He stiffens. "I'll work it off and double production," he promises me tightly. "I left Gio in charge, but I guess he did shit all."

"Well now he's dead, so what do you think?" Dante replies coldly. Which tells me that one of the men I killed was Carlo's right hand man.

Carlos sighs softly but nods. I eye him for a moment. "Why did you go to Alonso and not to Dante with the information about him stealing product?" I demand.

Carlo has the decency to look sheepish. "I got a little hot-headed," he answers. "Was so pissed that I figured I would confront him and see if it was true. But I did plan on letting Dante know. I knew my numbers were down, but we've been working double the hours so we shouldn't have been. I checked my people and nothing seemed wrong, until I figured out that some of them were Alonso's plants, to make sure that he got some of the product to sell for himself."

I watch him, assessing. Finally, I lower my gun and give him a cold, hard

stare. “I want triple the production by the end of week,” I inform him. “And that means triple from both operations, because now you’re going to be running both. Consider it your way of paying off your debts. I’ll have a man watching both operations, and if you are off by even one small ounce, I’ll come back and kill you myself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Carlo replies solemnly, “I understand.”

I turn and stalk out, taking the car and leave Dante to deal with Alonso. I’ll handle him later. Right now, I need to get back and figure out why the hell my little mouse is curled up in a closet when I specifically told her to sleep in the bed.

And in the mood I’m in, I won’t be leaving until I get all my questions answered.

CHAPTER 10

Gia



I CAREFULLY OPEN MY EYES, looking around the closet as I try to clear the sleep from my mind. I have a crick in my neck, but I don't dare move until I know that no one is watching me. This is definitely not the most comfortable place, but it's better than being out in the main room. I was a little slow on the draw—which I blame on being so exhausted—when my captor came in and told me to go to bed, somehow knowing I wasn't sleeping. While I was laying in the bed, waiting for him to leave, it hit me that he has cameras in here, which means he can see my every move. A disturbing thought, but not an unexpected one.

I always thought my father and/or brothers were doing the same at my apartment, which was why I was so careful to never do anything out of turn. Nothing to upset them. This time, I'm sure, and I wasn't about to lay in that bed, vulnerable. No way. But now, laying here stiff and sore, I have to wonder if I could have found a better option. And I'm probably fooling myself into thinking he doesn't have a camera in here somewhere too.

I sit up carefully, slowly, turning my neck each way to loosen it up a bit, before I close my eyes again and allow myself a moment for a pity party. I'm still exhausted, and I'll blame it on that when I think about it later, but all I want to do is scream and cry at the unfairness of it all.

Why me? Why did I have to be the one to catch his attention? Why couldn't I have watched where I was going that day, not running into him? I mean, I did it twice, which is worse. I'm just lucky that whichever man of my father's who watched me that day didn't report it. Or worse, my brother, who would have taken that as an opportunity to remind me what a whore I am.

Despite the fact that I never spent any time with a man alone. Now, look where I am. Being held by a man whose name I don't know, and sleeping in a damn closet.

I wish I was more like the women in the books I like to read. Strong. Fearless. Smart. If this was a fictional world, I'd have already found a way out of here, or at least tricked my captor into letting me have some freedom so that I could find a way to escape. But this isn't a fantasy world. This is real life, and I have a terrible sinking feeling I'm not going home anytime soon.

Well, no, it's not really a sinking feeling, it's a fact according to the man who's holding me here. I really need to think of a name for him in the meantime, because thinking of him as my captor isn't going to do anything but depress me.

I picture him in my mind, and my first thought is how sad it is that a man so handsome can be so evil. Then again, I know my brothers and father are considered good looking, so I guess I can't be surprised. I picture his dark hair and eyes, staring down at me when he had me trapped against the wall earlier. If I hadn't seen the darkness in them, I'd have probably been captivated. I've never seen eyes that have flecks of gold in them before. I thought that was only in books. I didn't notice them when he was here last night to talk to me, but up close and personal, they were hard to miss. They seemed to be more pronounced as he got impatient.

I give myself a mental shake. Why the hell does any of that matter? Who cares about his eyes? None of that matters when the man is holding me hostage. Not to mention, he told me he wouldn't hurt me as long as I cooperated and he's already broken that promise by backing me up against the wall and grabbing me.

He was doing that to intimidate you, not scare you, my traitorous mind scolds me. Which is bullshit if you ask me. He still grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head to the wall. And while he didn't leave bruises, his grip was tight. And I probably should be happy that he didn't beat me when I tried to knee him in the balls. I blame it on the lack of sleep and how pissed I was that he bested me. But I won't be making that mistake again. No more emotional displays for me. Because that is not going to help me get out of here.

No, I need to figure out who he is, and *then* figure out how to get out of here. And I'm not going to do that by just sitting here, so I need to get back to work. I bite back a groan as I slowly get to my feet. My ribs and stomach are

aching, but I ignore the pain.

I walk back out into the main room, but stop when I hit the doorway, because the bedroom door opens at that exact moment, and *he* walks back in, slamming the door shut behind him. I consider slinking back into the closet, but his gaze goes to me immediately and from the angry look on his face, there is no getting away from him

“I thought I told you to sleep,” he says in a low voice, but there’s no missing the anger under the surface. I stare at him, saying nothing. His eyes flash as he stalks towards me. I don’t back away this time, though I’m trembling on the inside. This man is far more intimidating to me than any other I’ve met. He stops when he’s only a few short feet away, but I can still feel the heat radiating off of him. And I don’t know what kind of cologne or aftershave he’s wearing, but it’s filling all my senses, and distracting me. I almost want to tell him to back up. “But here you are,” he continues. “Coming out of a closet, where you’ve been sleeping for the last few hours. Care to explain to me why?”

I hold his stare and keep my silence. Something he clearly doesn’t appreciate, because he lets out a low sound in his throat that has shivers going up and down my spine. He grabs me by the upper arms, hauling me into the air and carrying me out of the doorway and toward the bed.

I’m too stunned to react. Seriously, this man is strong if he can do this without even seeming to exert himself. I know I’m on the smaller side, but I’m still well over a hundred pounds of dead weight. Thankfully, though, my shock quickly goes away and I scowl at him, struggling against his hold. “Quit it,” he growls at me harshly, but I ignore him. Maybe if I can get him to drop me, or at least topple him off balance, I can race for the door and get out of here before he can catch me.

Sadly, that doesn’t work as easily as I was hoping. It only makes him tighten his grip on me until we reach the end of the bed, and then he suddenly sends me flying. I let out a gasp of surprise, then a groan of pain when I land on my side, jolting my ribs. “Fuck,” I hiss before I can hold it back. I turn my head to glare at him, but he’s already moving to the edge of the bed beside me and glaring down at me.

Neither of us say anything as we glare at each other. So much for acting cool and collected. Finally he demands, “Care to tell me why you were in the closet?” When I don’t answer, his eyes narrow at me. “Do not make me ask you again, *topolina*, or you really will not like my response.”

I know he's not bluffing, but still, I don't answer. I almost want to see what he's going to do. Knowing your enemy's responses is the way to figure out how to avoid them in future, or in my case, give me an advantage to escape.

When I stay silent, his jaw clenches, and he leans down, bracing his clenched fists on the bed so that our faces are only a few inches apart. I feel caged in, and my heart pounds at how close he is to me. And my senses are on overdrive from the dark and smoky aftershave or cologne. I had no idea that smells from someone could make you lose yourself, but with this man, I guess that's the case.

I'm jolted back to reality when he growls, "Last chance."

I blame the fact that he's completely overwhelmed my senses as I blurt out, "Are you always this obsessed with your prisoners and their sleeping habits? Or is it just me? And I think it's really creepy that you have cameras watching me all the time. Ever heard of privacy?" I immediately want to yank back my words and internally curse myself for saying anything at all.

He blinks once, then twice, before he grits out, "Like you said, you're my captive, which means you get nothing, not even privacy, unless I allow it. Maybe now you'll know not to disobey me when you know I'm watching you. As for your sleeping habits, well, everything about you is my prerogative, isn't it, Ms. De Luca? Perhaps I have plans for you that don't involve you being so exhausted that you fall asleep at the worst time." His lips pull up into a cold, callus smile. "Worried I'll catch you doing something you shouldn't be, *topolina*?"

"Stop calling me that," I bite out, "I'm not your little anything."

"Again, you forget that you are not in charge here, Ms. De Luca," he replies, uncaring. "And if you don't want me to call you that, then perhaps you should start by telling me your name."

I glare at him stubbornly, clearly any idea of being cool and collected flying out the window. My name is my current ace in the hole and I don't plan on letting him know what it is without a fight. "You haven't told me yours either." *That's it, Gia, just keep on pushing him. That's a great way to get out of here.*

Surprisingly, he doesn't get any angrier. Instead, his eyes flash with amusement, and he eases back ever so slightly. Not enough for me to squeeze by or get away, but enough that I have a little more breathing room. "Then I guess we're at a stand still, *topolina*. Because until you tell me your name a

I'll get to call you whatever I wish."

I stare at him.

"Unless your parents named you something hideous, then I won't be using it anyways," he says casually, easing back just a little further. If I can get him to move back just a bit more, maybe I can kick him or something and get to the door. "So how about you tell me and I'll leave you to get some sleep?" He sounds perfectly reasonable, like he's just any other man and not someone holding me here against my will.

I'll give him that if this was any other situation I might consider it, but I'm not so far gone that I can't see what he's trying to do. "Not until I get your name first," I tell him evenly. I carefully shift, easing back and away from him, hopeful he doesn't notice.

"I think you're forgetting you're not in the position to bargain, *topolina*," he reminds me drily. "Though I admire your—"

I burst into action, catching him off guard. I bring up my leg quickly, catching him in the side of the head, making him grunt and stagger slightly. I scramble back and jump over the footboard running for the door as fast as my legs can carry me. I reach it, twisting the knob and throwing it open. I hear him curse and run after me, his feet pounding on the floor, even as I race from the room and down the darkened hallway. Even in the bright light of day this place casts shadows.

I run as fast as my legs can carry me. Fear and determination war as I rush down the hall to the top of the steps. I don't even slow down as I rush down the few steps that lead to the wing, and then grip the railing of the main set heading to the main floor, throwing myself over it and using the momentum to slide down the old, wide wooden banister. I glance up as I hit the bottom to see him rushing down the steps after me, his face a thundercloud.

I turn and run down the long corridor, covered in pictures and paintings on both sides. The carpets are old and dark red with gold throughout, but the only thing I care about is that it softens the sound of my running. A part of me is a bit surprised that my captor hasn't called in his guards, but maybe he doesn't like the blow to his ego letting it be known that I made my escape.

When I reach the end of the corridor, I find a hallway that extends in both directions. I make a left, though I nearly run into a shocked cleaning woman, who jumps back and out of my way as I race away.

No one stops me, they only stare as I pass by. I don't bother stopping to

ask for help. They're all loyal to him, and it will only give them a chance to stop me. It's only when I hit the end of this long hallway that I realize the goddamn house is a maze. I try to orient myself from the light through the windows, but with everything so damn dark and the shadows everywhere, it's not that simple.

I look down both halls quickly, and finally decide to try the right this time, but skid to a stop when my captor suddenly steps out from one of the rooms, right in front of me. I whirl to go back the other way, but he grabs me by my braid and yanks me back against him, making me yelp in pain. Still I struggle, but he pulls my head back further and wraps an arm around my waist, holding me tight to his body. "Enough," he growls in my ear, using my braid to turn my head toward him so I can stare into his eyes. I see some anger, but also something else that I can't quite figure out.

Something that makes my heart pound even harder and my body quiver in his grip. I struggle again, but still when he tightens and moves his arms up around my ribs, making me whimper in pain. "Now," he says silkily in my ear, "as fun as this little game of cat and mouse has been, I'm done playing and have no more time or patience for it. Consider yourself lucky I'm lenient where you are concerned, Ms. De Luca. But try it again, and you will not like the consequences. So are you going to walk calmly and quietly back to your room, or do I have to drag you there?" I say nothing, staring at him defiantly. "My choice then."

He quickly loosens the hold on my ribs, spins me around, making me hiss at the pulling on my hair, and then drops his hand from it, before he leans down and throws me over his shoulder. This position is killing my ribs and stomach, but I force myself to stay as still as possible. "Damn it, Giulia, should have hit him harder," I mutter quietly under my breath.

I study my surroundings, looking for any details that I need to remember for the next time I try to escape. Because this is not a one and done deal. He caught me this time, but next time, I'll be much more careful.

I try to look down the other hallways as we pass by them, but again, I see nothing but walls of doors, paintings, and windows. All casting dark shadows and obscuring the view of what lies beyond. It's beyond frustrating to know that no matter where you go, you're going to get lost, and apparently, the man carrying me has some tricks up his sleeves because how the hell did he get to that hallway before me?

Suddenly, it hits me like a ton of bricks. There really are secret

passageways in this place just like my father's home. That's the only explanation. Which means that there might be another way out of here for me if I can find one of those passageways.

My determination builds and I carefully look at everything as we go by. Father had the passageways built so that you couldn't see them as you walked by, or behind something that wouldn't seem obvious. Nothing stands out to me as we pass, but now that I'm on the lookout, I'll be checking my room more thoroughly.

But how am I going to do that without my captor finding out what I'm doing? Especially if he's watching me? That's something to figure out later I guess. For now, I need to focus on the fact that we're almost back to my room, and I have no idea what he's going to do once we get there. A small ball of dread settles in my stomach, but at the same time, my mind reminds me that if he decides to beat me, it can't be any worse than what my own family has done.

When we reach my prison, he kicks open the door, walks inside, and boots it shut with his foot, though he doesn't stop walking until he's at the bed, and then flings me off his shoulder and onto it. I bounce a couple of times, making me groan at the pain that shoots through me, but it's short lived before he grabs me by the shoulders, hauling me further up the bed, so that my head suddenly finds itself resting on the pillow. I barely have time to register that though, before he clamps a hand on my left wrist and uses his free hand to pull the tie from around his neck.

I have never seen a man able to do that one-handed before, and for some reason, it captivates me. Which is why I don't struggle when I should. Once he pulls it from around his neck, he wraps it securely around my wrist, the soft silk of the tie keeping it from chaffing, and then he secures it tightly to the bed frame. I narrow my eyes at it, flexing my wrist to test it, but it doesn't budge. I lift my gaze to him, where he now stands tall, smirking down at me. "Perhaps now you'll stay put," he says silkily.

I don't bother struggling anymore. Instead I just stare at him calmly.

He gives a soft chuckle, and leans forward again to cup my chin in his hand, leaning down so his face is only a few inches from mine again. What is it with this man and always being so damn close to me? "You know, if anyone else kicked me in the head like that and fled, I'd have hunted them down and beat their ass," he tells me casually. "But you, my little mouse, have done the exact thing I thought you would, and you've shown me that

you're not so timid and quiet like everyone would believe. Good thing for you, I'm in a forgiving mood where you're concerned at the moment, but try it again, and my goodwill will be a thing of the past. Understood?" I stare at him, saying nothing. His lips tilt up as he murmurs, "Now go to sleep so I can get some work done, *Giulia*."

I go completely still. And I know it's my own damn fault for saying it out loud over his shoulder. I silently curse myself, but force myself to reply, "Since you know my name, then I think it's only fair that I know yours."

He doesn't respond right away, just watches me. Until finally, he replies with a hint of amusement, "Nico Armani."

I manage to not react, barely. I know exactly who this man is, and how dangerous he can be. I've overheard my father and brothers talking about him many times. My family is second behind the Armani empire and it's rumored that he murdered his parents in a fit of rage one night.

If I didn't know I needed to get out of here before, I definitely do now. Nico Armani may be good looking, but he's the devil himself, and nothing good will come from me staying here.

He thankfully lets go of my chin, straightens, and backs away. Then he says, "Get some sleep, *topolina*. And if you behave, I'll come back and release you." Then he turns and walks away. I hear the door shut, the key in the lock, and then the click of it echoing through the room.

I immediately get to work on trying to get free of the tie. Unknown to my captor, this isn't the first time I've been tied down, and I'm very adept at getting loose. I just have to pray he doesn't realize it and come back.

I have some secret passageways to find, because I'm getting out of here as soon as I can.

CHAPTER 11

Nico



MY FIST SMASHES into Alonso's face again, though he barely makes a sound. No, the motherfucker is pretty much done. His face looks like ground meat at this point, and his body drips with blood, saliva, and other bodily fluids that I don't care to think about. He knows he's as good as dead, and he gave up those who helped him almost as soon as we got started. The fucking pussy couldn't even hold out for longer than a few punches.

I step back and away from him, barely having broken a sweat, and order Dante, "Finish him." While I would normally be the one to deal the kill shot into his pathetic skull, I won't waste one of my bullets on this pathetic piece of shit. Dante doesn't hesitate as he lifts his gun and fires right between Alonso's eyes. His body swings from the chains holding him up, and I gesture at Tomasso to get this place cleaned up. He moves forward without a word.

I go up the old stone steps that lead to the basement, coming out into an open room we use for storage. My father tended toward the dramatic, wanting to hide even the torture room. Or the dungeon as he used to call it, the crazy bastard. Still, he hid it away behind a false wall so one of the staff wouldn't accidentally stumble onto it.

As far as I'm concerned, if any of my staff are stupid enough to come down here when myself or my men head down, then they deserve to witness everything, and then they can join whatever bastard is down there. A clear message to anyone else that wants to stick their noses where they shouldn't be.

Dante comes out behind me moments later and says, "Eion contacted me

while we were dealing with the fuckwad in there. Says he has some more information for us and is wondering if we can meet in an hour. He has a contact that will get him into the library again.”

“Fine. I’ll get changed and we’ll head over there in half an hour.” Dante nods and we walk out in silence.

Though before long, Dante casts a sideways glance at me and asks, “So how’s your little prisoner doing? Heard she tried to make a grand escape today.” There’s a thread of amusement in his voice that I ignore.

“She did, but she didn’t get farther than my office. She’s currently tied to the bed.”

He snorts. “Bet she’s loving that.”

I shrug, uncaring. “I also have her name,” I add, making him turn his head to look at me sharply.

“You do? How did you manage that?” he demands.

I let a small smirk pull at my lips. “She was quite annoyed at herself for getting caught, and muttered it under her breath. Her name is Giulia De Luca. So now your job is to find out everything else you can about her now that we have a name.”

He pulls out his phone. “And does she know who you are?”

“She does. Though I’m not sure that she knows who I am, considering her blank stare when I said it. Though, I suppose it doesn’t matter. She’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Something tells me that if she’s a De Luca, she knows exactly who you are and she’s trying to play it cool. I doubt those fuckers are quiet when they curse your name.”

On that we can agree. And it seems my little mouse is very adept at hiding her thoughts and feelings. Eventually, I probably could persuade her to tell me all about her family’s secrets, but I doubt she’d know much. Those men and their views on women are well known, so they would make sure she doesn’t know anything they don’t want her to. Especially their business deals and my association with them.

“I’ll call you when I’m ready to leave,” I tell Dante absently as I head for my wing of the house. I pull out my phone to look in on my little mouse. Or, rather, Giulia. Though I doubt I’ll be calling her that much.

I narrow my eyes when the camera comes on screen and I see an empty bed. Anger burns in my gut as I start flipping through the screens trying to figure out where she’s gone. When I don’t see her, I shove my phone in my

pocket and head up the steps to her room. If someone let her go, more people are going to die today. I angrily unlock the door and shove it open, but shut and lock it quietly behind me. If she is still in here, no point in announcing my presence, or letting her think she can try to escape again.

I immediately head for the closet, but unsurprisingly don't find her there. I head to the stairs for the library. When I get to the top of the steps, I check around the sitting area before heading down the hallway to the final room. And that's where I find her. She's curled up against one of the shelves, fast asleep, and her arms wrapped around herself protectively.

I frown as I stare at her. Especially when I see the red mark on her wrist from where she must have worked to get out of the tie. Damn foolish woman. Why the hell does she want to sleep with a bunch of books instead of a comfy bed? I have half a mind to put her back there, but instead, I grab one of the reading blankets off the arm of the couch, and gently put it over her. I barely resist the urge to run my hands over her hair, but somehow manage to tamp it down before heading back out of the room.

By the time I go to my room to change, wash off the blood that still stains my hands, and then head down to meet Dante in the car, I'm back to business.

We make it down to the library in record time, and Dante checks Eion over before nodding at me and standing in front of the locked door. We sit down as I stare at Eion, waiting for him to give me the information. He looks tired, worn down, but that fiery determination is still burning bright, so I have to figure he's not broken yet.

He leans forward and says, "Seamus figures that the Russians stole his guns and is planning to hit them back where it hurts by taking a large shipment they have coming in. In the meantime, he's pulling resources to make sure the attack is successful. Which means a couple of our warehouses will be on a skeleton crew."

"What's in the warehouse?" I need specifics before I tell him what I want him to do for me. After all, it doesn't pay to act irrationally in these situations.

"You have a choice. Two contain weapons and the other is the drug warehouse. Your choice of coke, meth, or heroin."

I look at Dante, who pulls out a pen and piece of paper from his suit coat pocket and moves to place it in front of Eion. "Write down the exact locations. Including the layouts and where the guards are posted."

Eion gets to work. I wait patiently, my mind already spinning on how to make this work to my advantage. Because if Seamus is attacking the Russians, then it stands to reason that he won't think it is the Russians after his things this time. It could lead them right to me, and I'm not ready for that. Especially since I have so many other plans to set in motion first.

When he finishes and slides the paper across the table to me, I take it, look at it quickly, and then hand it over to Dante. Surprisingly, he's given me far more information than I thought he would, but a man bent on revenge often takes things as far as he can before he's dead. Because I have no doubt that Eion's days are numbered. Either by Seamus or me.

I stand and nod at Eion before heading to the door. "Oh, and one more thing," Eion adds, making me stop to look over my shoulder at him. "There's rumors going around that the De Lucas are up to something. Seamus's kept mum about it, but I heard him talking to someone on the phone the other night. Something about a woman. I don't know any more than that, but if Seamus's got information, then it's probably something of importance."

I don't react to that, but I instantly know who they're talking about. Instead I turn away, heading for the door. Dante opens the door and walks out behind me. When we get into the car, I remark, "It seems the secret is out about our guest. Make sure you keep your ears to the ground and let me know if anyone suspects it is us who took her. Or if anyone on our side is blabbing something they shouldn't be."

Dante agrees. "We've only had her one day, I'm not surprised they haven't noticed her missing. As far as I can tell the family never sees her."

I shake my head. "She got those bruises recently, which means someone does, and no one would dare touch her that way unless it was her family. So they're getting in and out somewhere. Stands to reason someone went to check on her, or deliver something and saw she was gone."

"I'll have our men go back and watch all sides of the building this time."

"Make sure they aren't spotted. I don't need any more De Lucas in my home as it is."

"At least the one we have now is pretty enough," he remarks. "Not a hardship to have her around."

Jealousy burns in my gut and I clench my fists in my lap. What I really want to do is reach for my gun and shoot him for even thinking about her, but that would be irrational. Instead, I say tightly, "You have a woman of your own."

He snorts. “And she’s hot as fuck but I’m allowed to notice a woman is pretty. Hell, Sofia says all the time it’s too damn bad you’re such a bastard because you’re easy on the eyes. Not as easy as me, of course,” he says with a smirk.

I unclench my fists but give him a cool look. “Perhaps you’re not doing enough to keep your woman’s attention if she’s looking at another man. Even me. Losing your touch, huh?”

He doesn’t rise to the bait of my question. Instead he replies, “Unlike some people, I don’t care if she looks at another man, as long as she comes to me every night. Besides, Sofia knows the score, and she’s been in the life long enough to know that getting in my face about women or what I’m doing isn’t going to sit well. Instead, I fuck her into the mattress every night, and she’s fine.” He grins wickedly at that, making me roll my eyes. Something I rarely do, but since it’s just us at the moment, well, I’m allowed to let down my guard.

“And apparently against some walls too,” I add drolly.

He shrugs. “What can I say? We take the moments we have.” He gives me a sly look. “Or is that your way of saying you’re jealous because you can’t do the same with your prisoner? Though from what I’ve heard, you already had a bit of a run-in with her today.”

“How a woman can be so small but have that kind of strength is beyond me,” I remark, ignoring his questions. I don’t answer to him, and I’m not ready to share my thoughts on Giulia De Luca just yet. I’m still working through them myself.

“She’s probably been fighting her whole life,” Dante suggests. “Living with the De Luca boys couldn’t have been easy. From what I saw when I took her, she’s been abused by them for a long time.” He glances over at me and then continues, “If you’re trying to get her to cooperate, you are going to have to try a different approach. She’s not going to trust you. Especially now that she knows your name.”

I don’t reply to that, just continue to stare out the window, effectively ending the discussion. There are many things I still need to figure out where my captive is concerned.

When we reach the house, I order Dante to have my dinner along with hers sent up to her room in half an hour, and then I head to my bedroom to quickly change. And as I make my way down to her room, I feel a sense of anticipation starting to build.

Will she fight me again? Try to escape? Or will she sit and watch me like she did earlier, no expression on her face as she tries to figure out her next move? Who knew that a woman showing a little fire would be something I wouldn't immediately want to quell? Still, it never hurts to remind her of her place. Until I decide otherwise, she's my prisoner, and that means she needs to follow my rules. Otherwise, I'll make sure she does.

Though, she's apparently far more clever than I realized, considering she still got out of the knot on her wrist. And I tied that tight enough that it wouldn't have been easy for her to unravel. Next time, I'll have to be more thorough.

When I reach her door, I stop and pull out my phone to see where she is. No surprise, she's back to looking at the books in the library, but this time, she's started pulling them all out of the shelves and setting them in nice, neat stacks around the room. I narrow my eyes. What is she up to now?

I put my phone away, unlock the door, and step inside, locking it behind me, and walking toward the stairs. When I reach the library section, I stand in the entrance of the room and just watch her. Completely unaware of my presence, she pulls out another book on the shelf, flipping the pages quickly, before setting it aside in the new pile she's starting to build.

She's mumbling to herself, but not loud or clear enough that I can make out the words. Since she's woken from her nap, she's clearly showered and changed again, if her damp hair and new clothes are anything to go by. This time, she's chosen a pair of black gym shorts that hug her ass, thighs, and hips, in all the right places, showing off the slim curves and muscles. On her feet are running shoes, and a hint of amusement runs through me. If she's thinking of running again, then she's going to be disappointed.

I move my gaze back up to the top she's chosen, taking in the bright pink t-shirt. It's loose and flows over her upper half, but stops just short of her waistband giving a hint of her stomach and ribs when she shifts. I want to walk over to her, move the top out of the way, and move my hands all over her soft, warm skin. Instead, I just stand there and watch her.

It's fascinating how much people give away when they think no one is watching. Like how she worries her lip or how she mutters and scowls when she gets impatient. Or how she shifts every so often, wincing from what I can only assume is the pain in her stomach or ribs. Though I notice that no matter how frustrated she gets, she never once throws a book but sets it down carefully on the pile. And when she finishes, she moves on to the next one.

And never once does she look my way. Completely oblivious to anything but the task she's working on.

Finally, I'm tired of waiting and step into the room. "What are you doing?" I demand.

She jumps slightly but handles being startled remarkably well. She slowly turns her head and stares at me, eyes dark and emotionless when they connect with mine. "I'm looking for a book," she replies simply, then turns her gaze away and back to the shelf in front of her.

I walk toward her and stop a few short inches away. Close enough to crowd her and see the fluttering of her pulse in her neck, but still not touching her. "And you look for books by pulling them off the shelves and putting them in neat little piles?" I mock her softly. "Care to try again, *topolina*?"

She stiffens at the use of the pet name, but she doesn't turn back to me, just grabs another book and leafs through it quickly. "Maybe I'm doing it to annoy you," she says finally after another moment of silence. "Give you something to do with your time once I'm gone."

The thought of her leaving makes me incredibly angry, but I know she's trying to get a rise out of me. Perhaps, she still hasn't gotten the hint that she shouldn't bait the man who holds her life in his hands. Quickly, I reach out and wrap my hand around her braid once again, making her gasp as I pull on it sharply, yanking her head back so that she's staring into my face. I give her a slow smile as I lean down further and murmur, "That's the thing, Ms. De Luca. Your little attempt earlier has given you confidence you shouldn't have. Because you won't be leaving here unless I allow it. Or have you not heard about my reputation?" I loosen my grip on her hair just enough for me to move her head slightly so I can whisper in her ear, "And I don't plan on letting you go until I'm good and ready, Ms. De Luca."

I feel the slight tremor that works through her, but her voice is strong as she turns her head towards me, despite my grip on her hair. Our mouths almost brush, but she doesn't pull away. No, she looks me dead in the eye and says, "Well, I don't feel like staying, Mr. Armani, so I guess we're in a stalemate."

What a brave little mouse. Irritation wars with amusement at her words, but I know better than to let her get under my skin any further than she already is. And I won't let her distract me. I give her a dark smile and point out, "You can feel however you like, *topolina*, but the sooner you accept your position here, the happier you'll be." She gives a delicate scoff, and I give her

hair a sharp tug for her insolence, making her gasp. “Watch yourself, Giulia,” I warn her. “I will only tolerate so much sass from you. And you and I have something to discuss”

Her eyes flash her defiance. “It doesn’t matter what you do to me, I’ll always try to get out of here,” she whispers. “I’m going to finally be free.” There’s a fierceness in her words, and I know she means every damn word. If I was a good man, I might realize she’s never been free and I could be the one to let her go; but I’ve never been a good man, and I’m never going to let her go.

I let go of her hair, step back and announce, “We’re having dinner, so let’s go.” Time to get things back on track.

Of course, being the damn stubborn woman she is turning out to be, she doesn’t move an inch. Instead, she just turns back to the books, grabbing another from the shelf. Aggravation is the only emotion I feel as I reach out, yank the book from her hands, and toss it to the floor. She glares at me, but before she can say another word, I reach out, haul her up and over my shoulder and then head out of the room and toward the stairs.

She doesn’t kick, fight, or scream. She just lays there limply, but I know she’s not pleased. Again, if I was a good man, I’d be conscious of the fact this probably hurts her ribs, but instead I ignore the small voice of reason and don’t stop moving until we reach the small sitting area at the bottom of the steps, depositing her on the couch, just as there is a knock on the door. I give her a hard look and warn her, “Try anything, and you will not have the freedom you have now, *topolina*. And my hospitality towards you will get far less comfortable.”

She stares at me, unresponsive.

I walk to the door, unlocking and opening it to allow Sofia and Dante into the room. They are the only two I’ll allow in this room, though I don’t miss the curious, and sympathetic glance Sofia gives Giulia, before moving to set the tray of food and drinks on the small round table that Dante has brought in with him. Big enough that we can eat somewhat comfortably. Once Sofia has the food and drinks set up, Dante moves and grabs the two chairs from the hallway. Before they leave, Dante gives me a knowing look and then walks out, his hand on the small of Sofia’s back, leaving me to lock the door behind them.

When I turn around, I’m pleased to see that Giulia hasn’t moved from her seat on the couch, though I’m not stupid enough to think she’s not trying to

figure out a way out of this room. I have to wonder if she'll approach Dante or Sofia for help if she gets the chance. My initial guess is Sofia, but then again, she hasn't done a normal damn thing since I brought her here.

I move and sit at the small table, facing her from the opposite side. "Join me," I order, indicating the seat across from me.

"I'm not hungry," she replies immediately.

I narrow my eyes at her. While I seem to have more patience for her than most, it's quickly running thin. "It wasn't a request, Ms. De Luca," I inform her. "I don't give a damn if you don't eat, but you will join me. Now." I pour steel into that final word, and it seems to do the trick.

She slowly gets to her feet, walking toward me, her chin lifted and her shoulders back. She sits stiffly in the chair across from me, but she doesn't reach for her food or wine. Instead, she crosses her arms over her chest, glares at me, and asks, "Did you really kill your parents?"

I don't react to her question, but it is a surprising one. And one I've heard rumored around through my men. So I give her a direct answer back. "I did. And I'd do it again."

CHAPTER 12

Gia



I MANAGE to not outwardly react to his statement, but inside, I'm reeling. He seriously just admitted to that? What kind of monster is sitting across from me? I mean, I know my father and brothers aren't good men, and even with all the things they've done to me in the past, murdering them in cold blood has never entered my mind. I'd rather die myself. Because it would be a suicide mission. Which begs the question...

"Why?" I ask. A loaded question, and one I should not be asking, but I suppose if he was going to kill me, he'd have done it by now.

He eyes me for a moment, gaze dark and assessing. Finally, he says in a calm, almost reasonable voice, "Because my father was in my way, and my mother thought it would be a smart thing to sleep with one of my enemies to get her dirty little secret through my territory without my knowing."

I can't help the small frown that pulls at my lips. "Secret?" I repeat. Shit, I need to stop asking questions. But, how can I just let something like that go?

"It seemed my mother was very good at hiding her own little enterprise right under my father's nose. You see, she spent most of the time drugged or drunk enough that she was a zombie. My father rarely gave her any attention, but that also meant that unless she was playing the social scene how he expected, he left her to her own devices. And in that time, she took a lover. One she helped run his sex trafficking ring through our territory. For years. Men, women, and children have gone through our territory without so much of a whisper of it happening because no one thought she was capable of such a thing."

I'm no stranger to the things that the mafia does. All branches have some sort of operation, and I'm also aware my father is one of the top suppliers through one of the ports. It still horrifies and disgusts me. And my horror at the thought of him killing his mother quickly lowers. "She was shipping people through your territory and you didn't know about it?" I question carefully. "That seems hard to believe."

He takes a sip of his wine, his gaze never leaving mine. "Her mistake was forgetting about me," he tells me as he sets his glass back down and reaches for his fork. "She thought I was only focusing on my father, trying to figure out how to take over, but I'm the suspicious kind, and I followed her. Once I found out about her treachery, I made sure the pipeline was stopped, and I took care of her. I would have taken care of her lover, but, well, things aren't always simple in this world." He gives me an assessing look. "Something I'm sure you would understand, Ms. De Luca."

"I've never been a part of my father's business," I tell him tightly. I glance down at my own steak, but resolutely lift my gaze, despite my stomach panging and reminding me that I haven't eaten since last night. Eating with Nico Armani isn't a normalcy I want to experience.

"Hmmm," he hums as he cuts a piece of steak. "And yet, you've heard enough about me to know the rumor that I killed my parents. So you may not be a part of your father's business, *topolina*, but you certainly seem to have big enough ears to listen."

I stiffen even further at his words. I've now managed to give away that I eavesdropped on my father and brothers, and if it's information he's after, then he could try to get it out of me. And I'm not naive enough to think he won't torture me to get it if it comes down to it. He could just be luring me into complacency to see how long it will take for me to spill family secrets willingly.

He gives me a dry chuckle, pulling me out of my thoughts. "For tonight, *topolina*, you can keep your family secrets. Instead, I want you to tell me why your family locked you away in that apartment." He takes another bite of his steak, and adds once he's swallowed, "You really should try your steak. My chef is amazing in the kitchen, and I'm sure you'll find the meal much better than anything you've had in the past."

Based on the last meal I had here, I'm sure he's right, but instead I reply stubbornly, "No, thank you."

"Fine. Then, you can talk. The apartment," he prompts.

I consider not answering, but something tells me he won't appreciate that and will probably just end up forcing me in one way or another. So instead, think through my response. Finally, I reply, "My father bought it for me so I could have some independence." Yes, that sounds perfectly normal and reasonable.

He sighs, and then pins with a me a hard look that has my heart stuttering in my chest, and my gut clenching. This, this right here, is the expression of a mafia don that gets the answers he wants, no matter what means he has to use to get it. "I do not tolerate lies, Giulia," he warns me balefully. "Or half truths. So, when I ask you a question, I expect an honest answer. Understood?" I don't reply, just watch him warily. "Now, the truth."

I still consider lying to some degree, but something is telling me to tread carefully. I shrug and tell him, "My family has no time for women, and being the only one, means they don't want me around. And when my father married Carmen, she wanted me gone, so he made sure I was out of the house. Out of sight, and only in mind when he either needs me for something, or feels like checking in on me." There, that's simple enough, and the truth.

Nico doesn't answer right away. Instead, he watches me, as if gauging to see if I'm telling the truth or I'm going to add more. I hold his gaze, and keep my mouth shut. It seems that I'm talking and asking too many questions today, and I'm not going to dig myself into a deeper hole.

"Hmmm," he hums, but seems to be willing to let it go... for now. "And yet you don't really have much independence. You go to the same places every day, at the exact same time. You're rarely a minute off." God, if my muscles get any tighter I'll probably shatter. Looks like he's been following me for a while to know my routine. "And then, of course there are the bruises on your ribs and stomach. And you don't strike me as the clumsy type, or the kind to do that to yourself, which means that someone has done it to you." He lets the unasked question hang between us.

My throat burns with anger at his probing. What right does he have to do this to me? To ask me these questions. I have half a mind to get up from the table and walk away, but I also don't relish him putting me back here. And why does he care? How is he any better than them? Sure, he hasn't beaten me, and he doesn't call me names or try to find fault in what I say, but he's holding me here against my will. He tied me to the damn bed.

"Your man grabbed and drugged me, so how do you know it didn't happen while you were having me brought here?" I question, arching a brow.

“You think to insult my intelligence now?” he asks stonily, eyes watching me in a way that reminds me all too much of the look in my father or brothers’ eyes before they lose their temper on me. My heart hammers deep in my chest, and I carefully scoot to the edge of my chair, ready to bolt at the least provocation. “Your family doesn’t even want you, Giulia,” he continues harshly, driving the words at me like daggers. “They lock you away, they beat you whenever the mood strikes, and yet here you are, defending them. Hiding behind lies and accusations that you and I both know aren’t true. Not to mention, you think I didn’t see those bruises when you came in. I know my man didn’t hurt you, because I ordered him to make sure you came to me unharmed. And if he hadn’t, he would be dead right now for not following my orders to the letter. Or is that what you’re hoping? That I will believe you over my trusted man and kill him the moment he walks through the door?” His eyes are intense on mine. “Is that what you are saying, Ms. De Luca? You have no problem with the death of my right hand man on your hands?”

I want to look away, to pretend I haven’t heard a word he’s said. A sour note is filling my belly, as well as a healthy dose of fear. Something tells me he won’t kill whoever the other man is, but at the same time, do I really know anything about this man? Or will he kill him to make a point? No, my conscience could never handle it. “Fine, you want the truth. It was my brother. He was upset that I was following the rules and hadn’t given him an excuse to unleash his anger. As I said before, the men in my family have no use for women, other than the obvious, and I’m no exception.”

He doesn’t react, just watches me. Finally, after what feels like eons, he sits forward, his face still hard and dangerous, but his voice is calm as he responds, “And I take it that this isn’t the first time he’s hit you.”

“No,” I say simply. Where is he going with this? Surely he’s not upset about it? After all, why would he care? I’m just an annoyance to him. A means to an end.

“And yet you want to escape here and go back to that,” he muses, cutting back into his steak.

I glare at him, unable to help myself. “At least there I know what to expect. A beating is better than being held somewhere where you don’t want to be. Spied on with hidden cameras, and tossed around by a man that clearly wants you here for some reason that you can’t figure out. Especially a man with your kind of reputation.”

“And yet, have I beaten you? You’ve already tried my patience enough

that if I were a different kind of man I'd have beaten you to the point you would probably be bed-ridden. Or hell I'd have just killed you and saved myself the aggravation. And after your escape attempt earlier, I didn't lock you in a cold cell in the basement with no access to food or water until you saw the error of your ways. Perhaps next time I'll consider those options instead."

"If you were going to do that, you'd have already done it. You may have put me in a pretty prison, but it's a prison nonetheless. I'm not free to come and go as I choose. Why can't you just tell me what you want from me? Because while I may not know the ins and outs of my father's empire, I am still a De Luca, and that means my loyalty is to my family."

He finishes his steak, sets his utensils on the plate and then reaches for his wine before answering me. "And yet, your loyalty has done nothing but earn you beating after beating, and if what you say is true, your family clearly hates you and is only holding on to you to eventually sell you off to the highest bidder. Or do you think that one day they'll just forget you exist and you can finally have some sort of life and freedom?"

"I'm perfectly aware of what happens to women in my position." I can't keep the bitterness from my voice. "My parents' marriage was arranged, and my mother explained to me when I was very young that my father would pick my husband when he felt the time was right."

"And yet, he didn't marry you off when you turned eighteen," he remarks thoughtfully. "You're twenty-four, and that is late in life for a woman in your position to be single. Which leads me to believe he has a specific person in mind for you. The question is, who?"

I give him a bland stare. "I can assure you that he never shared that with me."

He cocks his head slightly. "No matter, if I need to find out, I will. Why the library?"

The abrupt change in questioning throws me and I blink at him in surprise. "Because that's the only other place in here that feels normal," I say slowly, unsure of what he's asking.

"No, why did you go to the library every day? You spent hours there. Why?"

"It was one of the few places I was allowed to go, because my father's guards can always see me, and I keep to myself, not talking to anyone other than the librarian if I want to know where something is," I answer honestly.

“And it’s one of the few places that I feel comfortable.”

“So I take it you like to read?”

I nod. “I always have since I was a child. It was a way to stay quiet and out of the way. My tutors and nanny would always give me something to read and make me be quiet when I was young and my father or brothers were around. They didn’t want to know I was there.”

We lapse into silence, and I blush slightly when my stomach growls, reminding me of how hungry I am. Still, I don’t reach for my food. Nico makes an annoyed sound low in his throat and leans forward to shove my plate closer to the edge of the table. “Eat,” he orders. “Or I’ll make sure you do.”

“Going to tie me up and force feed me?” There’s a slight sneer in my tone, but I don’t move toward the plate.

“Do not tempt me, Giulia. And this time, there is no way you will be getting free unless I release you myself. So I suggest you think very carefully before you open your mouth again to defy me.” I stare at him to gauge how serious he is, but from the look on his face, that would clearly be very. So I pick up my knife and fork, cut a small piece of meat and eat it. Even cool, it’s delicious. When I move to put my utensils down, he gives me a hard, warning glare, and I huff out a small sigh and continue eating. Neither of us say anything until I’ve cleared my plate.

“Happy now?” I sniff as I set my fork and knife down. “And I don’t go by Giulia. I go by Gia.”

He doesn’t reply to that. Instead, he orders, “Tell me about your uncle.”

That throws me for a loop, and my eyes widen at that. “Giovanni? What do you want to know?” Why the hell does he want to know about my uncle?

He ignores my questions. “Does he beat you as well?”

“Yes, sometimes. He and my cousins are cut from the same cloth as my father and brothers. There are no women in their line, something that my uncle loves to point out to my father.” *And those tauntings usually always left me black and blue from the beatings my father would give me because of being a disappointment and of a gender he can’t stand.*

“I wager your father has never read a biology book,” Nico remarks, “Seeing as it is a man who determines the gender of his children.”

I give him a bitter smile. “He knows because I made the mistake of mentioning it to him once when I was young. He didn’t appreciate it.” I hadn’t been able to eat for almost a week from the punch he landed on my

jaw. Not to mention I peed blood for just as long from the abuse I took to my stomach, kidneys, and ribs. That was one of the worst, and most severe beatings I ever had, and I made sure to never repeat those words again.

“No, I imagine he didn’t. And I suppose your uncle is proud of the fact that he never sired a girl?”

“Very,” I reply bitterly. Though, I also know many secrets about my uncle that I’m not about to share with this man.

“Hmmm, your family is a puzzle. But I think I’ve had enough discussion of them. What is it you do in your spare time?”

God, this man makes my head spin with how abruptly he changes the topic of conversation. “You mean when I’m not being held against my will?” I ask derisively.

“You know, I’m starting to think I’m going to have to do something with that saucy mouth of yours,” he answers silkily. “There are many ways for a woman’s mouth to be useful, and I quite like the idea of teaching them to you.”

I swallow hard at his thinly veiled threat. “I’ll just bite it off,” I hiss at him.

He gives me a sharp smile. “Oh, now, *topolina*, there are a lot of things you might want to do with me, but biting won’t be one of them when I finally have you where I want you.”

“You told me you don’t force women,” I say icily, bracing to run.

“And I don’t. When you’re in my bed, you’ll be there willingly. And once you’re there,” he adds with a heat in his eyes that makes my heart pound fast and hard in my chest, “I’ll gladly show you why your mouth is useful for more than talking.”

“So that’s it, you want to keep me here so I can be some kind of sex slave or something,” I summarize in disgust. “I’m not going to be anything to you, Mr. Armani, and I won’t be here long enough for any of that to happen anyway.”

“No?” He sounds more amused than angry at my statement.

“I’ll either find my way out of here, or my father will come and get me once he figures out I’m here.”

“And you really think he’s going to take you back and everything will go back to normal? How naive of you, *topolina*. You wouldn’t make it home. You’d either be dead within seconds, or your father will take you to the closest church to marry you off to someone.” He gives me a cruel smile.

“And if that’s what happens, this will look like heaven in comparison to what you will endure. You really think they’re going to believe you haven’t spilled family secrets? That you haven’t already given up your virginity to me? You are worth nothing to them without your purity. Before now, you held some value if only for that, but once they believe it’s gone...”

He lets that sentence trail off, and everything inside me turns to ice because I don’t need to wonder if any of that is true. Even now I could see the fury in my father’s eyes, knowing I once again proved women are worth nothing more than chattel to carry a child for them, or to look pretty on their arm in public.

I say nothing as he stands and rounds the table. I should move, make sure he can’t get too close, but I’m frozen to my seat as reality sinks in. When he stops beside my chair, I don’t look up at him, just continue to stare straight at his now empty seat. He reaches down, cupping my chin and turning it to look up at him. “Whatever plan you are hatching inside that pretty head of yours to escape, I would think twice, Ms. De Luca. Because while you are safe enough within these walls, out of them, you are easy prey, and I am not the only predator you would have to be on the lookout for. And as for why I want you here, it’s as simple as I want you here, and this is where you will remain until I say otherwise. You can either accept that and be cooperative while you’re here, or you can continue to defy me and see what happens when you try my patience a little too much. That choice is up to you.”

Then he lets go of my chin and heads for the door. I don’t move, not even when I hear the door open and shut behind him. Or when I hear the snick of the lock echo loudly through the space.

I’m not sure how long I sit here, my mind spinning as I try to come to grips with my new situation. My chest feels heavy and cold.

If I can get out of here, I’ll need to run. Run far and wide, and find a way to hide for the rest of my life. Because now it won’t just be my family after me, but Nico Armani, and for some reason, he terrifies me more than my family.

I glance up at the library area. There has to be something in there, some passage or the mention of one somehow that will get me out of here. That is probably going to be my only shot, because I know that I won’t be staying here.

I want my freedom. I push back from the table and head up the steps to get back to work.

CHAPTER 13

Nico



MY FRUSTRATION with my little captive is growing, and my patience is equally withering away. Every night for the past week, we go through the same routine. I have dinner with her, and she sits there refusing to eat until forced, while I ask her carefully probing questions. Nothing that would overtly ask her for family secrets, but enough that I know she's not being truthful when she says she knows little about the family business. No, she knows far more than she's telling, and I aim to discover all of it.

And amid it all, she's pulled out damn near every book from each shelf in the library and is now starting on the hallway area. Stacks cover the rooms, and I still can't figure out what she's doing or what she's looking for. And I don't like when someone keeps secrets, and Ms. Giulia De Luca is full of them.

The only good thing out of it all is that she's been sleeping in the damn bed every night, too exhausted to do anything but climb under the sheets, fully clothed, and sleep until the morning before she starts it all over again. No more sleeping in the closet or in the library area. Still, I don't monitor the cameras constantly, so it's possible she's doing something she shouldn't be, and I haven't noticed it, but she hasn't tried to escape again. I know there is some ulterior motive there, but I have to figure it out.

And that starts tonight. It's time to put my little mouse through some tests.

I pull up the cameras, and desire burns as I catch the moment she lowers herself into the steaming bath she's drawn. I get a flash of skin, a quick glance at her rounded ass, and then only her neck and face as she sinks into

the bubbles. The bliss on her face has me hard as a rock, and far too damn jealous of that water for putting that expression on her face. Fuck, this woman is messing with my head, and it's only gotten worse in the past week.

Having her here, spending time with her every night, my obsession grows. Hell, I haven't been sleeping more than a few hours a night, spending far too much time watching her sleep on the damn cameras. Or, in the case of last night, I went through the passages and walked into her bedroom, sat next to the bed and watched her sleep for hours. It took everything in me not to climb in that bed with her, or hell, wake her and bring her to my room.

I fucking hate this hold she has on me, and nothing will make it loosen. I fight in the ring with my men and the burning in my gut never lessens. I even thought of bringing in one of the women I normally fuck when the need strikes, but as soon as I pulled up the names, my cock never so much as twitched at the thought of warm, willing pussy. No, like the rest of me, he didn't want anyone else. He wants this woman. And only her. I'm going to have to do something about this soon, or I'm going to go mad.

I stare at the screen for another long moment, taking in the way she's piled the mass of curls on top of her head, and how her eyes are closed as she lays there, dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep. And if I'm not mistaken, she's lost more weight since she barely eats more than enough to keep her alive. Even when I force her to eat, she doesn't finish.

Is this all part of whatever plans she's making? To make herself so sick that I'll either let her die or take her to a hospital or doctor? Then she'll try to get help or escape? She'll be sorely disappointed if that's her plan, because I'll tie her to the damn chair and force-feed her before that happens. Determination grips me and I shove back from my desk. Dante glances up at me in surprise, and his brow lifts even higher when I order, "Tell Sofia I'll be taking my meal in the dining room tonight. Ms. De Luca will be joining me. Ensure there are guards at every exit of the room outside the doors and see that we're not disturbed." Then I stalk out, not waiting for his reply or to see if he follows my orders.

I storm up to her room, shoving the door open and shutting it quietly behind me as I head for the walk-in closet. I move through it quickly, grabbing the items I need before going and setting them on the bed. Then I head for the closed bathroom door, determination in every step.

I turn the knob and walk inside, biting back a smug smile when Gia startles, gasping at the intrusion and sinking so that only her chin and up is

showing. “Finish up and get dressed. We’re having dinner in the dining room tonight.”

She doesn’t respond for a moment, her eyes wide as she stares at me. I take one step toward the tub, and she blinks at me before saying stiffly, “No, thank you. I’m tired.”

I give her a cool stare. “That wasn’t a request, *topolina*,” I inform her sternly. “I will have someone bring you down in an hour. And if you do not arrive, I will come back up here and carry you down myself, and I will not care what state of undress you are in. And consider that I will kill any man in this home that glimpses of any part of you that I don’t allow, so do not test my patience. Your outfit is on the bed.” I turn and walk toward the doorway.

Before I reach it, she stops me by saying, “Mr. Armani, I’m exhausted. I don’t have the energy to fight and try to outwit you tonight.”

I pause because I hear the exhaustion in her voice. Turning, I walk back toward the tub, and when I near the edge, I look down at her. The dark circles under her eyes are larger than they were last night, and her face is pale, even with the heat of the water. I want to reach in and shake her, demanding to know why she’s doing this to herself, and at the same time, I want to soothe and give in to her request. Maybe she is realizing there is no point in fighting with me.

I do neither. Instead, I tell her, “Again, this is not a request, Ms. De Luca. You are the one deciding not to eat and exhaust yourself, so your poor choices are your own fault. One hour.” I turn and stalk out, leaving her room and locking it behind me before heading to my own bedroom.

Once I’m inside, I head straight to the bathroom to shower. I force myself not to look at the camera, telling myself that patience is key. Instead, I stand under the heat of the spray and close my eyes, trying not to picture the woman who is currently naked on the other side of the house. The one wreaking havoc on my entire life. And no matter how much I try to tell myself I won’t allow it, to try and ignore her, she’s an obsession I can’t shake. Far more addictive than the stuff I sell and far more dangerous than the weapons currently making their way into my buyers’ hands.

Even now, I can’t get the picture of her climbing into the bath out of my mind, and my cock is throbbing. I turn the water to cold, and it does nothing to calm the heat in my blood. No, if anything, it fuels it. I reach down and stroke myself, gritting my teeth at the pleasure that sparks. I’m far past the times I’ve had to jerk off to get relief, and it infuriates me I’m here doing this

instead of finding someone to relieve it for me. Hell, I could have a shower full of women if I wanted to ease this burning ache inside me, but no, the only one it's hard for is her.

So I do the only thing I can. I stroke myself slowly, picturing her in my mind. Of what I wish I had done when I walked into that bathroom. I'd have stripped down and joined her in that water, finally getting to taste that mouth of hers as I fucked her until she screamed my name. My balls draw up at the thought, and I stroke myself faster, imagining the sounds she would make. Would she try to quiet them? Refuse to let them past those pretty lips? Or would she scream them? Let everyone know what I was doing to her?

I'm that much of a bastard that I don't want anyone else to hear the sounds she makes. No, I want them for my ears only. And that's what I picture as I come all over my hand and the shower floor; her soft cries in my ears as I push her over the edge, feeling her pulse around me, squeezing me tight until I can't do anything other than follow.

"Fuck," I grunt as I release myself and then angrily scrub myself down and wash my hair. That did nothing to take the edge off, and it only left me wanting her more. My cock is still half hard, and I know I'll be doing this again before the night is over.

I climb out of the shower, wrap a towel around myself, and then head to the closet to get dressed. Then I go to the dining room to wait for my little prisoner to decide if she's going to defy me.

When I reach the dining room, Sofia is already there setting things up. She arches a brow at me when I walk in but says nothing. I take my seat and watch as she polishes the last of the silverware, pours the wine, and then walks out of the room without so much as a word. Probably for the best.

I pull out my phone to check the time and then set it on the table, watching the door and waiting as the minutes tick by. She only has about three more minutes before she'll be late. I resist the urge to check the cameras again, instead sipping at the bourbon Sofia poured for me.

The clock ticks to the one hour mark and I resign myself to waiting another couple of minutes before I head up to drag her ass down here. I bring the glass to my lips once more as the door to the dining room opens and Dante walks in with a sullen looking Gia behind him. I nearly smile as I take her in. I should be furious, but instead anticipation buzzes in my blood.

Instead of the little black dress I set out for her, she's wearing a pajama onesie, complete with mouse ears, and if I'm not mistaken a small little tail

on the back. Her eyes are gleaming and defiant, though her face is blank of all expression once again as Dante leads her over to her seat. She sits in the chair serenely, though her eyes never leave me. Over her head, Dante is grinning like an idiot, and I can tell he wants to laugh. I dismiss him with a wave of my hand, and then wait impatiently as he calls Sofia to bring our dinner. When Sofia is within eyeshot, I see the grin on her face, eyes bright as she sets the plates down in front of us. She looks at me with a smug grin, and then heads out, while Dante excuses himself and follows her, shutting the door quietly behind him.

I don't even look at the food in front of us. Instead, I move my eyes down over Gia once more. "*Topolina*, I'm almost surprised, but not quite."

She gives me a bland stare. "You told me to get dressed, so I did." She picks up the wine glass and takes a quick sip, watching me.

"I do believe I told you there was an outfit for you on the bed. And what reason do you have for not wearing it?"

"You picked out a dress that was far too revealing, and considering you threatened to shoot anyone who saw me, well, I figured why tempt fate? So this way, you can't say I didn't cover every inch of myself. My conscience is clear, and if it pisses you off, well, why not?"

Well, well, it looks like my little mouse has gotten brave and is not so carefully watching her words. Time will tell if I enjoy it or not. "You know, I could punish you for disobeying me," I remind her, nonchalantly grabbing my utensils and cutting into my salmon. A favorite dish of mine normally, but tonight I hardly taste it, my entire focus on the woman sitting to my left.

She gives me a defiant look. "You could, but I'm used to it, so your threats don't scare me."

Oh, how I want to prove her wrong, but no, not yet. She would expect such a hot-headed move, and from the look in her eyes, she's counting on it. Instead, I reply, "Lucky for you, you chose something that amuses me. Though that dress would have been beautiful on you. I picked it specifically for you when my personal shopper showed it to me."

Her fork stops mid-air as she stares at me. I hold it as she works through what I just said. "You had someone pick that out for me?" she asks carefully after a moment.

"I'm a man of particular tastes. So if anything doesn't fit, I'll have something else that does brought in."

She blinks a couple times. "Wait, so that entire closet full of clothes is for

me?” When I don’t respond, she takes a slow, deep breath. “So, how long exactly did you plan on taking me for?”

I shrug. “Since the moment you bumped into me the second time,” I reply. “I told you, *topolina*, I take what I want.”

“My God, this is too insane for even me to believe,” she mutters, though it’s loud enough for me to hear it clearly. “Who in their right mind looks at a person and takes them against their will? Psychopaths, that’s who.” She gives me an angry glare. “Didn’t you care that I might have a life? That I have dreams and wants of my own? That maybe I don’t want to be a prisoner? No,” she continues bitterly before I can respond. “No, you’re just like the rest of them. You think everyone is at your beck and call, that you can take and take, and no one will say anything because of who you are and your reputation. But you made a mistake when you took me, Nico.”

This is the second time she’s used my first name, and while normally I would never allow such a familiarity or casualness from anyone without my permission, but the way she says my name has me once again thinking of how many different ways I can make her say it. “Did I?” I return, taking another bite of my fish. “Why don’t you enlighten me then, Giulia, since you’re so talkative this evening.”

“Because you didn’t take into account that I’ve been dealing with men like you my entire life. You think your name, your power, your threats, will make me fall in line. Like tonight. You came into the bathroom when you knew I was bathing, and ordered me out, dressed, and down here to eat with you. When I told you no, you didn’t care. You spend every night with me making me eat, talking to me, and asking cleverly veiled questions to gauge my willingness to share my family’s secrets with you. Because you think you can trick them out of me, despite me telling you they don’t tell me anything. I am nothing more than an annoyance to them. A stray dog they feel obligated to feed and clothe, but not care for. Once I reach my usefulness with you, you’ll either kill me, or send me back to them, knowing full well they’ll probably kill me on sight. Or, they’ll torture me until I tell them what I told you, then kill me. Oh, but not before they give me to their men first, let them have their turn with me since I’ll be used up goods, right? Isn’t that what you said the other night? Of no more value because they’ll be sure that I allowed you to fuck me like a whore. But what will it matter to you?”

“You’ll have gotten what you wanted, and you’ll make whatever move you want to get ahead. And then you’ll move on to the next woman that can

further your cause, not caring who you hurt in the process. Only, next time, you'll have learned from your time with me. You'll probably chain her up in the basement, save yourself the headache. No big room with all the fancy clothes and library for her. No, she'll be expendable like me. Or maybe, you'll just take her straight to your bed, and she'll let you because you'll promise to let her go once she tells you what you need. Because women are nothing to men like you. We're a warm hole, information givers, and then expendable. Right? So you go ahead and threaten to beat me, or hell, just go ahead and do it, because I can promise you whatever you do, they've probably done it and worse." Her eyes burn into mine, her face red with her anger, and the grip on her knife is so tight that her knuckles are white. Suddenly, she tosses down the knife, pushes back from the table and stands. "I'm no longer hungry. I'd like to go back to my room." Then she turns and heads for the door.

I allow her to take a few steps before I'm up and moving. She's not even halfway to the door before I reach out, grab her by the upper arm, spin her, and press her into the wall. She lets out a small gasp, but quickly cuts it off when she gets a look at my face. Her eyes widen as they stare up at me, and I let her see my anger. My grip on her arm is tight, but not enough to bruise as I lift her up to my eye level. She weighs next to nothing, and even when she struggles, I ignore it. Instead, I step into her, wedging my leg between hers so she can't try and kick me in the balls.

She's trapped, and from the wary look in her eyes, she's quickly realizing it. "You do not walk away from me, Giulia," I tell her in a low, tight voice, letting her see and hear my anger and displeasure. "I have been lenient with you, and you think that by comparing me to your worthless father, and your cock sucking brothers, you're going to earn yourself any more favors from me?"

She bares her teeth at me and hisses, "Some kind of favor to keep me locked away against my will. Or do you expect me to thank you? Would that make you happy? Would that make you let me go?"

"I would think that someone in your position would be grateful to no longer have to worry about being beaten day in and day out," I hiss back.

"But I am not free," she rages, "I'm still under a man's thumb, at your mercy. You may not beat me, but taking away my choices, my ability to come and go as I please, it's just as horrible."

Deep down, I know she's right. But I don't care. "You foolish girl. You

really think you'll be free if I let you go? Do you think that you will ever be free? You were born into the world of the mafia. You are a commodity that men like me, like your father, use to barter with. To connect families and territories so we can grow our empires. As far as most men in our world are concerned, they want to know you're pretty enough for them to fuck, to breed with strong sons to continue on the family name. Nothing more. We don't care about your wants, your dreams, or your desires. They are worth nothing more than a passing thought to most. You may not like that you're here, but here you are. You're mine, Giulia De Luca. Because I saw you, I took you, and I refuse to let you go."

"So that's it? I'm going to be your prisoner forever?" she whispers, sounding defeated.

I hate the sound of it in her voice. No, I want her to rage, to scream, not give up. Where is my strong little mouse that knows exactly when to fight back? I set her back on her feet, loosening my hold on her arms, but I cup her chin in my hand, holding her still. "It is your choice to see yourself as a prisoner, *topolina*," I remind her. "Instead of making the best of a situation, you fight me. And while I enjoy our little battle, you will never win, *cara mia*."

She blinks, and then I see it. Just underneath the defeat, there's a little flash of something. That fighting spirit I know is building inside her. And as we continue to stare at each other, it builds. She's not about to let this go, and I almost look forward to seeing what she's going to do. "Do not underestimate me, *stronzo*."

It's the first time she's cursed me to my face, and while I should be infuriated at her disrespect, instead, I grip her chin tighter, lower my face toward hers, and murmur, "I wouldn't dream of it, *topolina*. But do not underestimate the man who holds your life in his hands. Hands that can be kind and gentle, or can be harsh and brutal."

"So much for not threatening to beat me," she sneers quietly.

A small smirk pulls at my lips as I reply, "I do not need to beat you to make you submit, *cara mia*. Placing my hands in just the right spot, I can make you scream, or I can make you beg." I move my hand down from her chin to her throat, holding tight enough to make her breathing choppy as I whisper, "Do you feel that, *topolina*? Do you feel your body struggling for air? The way your senses are heightened? I can feel the pulse in your throat pounding, and I can see your panic." I loosen my grip, and she takes in a

trembling breath, her face red and her eyes wide as she stares up at me in shock. I move my hand down along the smooth skin of her neck to the zipper at the top of the onesie, slowly, oh so slowly, pulling it down. She doesn't fight me; instead, she stares at me, waiting. Power and desire pour through me, though I remind myself to be cautious. To be patient. As soon as the zipper is down enough for me to see that she is wearing only a simple black cotton bra beneath, I bite back a groan.

I hold her gaze as I move my hand down between the gentle swells of her breasts, but never delving inside as I brush my fingertips along her sternum and then up over the top of her breast to her shoulder. Her skin heats and pebbles beneath my touch, and she trembles. Her lips part slightly as I move along her collarbone, then dip back down over the swell of her breast again and then along the bra underwire. When I reach her center and move my fingers down again, she trembles under my touch, and her eyes are full of confusion, heat, and a small hint of worry.

Instead of pushing lower, despite the fact that I want to know if she's wearing anything else under this ridiculous outfit, I move my fingers back up the center of her chest to her neck once more. There, I cup it lightly, and murmur, "And now I can feel your body responding to mine. It wants more, heating under my touch. If I moved those feeble cups out of the way, I could have you squirming and begging within seconds. So remember, Gia, while you may think that a beating is the only way for me to get my point across, I can assure where you are concerned, it is not. And I would much prefer to hold you on that edge for hours to hear you beg me so desperately."

She doesn't say anything, her entire body trembling now as I draw the zipper back up on her onesie, and force myself to step back. "If you would like to go back to your room, I will have Dante escort you," I tell her calmly, though my voice is a bit rougher than I like. I give her a warning look. "And I expect you to behave yourself."

She doesn't reply, only waits silently as I call Dante back into the room. As they walk out the door, she glances briefly over her shoulder at me, confusion and uncertainty clear on her face.

I head for the gym. I need to work off some of this excess energy, or I won't be sleeping again tonight. Because after having seen and touched my sweet little mouse's skin, I need more. And next time, I want her in my bed, eyes wide and mouth open as I fuck her hard and show her exactly what I was talking about.

But until then, I'll have to settle on sparring with my men.

CHAPTER 14

Gia



I KNOW he's there before I even open my eyes. Years of my brothers sneaking into my room to torture me has trained me to sleep lightly. I keep my breathing even, and my body relaxed as I wait. What is he doing? And where is he? I don't dare look because who knows what he'll do if he realizes I'm awake. After the dining room earlier tonight, I need to be very careful around this man.

Not because I think he's going to force me, but because my reaction to him isn't normal. It can't be. I have no experience with men, but I know desiring your captor isn't normal. The way my body reacted to him was frightening. It's Stockholm Syndrome at its finest, which is exactly why I need to get out of here and fast.

Even now, thinking of it makes my body heat, and my heart race. And if I really focus, it's like I can feel his fingers touching me now. I was sure that when he unzipped my onesie earlier he was going to try and take things further. I'm still surprised he didn't, considering I was half-naked standing there, but the man must have some pretty strong self-control.

I was sure that he would be furious and send me back to my room once I walked in with that ridiculous thing on, but instead, I saw the flash of amusement in his eyes. And again, I thought he was going to hit me when I tossed all those things in his face and then got up and walked away. Some small part of me almost wishes he had because I wouldn't be so damn confused right now. He would prove himself to be just like every other man in my life. I'm also pissed his words hit a little too hard when he hissed them in my face.

He's right that I'm not free. I never will be. Either with him, my family, or hell, whoever I would be forced to marry. I'd always belong to someone other than myself. They say the devil you know is better than the one you don't, but I crave that freedom. Finally to go somewhere because I want to, not at a certain time of day because that's the time I'm allowed to go. Or to finally be able to make friends instead of avoiding people like the plague because I can't risk someone finding out about them and my father killing or taking them. So instead I endure a lonely existence.

Even here it's no different. I don't have anyone to talk to but Nico, and that's not really just a conversation. So I need to get out of here, and it has to be tonight if I can manage it.

I come out of my thoughts, listening carefully to see if he's moved at all, but nothing. I know he's still there. I can feel his eyes on me, feel him near. What the hell is he doing? I feel vulnerable, uneasy, and I want him to leave.

Finally, after what has to be another hour, I hear the soft fall of his footsteps. Slowly, carefully, I open my eyes, and turn my head to see him heading up the steps towards the library. Wait, why is he going up there?

It hits me like lightning. *The secret passage! That's how he got in here, and how's he going to leave so I don't hear him.*

I have never been so grateful for all the times I learned to be silent when moving around because I ease out of bed and head up the stairs, careful to miss the creakiest parts of them so that I don't make a sound. When I reach the top of the steps, I head down the hall and stop just outside the darkened room, eyes on the man who's making his way to just underneath the ladder that leads up to the next level. I watch as he simply lays his hand on the edge of one of the shelves, and it moves with the softest of clicks. If I weren't this close and listening for it, I never would have heard it.

He slips inside, and I rush toward it, my heart pounding as I barely manage to squeeze in before it closes up tight. I press myself against the wall, barely allowing myself to breathe as I wait, terrified he's going to turn around and see me. But he just keeps walking, his feet making soft thuds on the metal floor as he makes his way through the darkened tunnel. The only light is the soft glow along the floor's edge so that you can see your path.

I wait until I'm sure he's walked far enough out of earshot before I move. I move slowly, keeping my ears open for any sound that he's heard me or is making his way back. Or, heaven forbid, someone else coming along and finding me and alerting him.

As I make my way along, I realize how extensive the passageways are. They branch off in every direction, but I continue straight, trying to figure out my bearings. The last thing I need to do is get lost in here. And since the only way to get in, it seems, is with a hand scanner, who knows the next time someone will come through? Not the best way to die. Still, there has to be a way out

I stop when I hear a door open softly, and I hold my breath as I wait. Minutes pass, but nothing, so I continue on. When I come to a three-way fork of tunnels, I pause, considering. I have no idea where the exit is in this place, but there has to be one in each wing of the house. Based on the sunlight that comes in my room, I've determined I'm on the east side of the house, which means that heading straight means I'm going west. Statistically, the entrance to the house is in the north, which I want to avoid since that's probably where they'd look for me first once they discover I'm missing. Same thing for South. So west it is.

When I reach the end of the hallway, I take a deep breath and wait, listening. I don't hear movement or any kind of sound, so hopefully, I'm going to come out into an empty room. And, you know, hopefully, the door opens, and I don't set off some kind of alarm. But if I do, I'll handle it.

I put my ear to the door, holding my breath. Nothing. No sound, no alarm. I release a soft sigh of relief and then put my hand on the door and give it a very gentle push. It releases with very little sound, but I still wait, ever cautious. When I hear nothing, I push it open a little farther and look out. The room I'm in is dark, and only a faint glow comes from the door down the left wall.

I step out, pushing the door almost closed behind me, but leaving enough space I can squeeze through if I need to make a quick exit. I head for the closed door, waiting to see if I hear any movement beyond. Nothing. I take a shaky breath before I methodically turn the knob, making sure it doesn't creak and give me away. Thankfully, whoever maintains this place keeps these knobs and hinges well-oiled because it's silent as it opens. I peer out and look at the huge bathroom in front of me with a sense of dread.

Shit. I don't need to look around to know this is Nico's bathroom, which means I've entered his bedroom, and I need to get out of here before he spots me. I soundlessly shut the door and turn to creep back to the passageway. But I stop dead in my tracks when I see the very man I'm trying to avoid leaning against the now shut door, arms crossed over his chest, and a look on his face

that has my blood running hot and then cold. It's not anger I see on his face. It's a dark kind of anticipation paired with an amusement that has nothing to do with him finding this funny. No, more like I gave him the excuse he needs to teach me a lesson.

I ease back a step, my hand finding the handle behind me in the dark, even as a low chuckle sounds through the dim room. "Oh now, my sweet little mouse," he taunts, "you really have found yourself trapped, haven't you? Though I'll give you points for ingenuity to follow me. Had you gone through any other path, I probably would have let you go long enough until I decided to come and collect you, but here you are."

"You knew I was there the whole time." Though, why am I surprised?

"Of course. The entire tunnel is full of cameras, and not to mention, the moment you stepped inside, you set off a silent alarm that goes to my phone as well as Dante's. I let him know I was handling your little escape attempt, of course. Couldn't have him ruining the surprise, now could I?"

Anger burns in my gut. Damn it. But I'm not going to give up yet. I still can get out of here and make a run for it. "This is all just a game to you," I accuse him, ever so carefully turning the knob behind me, but not pushing on the door. No need to alert him to what I'm doing.

"You're the one who started the game," he points out as he straightens, uncrossing his arms in one smooth movement. "And I have to say, I thought I'd spend the night pissed at you, but I enjoy this much more."

"Why the hell were you watching me sleep?" I demand. I need to distract him long enough so I can get out and shut the door before he can reach me. It will only buy me a couple of seconds, but it's enough for me to get to his bedroom door and out into the hallway. I know which way not to go now, and I don't plan on stopping until I find my way out.

He doesn't answer me, happy to be his creepy self. Instead, he takes one step toward me, and I make my move. I push the door open, letting the handle go, and turn to sprint out of the closet and into the bathroom. Laughter follows me, sending a chill down my spine. I don't think about it, though, as I slam the bathroom door shut as I rush into the main bedroom.

The large double doors are much like my own, and I wrench on the doorknob when I reach it. Only to find it locked and unmoving. I curse, trying the other one, but it's the same. I feel around the knob quickly, trying to find the unlock mechanism, but much like mine, there's nothing. It's an old-fashioned key lock. Panic pools inside me, and I quickly turn around,

looking around the room, trying to find another way out. Just as Nico walks out of the closet, completely at ease.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Looking for this?” he asks, pulling out a key from his pocket, the gold of it shining in the light of the room. I look around the room, looking for anything to protect myself with, but almost everything I could use is closer to him than me. I want to curse him, but instead I focus on keeping my mind clear, and watching him as he prowls towards me. Because there is nothing else I could call how he’s walking towards me. Like a panther; slow, steady, and purposeful. And I’m his prey.

I don’t ease away from the door, not wanting to be cornered. His mouth lifts into that dangerous smile, and his eyes flash with something heated, dark, and almost feral. He’s enjoying this little chase, and while that’s a whole other thing for me to worry, right now, I’m just trying to stay alive. I would try to head for the passageway again, but unless I find a way to cut off his hand, or knock him unconscious and drag him over there, that’s not an option. No, I need that key, which means, I need to knock him out and get it so I can get out of here.

“I can see all those thoughts moving across your pretty little face,” he tells me as I move along the wall and toward his sitting area. I manage to keep the couch between us as he matches me step for step, but not getting much closer. “What are you going to do, Gia?” he purrs. “Because you are proving to be remarkably resourceful. I never thought I’d enjoy that in a woman, but here you are.”

“I’m not doing this so you can enjoy it,” I tell him icily as I dart back to the other side of the room, making him pivot and reach for me, but I evade him. I ease toward the bathroom this time. “I’m doing this so I can get the hell away from you.”

“Hmmm, yes, I can see that. And yet, here you are, trapped once again.”

“God, you’re sick in the head,” I rasp as I stop and stare at him. He stops as well, watching me.

“I never claimed I was a sane man,” he returns with a careless shrug. “Most in my line of work can’t be to do what we do. But, I can assure you that when it comes to you, I have all my faculties running.”

“Why did it have to be you I bumped into that day?” I wonder aloud as I glare at him.

He gives me a slow smile. “Fate is a funny bitch. Perhaps she knew you

were looking for a little adventure in your life.”

“Adventure?” I shout incredulously. “Are you sure you haven’t fallen and hit your head on something? Or maybe you’ve been taking a little too much of your own product, but I think you’ve lost your damn mind.”

“A man who uses his own products is a fool and shouldn’t be in a position of power,” Nico scoffs. “And yes, you could look at this as an adventure. You haven’t been wasting your life away in a sterile apartment doing the same routine day to day. No connection to the outside world except for some meager trips to the library every day, where you don’t talk to anyone but the librarian and the occasional old man.”

“Instead, I spend my days locked in a pretty prison, and the only person I get to talk to is you. I wouldn’t say that this is an adventure, Armani. This is a nightmare that I’m ready to wake up from.” I move toward the bathroom, intending on shutting the door and locking it to keep him out until I can figure out how to open that passageway door, or get that key from him, but before I can reach it, he’s on me.

I let out a cry when he grabs me, his body pressing me into the wall with a thud. His front is to my back, and I struggle, trying to get away, but he presses in tighter until I can’t move. A rumbling chuckle sounds in my ear and panic fills me, realizing that there is no escape now. I’m completely at his mercy. And that panic turns to fear when I feel how hard he is pressed against my lower back.

“*Topolina*, you are a handful,” he admonishes softly, his right hand settling on my hip and his other arm wrapping around my waist, holding me against him. “Now, what am I going to do with you?” I don’t answer, though my body trembles in his grip. “Anyone else, I’d lock you in the basement, be done, but you, *you, cara mia*, I want close so that I can see what you’ll do next. So I can hear that sharp tongue, and watch that brain of yours work as you try to escape.”

“Just let me go, and I’ll go back to my room. We’ll chalk this up to another failed attempt on my part. I’m sure I’ll amuse you again when I keep on trying,” I grit out through clenched teeth.

I still when he leans down and puts his nose to the crook of my neck, breathing me in. Goosebumps cover my skin, and I have to work on controlling my breathing. “Oh no, *topolina*, I don’t think I can do that,” he whispers against my skin. “First, you pissed me off earlier by comparing me to your fucking family, and then defying me. Now, here you are, trying to

escape again. If I was a lesser man, I would think you didn't like me. But that's not true, is it, Giulia?" He moves his mouth from my neck to my ear, making me shiver at the feel of his warm breath. "I think you're feeling things you don't understand, and it frightens you. But that's alright, I can work with that."

"I don't feel anything for you but anger and contempt," I rasp out.

"Is that why your pulse is pounding so hard?" He moves from my ear and back down to the pulse point in my neck. He presses his lips there, making me gasp. The feel of his lips on my skin has my body going haywire as it tries to understand the sensations moving through me. "Or why you've stopped struggling?"

"My pulse is pounding because you have me trapped against a wall," I manage to sneer. "And I'm not struggling because you're double my size."

"That's true," he agrees. Suddenly he spins me around, pressing my back against the wall. He crowds back into me, his hands coming up to cup the back of my head, his fingers weaving through my hair. It's an intimate position, and I try to ignore the way my body responds to it.

"Let me go," I order.

"I think you forget, Gia, that you are not the one giving orders," he reminds me, his grip in my hair tightening and pulling lightly on the strands as he tilts my head back. "And that you are not in charge of this game. But you are the one losing."

"You think this is a game? That my freedom, my life, is nothing more than a game?" I hiss, infuriated.

"Life is always a game," he counters. "Some win, some lose, and some skate by." He has a thoughtful look in his eye that makes me nervous.

"And in this, I'm always the loser," I toss back bitterly.

He doesn't reply for a moment, watching me. Suddenly, he pulls his fingers from my hair and steps back. I blink, shocked, but still wary. What the hell is he up to? "You're right," he says as he pulls the key from his pocket. I freeze. *Wait, what?* "You haven't had a chance to win at our little game, have you? So how about you and I change the rules, Ms. De Luca?"

Oh, no, this does not sound good. "What do you mean?" I ask carefully.

"I mean, I'm going to give you one chance to escape," he answers nonchalantly.

"You're going to let me leave?"

He gives a slow smile, and I instantly want to hide. I'm not going to like

this and I know it. “I’m going to let you *try* to leave,” he corrects. “You want an adventure, and you want a fair chance to get out, so I’m going to give it to you. I’ll open the door, and you get a five-minute head start. I’ll instruct no one to get in your way. No one to stop you. If you can get to the front gates without me catching you, I’ll let you go. I’ll have one of my men take you back to your apartment, or anywhere else you would like to go.”

“Just like that?” I whisper, a glimmer of hope building in my chest.

“I’m a man of my word, so yes, just like that,” he replies. “But...” His expression turns dark, predatory. “If I catch you before you reach those gates, then you’re mine, Gia. No more running, no more attempts to escape. You will stay here, behave yourself, and you will submit to me in everything.”

My back goes up at that because there is no missing his insinuation. “If you win, I agree to be your whore?” I ask coldly.

“You will never be a whore, Giulia,” he corrects, his tone taking on an edge that has my stomach cramping. “You will be mine. And that means you come to me willingly. To my bed. And if you do all of that, I will give you more freedom around the house. But if you abuse it, I will put you right back to where you were and chain you to the bed, only allowing you to use the bathroom, or when I feel like you’ve earned it. Do you understand?”

“I get a chance to leave, and if I do, you’ll let me go and make sure that no one else can find me if I do?”

He nods. “Yes, you will have the freedom you so desperately desire.”

“And if I lose, I agree to be your...pet, until you’re done with me?”

“Mmm, I’ve never had a pet, but with you, I imagine the experience would be an interesting one,” he says thoughtfully.

It’s a loaded question, and I know my chances are slim. But what other choice do I have? This could be my one shot. Is it worth the risk? Because if I lose, I’ll be losing more than my freedom. I’ll lose everything I am to the man standing in front of me. But I suppose it’s one thing to choose your captor than to be made to have one. And he might think he can trick me, but I’m smart and resourceful. Desperation might be making me do something I’m going to regret but can I really not take the chance? Surely if I’m smart, he won’t catch me. And if he does...

Obviously, with my background, I’ve never been with a man, but I’m not an idiot. I know how sex works, and I know from the books I read and the shows I’ve watched it can be pleasurable. But I also know that it can be painful. And having seen far too much living in my father’s home, I know all

about how some people enjoy inflicting that kind of pain on others.

I take a deep breath. “If I lose and I have to sleep with you, you can’t whip me,” I tell him firmly. “And no sharing.” My heart pounds. God, am I really considering this?

He doesn’t react at first, just stares at me. “If anyone would dare to touch you, *topolina*, I will kill them where they stand. You are mine, and that means no other fucker gets to touch what’s mine. As for the whipping, I have no desire to mar this perfect skin. I take it that’s another thing you’ve witnessed at the hands of your family?”

I stay silent because he won’t like the answer. I stare at him for another moment, trying to tell myself that I’m insane for even considering this. But I suppose there are worse things in the world than being a plaything to this man. And he has been nice enough while I’ve been here. God, why is this so damn hard?

Finally, I make my decision. I can’t squander my chance to get away, to finally have a life that is outside of this cruel world. So I give him a curt nod. “Fine, I’ll agree to your terms,” I tell him tightly.

Triumph fills his eyes, along with a primal anticipation. He holds out the key to me, and I cautiously reach out to grab it. “Once you unlock that door, your five minutes start,” he informs me, stepping back a couple more steps to give me room.

I move toward the door, hesitating as doubt creeps in. God, what have I done? I glance over my shoulder at him, and see him watching me, body completely relaxed, but the expression on his face...It makes my entire body tremble and my blood heat. It’s a primal desire that would make any woman wary. “You won’t catch me,” I say with a bravado I’m not fully feeling.

“We’ll see,” he rasps. “So run, little mouse. Run as fast as you can, because when I catch you...” He lets that trail off, and I swallow hard.

I turn back to the door and take a deep breath. Alright, it’s time to get my head in the game and get ready to figure this out. I need to be smart. Determination floods my system, and I put the key in the lock and turn. I pull the key from the lock, open the door, and run, never looking back.

Still, I’m not far when I hear him give a dark laugh behind me, making a chill go down my spine, and I know the game’s begun.

I cannot lose. I will not lose.

CHAPTER 15

Gia



I DO the one thing I know he won't expect. I run toward my wing of the house. I'm sure his men and the other house staff are all near the front and back doors, figuring that I'll be heading straight for them. Well, they would be wrong. I may not know much about this place, but if it has secret passages, then there are multiple exits, and I just need to find one on this side of the house. But I also have to figure out a way to keep from being seen by too many cameras. Easier said than done since I can't make them out, but I'm not going to worry.

Right now, I need to make a plan, and I need to stick to it. Five minutes isn't a long time, and I need to make sure Nico isn't close behind me. I know he's going to play with me, but that's alright. I'm a clever woman, and he's going to be in for a surprise if he thinks I'm going to be an easy catch.

When I reach the steps that exit the west wing, I move swiftly down them and around, where there are small open areas underneath. They're dark, and I pray I'm not going to be going into something that will get me hurt, but I don't have a lot of time. I climb in, realizing it's a small storage area, but plenty of space for me to hide in until Nico walks past. I have never been so happy to be so tiny, because if I was any bigger, this would be next to impossible.

I feel around and I nearly laugh out loud, when I feel something soft beneath me and when I pull it out, it's an old maid's uniform. Oh, yes, this will work. I've seen a few of the maids wearing them, and I'm sure I can use this to get out. Nico would never expect me to change outfits. No, he's expecting me to be running for the door.

A smug smile pulls at my lips and I grip the outfit tightly to me as I wait. I can be patient. Thankfully, I don't have long to wait. I hear his steps as they move down the stairs, and I barely let myself breathe. He can't know I'm here. He's whistling as he strolls down the hallway casually, like he doesn't have a care in the world.

It really is a shame he's insane. I watch the way his legs flex and move with each step, and the way his ass fills out those pants so nicely. I imagine that at any given moment he has women willing to crawl behind him just to get some attention. But that will never be me.

His words echo in my head as he reaches the end of the long hallway. *If I catch you before you reach those gates, then you're mine, Gia.*

I'm ashamed to admit how much those words affect me. I should not feel this way about him. Ever. He's a mafia boss, and he's a killer. He probably has so much blood on his hands that they'll never be able to be washed clean.

He finally reaches the end of the hall and heads to the right. I don't move until I'm sure he won't be coming back before quickly changing into the outfit and a pair of flat shoes that were tucked in behind an old trunk. And wouldn't you know, it fits pretty damn well. I'm a bit smaller in the chest, but I doubt most would notice it. I find a string in the storage area and pull my long hair up into a quick messy bun, and take a deep breath.

It's now or never.

With all the confidence I can muster I stride out from under the stairs and down the hall, careful to keep to the edge of the wall. I wish I had some makeup or something I could use to disguise my face, but this will do for now. I just need to find my way to the exit. And pray that if I run into anyone, they don't alert Nico or Dante, who I'm sure is also in on this little game.

When I reach the end of the hall, I see a small group of people chatting. I try to think of the best course of action. I glance around me and then I see a duster on a small table against the wall. I grab it quickly, and head toward the group of people, pretending to be working as I listen.

"What does she look like?" one of the women demands another. I'm not close enough to make her out, but she's about the same height as the other woman, but she has dark black hair that is tumbling and falling over her shoulders in soft curls.

"You're not allowed to interfere," the other woman informs her curtly. "So you don't need to know what she looks like. All you need to know is if you see the boss, you turn and go the other way. Now, all of you, get to bed

or get to work. And keep your mouths shut.” Then she pushes past the women, and I get my first real look at her out of the corner of my eye when I quickly turn and dust one of the vases on another small table.

I recognize her as the woman who brings me my food, and a small bead of sweat begins to form at the base of my neck. Will she recognize me and tell Nico or Dante where I am? Her eyes connect with mine, and I instantly see the recognition. But instead of surprise, I see approval, and a slow smile pulls at her mouth. She doesn't draw attention to me, but she does say sharply to me, “You, you heard what I said?” I swallow hard and nod sharply. What is she doing? “Good.” Then she walks by, without a look back.

I don't stare after her, not wanting to draw anymore attention. The other women are still talking, but most of them ignore me and keep on walking down the hallway that Nico went. Do I follow? Maybe one of them can show me another way out of here. I just need to be careful how I do it.

I decide to follow two of the women who are chatting animatedly, and most of their conversation revolves around Nico. Any other time I would probably be amused, but right now, I'm trying to listen carefully without giving away what I'm doing it; stopping every so often to dust a few things so they get farther ahead than me. And I keep my head down and averted when a couple of the security guards make their patrol. Neither of them even give me more than a cursory glance.

I catch up with the women when we reach the end of the long hallway, and encounter a set of curving staircases. I don't step out of the hallway, pretending to dust something along the wall, and keeping my face down in case any cameras are watching.

“I'm heading to the kitchen,” one of the women announces, and I glance over to see which one it is. She's the one that had been speaking earlier. I glance at the other woman, a slightly shorter blonde woman that shrugs and continues on down the stairs.

Now I have a choice to make. But it's a quick decision because the kitchen would have a back door. One that I can sneak out and head for the gate under the cover of darkness. Yes, that's what I need to do. I slowly make my way out from the hallway to the top of the right of the curved staircase and carefully look down. I bite my lip to keep from gasping when I see Nico standing there, his back to me as he talks to Dante and another man. Shit, how am I going to do this?

I look down at myself, and then remind myself that I can do this. I watch

the dark haired woman reach the bottom of the stairs and then head to the right and down a hallway, which I assume is the way to the kitchen. I don't even need to go near Nico. I just need to play this cool, and make sure he can't see my face.

I rub the duster over the ornate wooden railing. Damn, this place must take forever to clean with so many intricate pieces and designs. Even the spindles in this staircase are elegant and gothic. But I continue to dust each and every one at a steady pace. I can't panic. Anything sudden would get me noticed, and I don't want to draw attention to myself.

When I finally reach the bottom of the stairs, I don't even glance toward where Nico is still talking with his men, keeping my back to him as I stop to dust a couple more things. I barely keep from laughing when I hear Dante remark, "No one has reported seeing her. Maybe she's not making a break for it and is holing up somewhere thinking that she can wait you out?"

Nico doesn't reply for a moment. "I saw her go down the stairs from my wing," he grumbles. "Then nothing. She can't have disappeared into thin air."

"Want me to send out more men to see if they can put eyes on her?" the other man in their little huddle asks.

"No, I'll find her. If she's hiding, I'm sure she won't have gotten far."

I don't wait around to hear anymore, making my way calmly down the hallway and keeping my eyes peeled for an entrance to the kitchen or another way out. This hallway is much like the others with its paintings and decorative art, but it feels livelier. Like this is where the hub of the house is. A buzz of excitement goes through me. I can feel my freedom that much closer.

I reach the middle of the hallway when I hear the clanging of dishes and I head toward the sound. Just before I reach the door at the end of the hallway, I hear Nico curse behind me and then give a small laugh. "She's fucking changed into a maid outfit," he announces.

Oh, shit. He saw me on the camera. I fight down the panic. "She what?" Dante repeats, clearly surprised.

He doesn't reply, and that's when I feel his eyes on my back. I don't need to turn around to know he's spotted me. I keep on working, but his gaze never leaves me. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* Then I hear the laugh. That same laugh from in his office. "Clever, little mouse," he says loudly down the hall. Now I do turn my head to look at him, unable to stop myself. He's already heading down the hallway toward me, a look on his face that has the panic inside me

rising higher and faster.

I need to get out of here.

I don't waste any more time. I rush into the kitchen, looking around for the exit. The kitchen only has a couple of people in it, but they all look up at me when I enter. I ignore them and head straight for the back door. No one stops me or utters a word, and as soon as I'm through the door, I break into a run down the stone path. My freedom is so close. So damn close.

Until I round the corner and see him standing in the middle of the path, under one of the lights out here. He has his hands on his hips, and a triumphant smile pulls at his lips. How the hell did he get out here ahead of me? I skid to a stop six feet away from him, my heart pounding. He takes me in with a slow perusal, the searing heat of his gaze making my skin heat. When his gaze moves back up to mine, he rasps, "Nowhere to go now, *topolina*. Ready to surrender?"

I sneer at him. "Never." Then I turn and run back down that path, and head for a thinner patch of bushes I saw along the way. The branches pull at my clothes, but despite the outfit getting a bit torn, I manage to make my way through. I keep on running, but I quickly realize I'm now in a large garden, with many different paths. What the hell? Seriously, did whoever designed this place have a thing for mazes? This is just ridiculous.

I hear Nico's footsteps behind me and I quickly try to scope out a place to hide. I just need him to go past me so I can double back and get to the gate. The last thing I need is to get lost in here. He'll catch me for sure.

"I'm going to enjoy catching you, *topolina*," he calls out behind me, but still far too close to me for my liking.

I reach a set of stone steps that curl up and around some kind of stone wall. I hesitate, since it's going to take me farther away from where I want to be, but perhaps I'll get a better vantage point up there. And as I hear Nico getting closer, I know I don't have time to waste, so I rush up to the second level of this massive garden. From up here, I can see a large black three-tiered fountain in the center of the garden, and also what looks like a very old, but small mausoleum covered in ivy and greenery from where the vegetation is starting to take it back. I think briefly about hiding in it, but it's too open and exposed. He'll find me there for sure. I look at the other side and see a large metal gazebo in the far corner, also too exposed.

Damn it, now what am I going to do?

"What are you going to do now, Ms. De Luca?" he calls from below, but

I can hear as he approaches the steps. Shit. I need to figure something out. “You could just surrender, of course,” he adds as his feet touch that first step.

I make a split second decision and head for the mausoleum, skirting around behind it, pressing my back against the stone wall, and pray he walks by. I listen as he comes up the stone steps, and when he reaches the top, I hear him chuckle again. “You know, I thought for sure this was going to be over in about ten minutes,” he says conversationally, and I can hear him moving further into the courtyard. I just need him to go far enough in that I can head back down those steps and make a run for it. I very carefully peer around and see him striding past the mausoleum, a look on his face that I can’t quite decipher. “We’re heading into almost an hour now. You must be getting tired,” he reasons.

Not a chance, I think, as adrenaline pumps through me.

I continue to carefully edge my way along the side of the building, just needing to get to the front edge so that I can run for the stairs. He’s still walking, and I can hear his footsteps on the stone path. When I reach the edge of the building front, I stop and carefully move so I can peer around to see where he is. I bite back a curse when I see he’s not far enough away like I thought he would be. He would definitely catch me if I bolt for the stairs now. Shit.

Think, Gia, think. How do you get him to move further in?

“Come out, come out wherever you are, my clever little mouse,” he calls softly, turning slightly back toward the mausoleum, making me move back quietly and wait, heart pounding. “I know you’re hiding around here somewhere.”

I look down at my feet, searching for anything I can throw as an idea comes to mind. I see a larger-sized pebble, and quickly reach down to pick it up. When I peer around the side of the building again, I see he’s now facing away from me. I take a deep breath, make sure that he’s still looking away, and then throw it quickly to the right of him, smiling smugly when it makes the flower bushes rustle loudly. He turns towards the sound, his back still to me, as I rush from the side of the building and toward the steps. Then I hear him laugh and say, “Ah, there you are.” Then his feet are pounding on the ground behind me as he runs after me.

Fuck. I bolt down the stairs, running along the path as fast as my legs can carry me toward the entrance to the garden. As long as I can stay ahead of him, I can reach the gates.

Only, somehow, he gets ahead of me by some other path, and bursts out in front of me so suddenly I barely manage to skid to a stop, pivot, and jump away from him before he can grab me. I feel the brush of movement as he just misses grabbing the skirt of this outfit. Damn it. That was too fucking close.

He runs after me, and I glance back over my shoulder. He's right behind me, almost within grabbing distance, and I can see that his face is a mask of primal desire, the thrill of the chase making his dark eyes glow in the dim light from the moon and some of the small tree lights that cover some of the grounds. This is a hunter stalking his prey, ready to pounce.

A grim determination grips me and I push myself faster, and when I see a small, low wall to my right, I quickly grab it, leaping over it in the way that my old tutors taught me in the gym lessons my father insisted I do. I hear Nico curse and a grin splits my face as I run back down the path, doubling back toward the gate. My breathing is labored as I keep up the fast pace, but I barely notice. My freedom is so close. Nothing will stop me from getting it.

Of course, I probably should have figured Nico has another trick up his sleeve. Next thing I know, he's stepping out in front of me again, and I can't slow down this time. I crash into him hard enough, making him fall to the ground and not able to get a good hold of me. The tips of his fingers brush at my ankle, but I keep moving, kicking his hand away. He curses and growls, "Fucking hell," before I hear him get to his feet and rush after me.

I run down the path leading away from the garden, and right past Dante and his shocked expression. I give him a smug smile as I run by, careful to stay far enough away from him that he can't reach out and grab me himself. "I told you you wouldn't catch me," I gasp out as I run around the house and head for the front.

"I'm going to enjoy it when I get you, *topolina*," Nico grits out. "And you'll pay for that little kick."

"You'll have to get me first, and you won't," I yell back. But then it's my turn to curse when I get to the front of the house and realize I still have a ways to go before I reach the gates. No matter, I'll get there.

I reach another set of stone steps, these ones only three in height, and jump from the top, barely managing not to stumble when I land. I hear him do the same, but now, he's even closer than before. I glance over my shoulder and see him gaining on me. He no longer looks like he's enjoying this little game. No, he's ready for it to be over. And that means I'm in some real

danger of losing. Nico Armani is not known for losing.

I look frantically around, trying to see if there is some way I can lose him, and I see another path that splits off to the right and goes through some thicker foliage but is still heading in the direction of the gates. I need to get in there, and try to come back. Lose him in some of the thicker brush. There has to be a good place to hide.

Except, I know I've made a grave mistake as soon as I run down the path, and realize it doubles back toward the maze of a garden I just managed to run out of. Fucking hell. I hear him laugh, triumphant, and his steps slow when I find myself at a dead end of the maze.

I spin around, looking around to see how the hell I'm going to get away from him. My stomach sinks when I see no way out. The only way I might have a chance is to get through the thick brush, but considering this end has a bunch of rose bushes, I'll probably only end up cutting myself to pieces and getting stuck anyway.

I gasp for breath as I try to figure a way out as I watch him enter the maze, stalking slowly toward me. "You know, I hated this garden growing up," he tells me gravelly, watching me as I fight down my panic. "My mother insisted it was fun and something different, and made her the envy of all her friends. Only in actuality, it was a great way for my father to toy with me and anyone else he wanted to mess with. There are only a few ways out of it once you get in. I always told myself when I was old enough I would get rid of it all, and yet, here I am finding a much better use for it. Chasing a clever little mouse that is about to be mine."

"I will never be yours," I vow, unmoving. If I can't get out by going through the maze, I'll need to go through him. Though something tells me that taking down Nico is going to be a hell of a lot harder than any trainers my father sent to work with me when I was younger.

"And yet, here you are, trapped," he taunts. He stops a few feet away from me. Even dirty and breathing harder, he looks far too good looking in the low light. But I need him a little closer. "Game over, Gia," he tells me, giving me a mirthless smile.

"It will never be over until I'm free," I grit out between clenched teeth. *Just a couple more steps.*

He takes two steps towards me, and tells me firmly, "You've lost, and it's your choice if you come quietly or fight me."

I let a mocking smile pull at my lips. "Which do you think I'll choose?"

I'm not sure if it's luck, or he's not expecting me to fight, but I manage to land a kick to his thigh, close enough to his balls that he doubles over and I evade the hand that grabs at me before landing an elbow into his kidneys, making him groan and fall to the ground. I don't look back as I run back down the path and out of this fucking garden.

I reach the fork and go down the path I should have in the first place. He won't be getting up quickly, so I have enough time to make it. Exhilaration fills me as I reach the end of the path and finally see the gates in front of me. There are men spread out along the very long front fence, but none of them make a move toward me. They just watch me as I race down the path and finally get onto the paved driveway.

The driveway is circular, but at least it's on flat ground, and I don't have far to run once I round the corner. I can see my freedom. Taste it. Until I feel an arm wrap around my waist just before I reach the gates. Panic and fear envelopes me as I struggle and fight. "No!" I scream, struggling with everything I have, but considering how much running I've been doing, is far less than I need to have to escape his iron grip.

Fear, pain, and despair fill me as his free hand comes around to cup my throat, and he rasps in my ear, "You're mine now, little mouse."

I stop struggling, realizing he's not going to let me go. And I have no way of fighting him off. My eyes blur with tears as he spins me around, releasing my throat but managing to get me up over his shoulder. I lift my head and stare at the gates. At what should have been the start of the life I had always wanted.

But just like everything in my life, I've lost. And now I belong to a man that could break me in so many ways I wonder if I'll survive it.

CHAPTER 16

Nico



SHE'S MINE. *Finally, she's mine.*

The victory of winning this little game pumps through my veins when I reach the front door. Right behind it, is a pounding desire that has my cock hard as stone. Fuck, I don't think I've ever been this turned on. Running after Gia, trying to catch her, has ignited something inside me that has long been dormant. The need to chase, the need to capture, none of it lessened, even when she managed to get away from me, and felled me a few times.

She's a strong woman, despite her size. Cunning, wily, and resourceful. I would never have thought she would hide and then change into a maid uniform to sneak by. It was by chance I saw her face on the camera when she came down the stairs behind me that I realized what she was doing. I was impressed and amused, but in that moment I realized this woman can't be underestimated.

I should be pissed at her attempt to kick me in the balls, but really, can I fault her? I was taught to fight dirty, and clearly, she has a few of those tricks up her sleeve as well. I'll be feeling that elbow to the kidney for a few days, but what's a little pain when you know you're the victor?

I make my way up the stairs, heading toward my wing, and ignore the knowing grins of my men as I walk past. Some of the staff stare at me in shock, but none say anything. Well, all except Sofia, who watches me unsurprised, but if I'm not mistaken, a small light of disappointment is in her eyes as they land on the still woman over my shoulder. Apparently, she was rooting for Gia, and while I should be pissed, it's the last thing I'm thinking about now.

When I finally reach my room, I open it, close it behind me, and fish around in my pocket for the key. Surprisingly it didn't fall out in our merry chase. I lock the door, putting the key back in my pocket, and head toward my bathroom. I'm surprised Gia hasn't been fighting me, but perhaps she's accepted her fate and realizes it's futile.

I kick the bathroom door shut and set her down on her feet by the vanity. She sways slightly but rights herself, even though her eyes never meet mine. I put my finger under her chin and lift her face. Her red-rimmed gaze meets mine, and I see so much in her eyes that my chest tightens. An uncomfortable feeling spreads through me at the sight of her looking so lost, so defeated. This is not the strong woman I just spent over an hour chasing around my house and grounds.

I don't like it one bit. I want her fire. Her strength. Still, not one tear falls from her eyes as she watches me. But then I see beneath all of that is something else. Fear. More than I have ever seen before. A fear of me, of the unknown, I'm sure. I don't say anything as I watch her, trying to figure out how to handle this. Normally, I wouldn't care about her feelings, but something clicked the moment I caught her by the gates. She's mine. Finally, she's mine, and I won fair and square. But just because she's mine doesn't mean I want her to hate me.

This woman is far more than a captive to me. More than a possession. She's everything I want for myself, and while I may not have done this the way society would consider acceptable, I would do it all over again.

"You surprised me, *topolina*," I tell her in a low voice, careful to keep my voice calm. I can feel the small tremors working through her body. "And I am not surprised easily." She blinks at me, but says nothing. "I will not touch you tonight," I inform her. "But you are not returning to your room." Not only because I don't believe for a moment she won't try to escape again, but also because I want her close. I want her with me and not in that dark old room on the opposite side of the house.

"W-What?" she whispers, her eyes widening slightly.

"Undress and get in the shower."

Her eyes widen further. "B-But, you said that you, that we wouldn't—"

"I gave you my word, but we're both filthy," I cut in. "Your virginity is safe tonight, *topolina*."

She doesn't move, just watches me. "Then why am I getting in your shower?" she asks finally. Some of the fear eases in her eyes, but the

wariness is still there.

“Because you’re sleeping with me,” I inform her impatiently as I pull my shirt off and toss it to the floor.

“You want me to sleep in the same bed as you?” she squeaks.

I narrow my eyes at her in warning. “You really think that I’m going to trust you to go back to your room and not try to escape again?”

“I…” She swallows and wets her lips with her tongue. My cock twitches at the sight. I want to feel that tongue on my dick, but not tonight. “I gave you my word I wouldn’t try to escape again,” she manages to whisper.

“Then you won’t have any trouble sleeping in my bed.” I move my gaze over her maid outfit. “Now, get out of that outfit. As much as you can pull off anything, I’m tired of looking at it.” Not to mention, I’ll be speaking with Sofia to make sure the outfits are changed after tonight. Don’t need Gia getting any more ideas.

She glances at the shower and then at me, eyes taking in my bare chest. I bite back a smirk when I see her eyes trace over the tattoos that cover my chest and arms, and then taper down to my abs and the V below. Her eyes widen when her gaze moves lower, before she looks right back up and away from me, her cheeks flushing a bright pink. I bite back a laugh. Oh, my sweet, innocent mouse. She’s probably never seen a cock outside of TV or movies. Finally, she looks back at me and suggests, “If I promise not to run, will you let me shower alone?”

“No.”

She glares at me. “So you expect me to get naked, get in a shower with you, and think you’re not going to try anything?”

There’s that fire. Something settles inside me when I see it. “I have already said I won’t, and I’m a man of my word. Or have I not proved that already?” Her glare intensifies but doesn’t reply. “Now, I’m not going to tell you again. All of it off and into the shower, or I’ll take it off for you. Your choice.”

Neither of us moves, staring at each other. I’m sure I’m going to have to tear the fucking thing off her until she slowly, with shaking fingers, reaches up and peels it off, leaving her clad in nothing but a small white tank top, no bra, and a pair of simple black cotton underwear. I take her in, desire heightening. She swallows hard again as she removes the tank top and then underwear, leaving her bare.

Fuck. I have never seen a woman more beautiful, or perfect in my life. I

thought it the night Dante brought her here in nothing but a robe, and I'm thinking it again. She's small, and I vaguely wonder if she'll be able to handle me, but I quickly dismiss that. I've never been gentle, but with her, I will. The first time.

Her breasts are smaller than most women I've been with, but they're still a nice handful, and my fingers itch to play with her pebbled nipples. Hear her gasp, and feel her squirm as I squeeze them, making her feel the sensations that will have her wet and wild for me. I slide my gaze down her stomach to between her thighs. Her pubic hair is the same color as on her head, though neatly trimmed. I'll have to see about getting her waxed. Still, that's not something for now.

I lift my gaze to hers, and I hear her sharp intake of breath when I toe off my shoes and push my pants down, kicking them off. "In," I order her gruffly, pointing toward the shower.

She stiffly walks over to the shower, shivering as she walks in and presses herself as tight as she can to the back of the shower. I follow her in, flicking on the water, the body and rainfall showerheads hitting us both. I point at the shampoo and hold out my hand.

She hesitates but grabs it from the bench seat, handing it to me. As I wash my hair, I watch her, amused when she tries to look at any and everything but me. "I would suggest getting clean, *topolina*," I tell her after rinsing out my hair.

Her eyes come up to mine, before they slide away quickly. "I-I will once you're finished," she manages to get out, though it sounds like a struggle.

I bite back the impatient sound that wants to come from my throat, and instead I tell her gruffly, "No. Get clean now, Gia. I'm not waiting in here for you, and I'm not getting out until we're both done."

Her eyes come back to mine, flashing angrily. "What? Do you think I'm going to try and run out of here naked if you're not in here with me? I'm in the shower with a naked man, so I think I have a right to be uncomfortable."

"But I am no regular man, *topolina*," I remind her, taking her in. "I'm the man that's going to know you intimately, and there is nothing that I haven't seen before." Her body flushes at my words, but she doesn't move. "Now, you can either wash yourself, or I can do it for you. I know which I would prefer, but for now, that choice is up to you."

"God, you're a bastard," she mutters, and then reaches for the shampoo bottle I hold out to her. She turns her back to me as she pours shampoo into

her hands before setting the bottle down. I take her in, my dick throbbing as I watch as she pulls some sort of string out of her hair and her thick, dark tresses tumble down her back. Who knew such a sight could be so erotic?

I don't move as she continues to wash her hair, the water and soap cascading over her curvy body, making my hands itch to follow it. And when she tilts her head back to rinse the final bit out, her body arches forward, and I see the tops of her breasts, making me nearly groan. Fuck, this is torture. I should never have agreed to keep my hands to my-damn-self. But I stay still, unmoving, just watching, even as the water pours over me.

When she finally finishes, I bite back another groan and step forward until my body brushes her back briefly. I don't touch her with my hands, but by the way she stiffens, I know she can feel me. "Pass me the soap, *topolina*," I order in a low voice. She moves slowly and stiffly, letting her hair fall in front of her face and over her breasts, obstructing my view.

I look at the smooth line of her neck and shoulders, but I stiffen when I continue down further. There, on her back, in small faded lines, are scars. Fury surges through me. Before I can reason with myself, I reach up and grab the back of her neck, making her gasp. I can feel the pulse in her neck starting to pound fast and hard under my hand.

I bring my other hand up and trace along a few of the scars that criss-cross. Her body goes still as stone, and even with the sound of the water and rage filling my ears, I hear and feel her swallow hard. "Who?" I grit out between clenched teeth. She doesn't answer, just stares straight ahead, small trembles moving through her body. "I want an answer, Giulia. Who did this to you?"

"I'm sure you can figure it out," she mumbles tightly.

I let go of her neck, but put my hand on her shoulder, spinning her around to face me. She stares up at me, shocked. "I will not ask you again, Giulia," I growl, staring down at her. "Who. Did. This. To. You?"

"They took turns. My father used me as a teaching tool to show my brothers how to keep women in line. I was seventeen, and when they were done, my father had a surgeon clean me up as best as he could because he said that he didn't want to risk my being damaged goods to whoever he married me off to."

Those fucking bastards. I'll enjoy killing them all. "And they never did it again?"

She gives a small shake of her head. "My father forbade it. Even though

Marco wanted to since he had gotten so little time to practice on me.”

Her statements are matter-of-fact, but there is no mistaking the pain in her eyes. I’ve always known her family were bastards, but knowing they caused her this pain for no reason other than they needed a body to use, infuriates me. If it wouldn’t fuck up my plans, I would go and kill them all now, but it will have to wait. Instead, I focus on the woman in front of me. “But just because it was forbidden, doesn’t mean it stopped.”

She hesitates. “Marco tried once, but one of my father’s men saw him carrying me crying down to the basement, pleading with him to let me go, and my father came before Marco could land one lash. He took a beating from my father for going against orders, and he blamed me. Said I should have kept my mouth shut. So Marco beat me until I had a swollen eye, cracked ribs, and a broken arm. My father didn’t stop him from doing any of that.”

“Which arm?” I ask, barely able to get the words between my teeth. My jaw aches from clenching it so hard. She moves her left arm, and I wrap my hand around her wrist, moving my fingers up and over her smooth skin. There is no sign of the break any longer, but I feel her stiffen when I reach her forearm, and then again when I reach above her elbow. “He broke it in two places?” She slowly nods. I remove my hand from her arm, but then move to the other one. “And this arm?”

She blinks at me before answering softly, “Sebastian and Mateo broke my wrist when I was fifteen because I put my hand up to block their blows.”

I lift her wrist to inspect it closer, but once again, it seems her father ensured it healed because I can’t see any imperfections. Surprising even myself, I press my lips to the underside of her wrist, before lowering it back down and letting go. Her eyes widen on me as I look at her. “It will never happen again,” I tell her in a low voice. She doesn’t reply, not that I really expected her to. “Hand me the soap, *topolina*.” She turns to do as ordered, handing it to me. I briskly wash myself, before handing it to her. “Finish up.” Then I open the door of the shower, stepping out and grabbing a towel.

I briskly dry off before heading into my closet to put on a pair of sleep pants, and grab a t-shirt for her to sleep in. At the last moment, I grab her a pair of my boxers, though I would prefer she didn’t wear anything underneath. Still, why tempt myself?

I walk back into the bathroom, leaving the shirt and boxers for her with a towel. I stare at the steamed glass for a moment before grabbing my phone

from the vanity and sending a text to Dante as I walk out of the bathroom.

Me: I want all the information you have on the De Luca men.
Including the uncle and cousins.

Dante is quick to respond.

Dante: I'll have it on your desk in the morning.

I set my phone down on my nightstand, and turn to look out the window. I look down at the garden as I try to sort my thoughts. Knowing how brutally treated Gia was has me feeling things that I have never felt before. I want to avenge her, make her father and brothers suffer as she has suffered. That tiny slip of a woman stood no chance against them. And they knew it.

God, this woman is messing with my head in ways I can't even begin to understand. If my father were still alive, he would be furious with me. He always said women were for nothing more than breeding and to take the edge off. Never to interfere with business. That I wasn't to squander the empire he grew. Especially not because of a woman.

Yet, here I am, ready to put everything on the line for her. I give a soft, rueful chuckle. Fuck.

I turn when I hear the shower turn off and know she'll be stepping out soon. I need to get a grip, or this is going to be a very long fucking night. I give her another couple minutes before I walk back into the bathroom, unable to wait any longer. I walk in and see her dressed in my shirt, which is far too big for her and hits her mid-thigh, while trying to towel dry her hair. Desire hits me again at the sight, but I ignore it, making my way toward her.

She gives me a wary look, but doesn't say anything. I step up close to her and ask, "What do you normally do with your hair?"

Lowering the towel as she replies, "I blow dry it and then braid it so it doesn't get knotted through the night."

"Hair dryer is in the vanity drawer," I tell her as I make my way out of the bathroom and have a seat in the chair in my sitting area that faces the bathroom door. As she dries her hair, I realize I am well and truly fucked if I have no qualms about sitting here watching her so closely. If we were further along, I'd probably take out my cock and stroke it, thinking about how that hair feels in my fist as I fuck her mouth, or from behind. But it will come in time.

When she finally finishes, I'm too impatient to wait for her to braid it.

“Bring the brush and hair tie out here.” She looks at me in surprise, but slowly complies. I spread my legs and point between them. “Sit.” She swallows hard as she does as I ask, facing away from me. I take the brush from her hand, moving it through the tresses slowly, carefully.

Neither of us speak as I methodically gather her hair before splitting it in three sections. But as soon as I start to weave them, she asks quietly, “How do you know how to braid hair?”

I don’t answer her right away, instead, finishing the braid, securing it with the tie, and then setting the brush aside. Finally I tell her, “My mother had long hair, and I got in the habit of braiding it so that she didn’t get vomit in it when she would puke up her alcohol or drugs.”

She turns and looks up at me in surprise. “You made it sound like you hated her,” she says carefully. “Why would you do that for her if you were going to kill her?”

I arch a brow at her question. “It was before the death of my father, so at the time, I didn’t know the extent of her betrayal. Otherwise, I would have left her there. Though, now, I suppose I could thank her for teaching me that one skill.” I reach out, running my hand down her hair. It’s soft under my touch, and long enough to reach the middle of her back. Fuck, what I wouldn’t give to wrap it around my fist right now.

“You braid a lot of womens’ hair, huh?” she asks, the tone light, but the look in her eyes unable to hide that she’s not sure she likes what that implies.

I can’t help the smirk that pulls at my lips. “Jealous, *topolina*?”

Her expression instantly morphs into a scowl. “No,” she denies.

I sit forward, cupping her jaw. “I have never braided another woman’s hair that has been in my bed,” I assure her. “Nor will I in the future. The only woman’s hair that will ever get my attention is yours, *cara mia*.”

She glares at me. “Stop making fun of me,” she snaps. “I don’t care about who has been in your bed or hasn’t.”

“Mmmm, now I don’t believe that for a second.” I let go of her face, motioning for her to stand. Once she does, I follow suit and look down at her. “But we can worry about that another time. Get into bed, *topolina*.”

She doesn’t move, just stares at me. “I don’t want to sleep with you.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re not in charge, isn’t it?”

“Why do I need to sleep in the same bed as you? I told you I would stop trying to escape.”

This woman really tries my patience. “You agreed to be mine, Gia. And

that means if I want you in my bed, you get in my bed, no arguments. So get in the bed.”

She looks like she wants to argue, but finally decides against it. She makes her way stiffly to the other side of the bed from where I sleep, and climbs in, laying down as close to the edge as she can without falling off, and pulling the covers up to her chin. I nearly laugh, but instead take care of turning off all the lights. When I climb into bed, I have half a mind to slide over and haul her closer, but instead, I wait.

Neither of us speak, but it isn't long before I hear her breathing even out as she slips into sleep. I immediately move deeper into the bed, reaching out and pulling her from the edge and against me. I'm torturing myself, but I can't bring myself to care. Instead, I bury my face in her hair and breathe her in. Smelling myself on her, knowing that she's finally where I want her, I allow myself to fall asleep.

CHAPTER 17

Gia



I'M SO WARM. I snuggle into the warmth as my body tries to slip back into a comfortable sleep. But my brain is faster than my body, because everything comes flooding back instantly, and the reminder of where I am right now. And a couple more things become clear.

I'm no longer at the edge of the bed, but instead, pressed up against the very man that forced me to be here and is responsible for the loss of my freedom once again. He's also wide awake, smirking down at me. My leg is thrown over his hip and his cock is pressed tightly between my thighs, and there is no missing just how *awake* he is.

This is bad. Very bad.

"I have to say, *topolina*, that I have never had a woman spend the night sleeping in my arms, but I don't hate it," he remarks in a husky voice as he watches me. His hand, which I now notice is on my ass, flexes, cupping one rounded cheek lightly.

Mortification hits me, and I know my face is flaming. I try to pull away and whisper, "Let me go."

Of course, he doesn't. "Problem, *cara*?"

I clench my jaw and glare at him, making his smirk stretch to a grin full of smug amusement. "You know exactly what the problem is," I grit out. "Now get your hand off my ass and let me get up."

"It's a very nice ass," he points out conversationally as he cups it tighter, and I can't stop the small gasp that escapes. "At one point last night before you decided to turn around and burrow into me, it cradled my cock so fucking perfectly it was torture to even sleep. Though, a sleepless night with

you here is worth it if I get to have this against me.” He gives my ass another squeeze to punctuate his statement.

“I-I didn’t know what I was doing,” I manage to get out. “I was sleeping. You shouldn’t have taken advantage of that.”

“And yet, you were the one to turn to me, *cara mia*.” He winks at me. “Don’t worry, we can keep it our little secret.”

This man is going to drive me insane. “There is no secret. Now, let me go. I’ve done what you asked and slept with you, and now I’d like to go back to my room, please.”

“You can go back to your room after we have breakfast,” he replies firmly.

I want to argue, but my stomach growls, and I have to fight back the embarrassment. So I give him a stiff nod, which makes him chuckle. “I need to go to my room and change. Unless you want me to walk around in nothing but a t-shirt and some boxers.”

His eyes heat as he leans back to take me in. “Mmm, as much as I love you wearing my clothes, *topolina*, I don’t like the idea of another man seeing what’s mine. So we’ll make a stop at your bedroom for you to get dressed. But first...” I don’t know what to expect as he trails off, but when his hand slides from my ass up to cup the back of my head, I still. He leans down and murmurs, “I want a kiss, Gia.”

A kiss? He wants me to *kiss* him. I don’t move, just stare at him. Nerves build in my belly. I know I told him I wouldn’t fight him, but I was really hoping I would have some more time to get used to the idea of doing anything physical with this man. Especially considering I’ve never kissed anyone. Hell, I’ve never done *anything* with a man. “I, uh, I, umm, I don’t...” I stammer out, completely unsure what to do or say.

He just regards me patiently. “It’s a kiss, Gia. I’m not asking for anything more... Yet.” He lets that hang between us.

“Oh, sure, that’s going to make me want to kiss you,” I mutter sarcastically. I let out a surprised yelp when he gives my ass a quick slap. It’s not painful, more just a shock, and a slight sting. “What the hell was that for?” I demand.

“That is for being sassy,” he responds calmly. “Now, I’m not going to ask you again, Gia. I want a taste of your lips, and the longer you stall, the longer you’re going to be waiting for breakfast.”

I want to point out that I’m not a child he can spank when he doesn’t like

what I've said, but I bite my tongue. Instead, I purse my lips and press a quick, chaste kiss to his lips. "Happy now?" I huff, trying to pull away.

His grip tightens, and I bite back a growl of annoyance. "You call that a kiss, *topolina*?" he demands.

"You said a kiss, you didn't specify what kind," I argue.

He narrows his eyes at me. "You know exactly what kind of kiss I want. Now, stop stalling."

I glare at him, incensed, embarrassed, and desperate to end this whole encounter. "You really expect me to want to kiss you after everything?"

"At the moment, I do not care what you want, Giulia," he says, his tone hard. "You agreed to be mine, and you knew exactly what that meant."

"Stop throwing that in my face. Yes, I know what I agreed to, but that doesn't mean I have to be okay with it. Or not be terrified of what that means. Or do you not remember how much I don't know about men, other than what my family has taught me? So please excuse me if I'm not jumping for joy at the thought of being in your bed and doing all the things you want when all I know about it is how much it's going to hurt, or that I have no experience at all. Fuck, I'm twenty-four and I've never kissed a man, and you seriously think I'm going to pop that cherry and just figure out how to do it like you want?"

He says nothing at my words, just watches me. But then, before I can figure out what the hell he's going to do, he leans down and presses his mouth gently against the line of my jaw, just past my mouth. I'm too shocked to do anything but lay there, trying to understand the emotions and sensations moving through me. The feel of his lips on my skin is pleasant, and my skin tingles as he continues to make his way along my jawline, past my mouth, and starts on the other side, moving my head to get better access.

Shivers work through my body, my hands come up to rest on his chest, and my eyes close. "You are right, *topolina*," he murmurs against my skin. "I am expecting things from you that you don't know. And you have no idea how much it pleases me that I will be your first. The first to touch your smooth skin; the first to taste your pretty lips; and the first to show you all the ways I can make you beg me for more, and cry out my name so loudly that the entire house hears you. Because I will be your first and your last, Giulia." Then his mouth moves and is on mine before I can reply.

At first, I don't move as he kisses me. But slowly, I open up, trying to copy his movements. I know I'm awkward and completely unskilled, but he's

patient and shows me what to do, and before long, I'm falling into him, completely unable to focus on anything else but his mouth on mine.

When he finally pulls away, I open my eyes and stare up at him. His eyes are dark, burning with desire, and I don't argue when he growls, "again," and takes my mouth. This time, I know what to do, and meet him head on, drowning in the sensation. He tastes of darkness, danger, but also something tempting and sweet. Something I didn't know existed before now.

When his tongue sweeps along my lower lip, I instinctively open wider, letting him inside. I should probably worry about morning breath, but the only thing I can focus on is him, and the way he's now dominating our kiss. I curl my fingers into his chest, trying to hold on to something to ground myself. I gasp when his erection jerks against my center, and feel a pooling between my legs and a burning heat through my entire body. I should be terrified, because even with my almost zero experience I know exactly where this could lead, but instead, I press against him tighter, wanting more of that sensation.

He growls low in his throat before he suddenly yanks his mouth away from mine, and rasps, "Fuck. I knew you would taste so fucking good, *topolina*." He presses one more hard kiss to my mouth, and then pulls away. "But as much as I would love to show you more, I have things to see to. Otherwise, I would continue your education, but it will have to wait." He gives my ass a quick slap and then starts to pull away.

I quickly move my hands away from him, my face flaming as I roll away, and quickly get out of bed. Now that I'm further away from him, I have to try and mask my embarrassment. God, what the hell was I thinking?

"None of that, *topolina*," he warns me, making me look over at him as he heads for the bathroom. And there is no way I can miss the tent in his sleep pants either. I quickly lift my eyes away and back to face, where he gives me a smug look. He knows exactly what I was looking at. But thankfully, he doesn't comment. "I'll get dressed and then we'll go to your room."

I nod, and sit nervously on the bed to wait. Silently, I curse myself.

What the hell, Gia? You basically just gave him all the permission he needs. Now he's going to expect more.

There's no point in stressing about it now. It's done, and I just need to make sure it doesn't happen again. I cannot let him have the upper hand. I need to bide my time until I can leave. Or at least convince him to let me go and give me the freedom I want. Away from him, my father, my brothers,

and anyone else looking to use me for gain.

I look over my shoulder at the bathroom door, hearing him moving around. I suppose it could be worse. Nico may be a man I should be avoiding like the plague, but so far, he has treated me well enough that I don't think I have to fear him hurting me. I mean, even last night, after everything, he didn't beat me, or force me to do anything. Well, other than forcing me to shower with him, but even then he surprised me.

I saw a side of him I didn't think he had. The softer side that I doubt many know about. I saw such rage in his eyes when he asked me about the scars on my back. Or when I told him about the breaks I suffered under my brothers' hands. There was a tenderness as well, and something moved inside me when he kissed the wrist that had been broken. It had been light and gentle, much like the kisses he gave me on my jaw.

Or when he brushed and braided my hair last night. It was the perfect time for him to hurt me, having me at his mercy, but instead, he gave me a peek at who he is underneath the mafia boss exterior. I reach back and feel the braid is still mostly in place, with a few strands having worked themselves out. Who knew a man as big and tough as him could do something that most would never even give a thought? Or label as a woman's job?

"Let's go, *topolina*," he says, pulling me out of my musing. I turn and watch as he strides out of the bathroom, now wearing a dark gray suit, with a black dress shirt underneath the jacket, and a gold chain peeking from underneath the collar. His hair is styled, and he looks every inch the mafia boss he is. And even with the reminder, I can't help but see how attractive he is.

I stand and follow him quietly, feeling even more confused. So much so that I barely even glance at the stairs when he leads me out of his wing and into the wing where my room sits. I need to get my head on straight. Remember who and what he is.

When we reach my room, he unlocks it and gestures for me to go in. "Get dressed, *topolina*, but don't take too long."

I head to the bathroom, and shut the door behind me. I half expect him to open it, but surprisingly, he allows me the privacy. I take care of business, brush my teeth, and wash my face. The routine of it is enough to settle me down, and I head into the walk-in closet, trying to figure out what to wear. Finally, I settle on a pair of black leggings and a soft white sleeveless tunic

that hits me mid-thigh. I pair it with some flats and then unravel my braid to let it fall around my face and down my back in soft curls.

When I walk out, I find Nico in the sitting area, looking at his phone. When he hears me emerge, he looks up. His eyes heat as he takes me in, and slowly he stands, approaching me. “Beautiful,” he murmurs when he stops in front of me. “Though I have to say, I’m disappointed you didn’t find another onesie to wear. Perhaps a fox this time, huh? Wily and clever.”

I look up at him in surprise. Did he just tease me? What the hell is happening? “I’m afraid that whoever bought the clothes didn’t include any more,” I manage to reply as calmly as I can.

“Shall we?” Then we head for the bedroom door. He doesn’t lock it behind him, which I assume means this is where he’ll be sending me after we’re done. We make our way down to the dining room, which is set and ready for us when we walk in. Though, I’m surprised to find Dante already seated. He doesn’t bat an eye when he sees me, just nods and greets us both. Nico takes his seat after pulling out my chair.

I narrow my eyes at him. What the hell is he trying to pull? Acting nice to me? Being all gentlemanly? I don’t trust it for a second. He smirks at me, clearly unfazed and turns to look at Dante. “Any news?” he asks him casually.

The door behind him opens, and in walks the woman from last night. She wheels in a small cart with some plates, and when her gaze meets mine, her face is blank, but her eyes say she’s disappointed I didn’t get away. Well, at least someone in this house is possibly on my side. I give her a small smile, a silent word of thanks, when she sets my breakfast in front of me. Interestingly, she serves me first, then Dante, and finally Nico. Nico gives her a narrowed-eyed glare, which she ignores. I’m not sure if she’s brave, or stupid. Dante lets out a low chuckle and grins when Nico glares at him. “What did you expect to happen?” he says to his boss.

“I expect her to remember who signs her paycheck,” Nico gripes, glaring once again at the woman.

“Well, I’m sure you can understand why I like these two a little more,” she tosses back with a shrug. “They’re far prettier than you, after all.”

My eyes widen at her words. What the hell? If anyone spoke to my father or brothers that way, they would be dead. Or wish they were before they were finished.

“Sofia,” Dante sighs. Ah, so that’s her name.

“What?” Sofia asks innocently. “She’s gorgeous, and I have to say you’re much more handsome than he is, or you’ll get all butt hurt, and I have things to do today other than dealing with your jealous ass.”

Wait, Dante and Sofia are in a relationship? I glance at the other man, and then back at Sofia. Dante looks amused but also exasperated, and there’s a wicked gleam in their eyes that can only speak of familiarity beyond colleagues. I look at Nico, who doesn’t look surprised by this, so I have to say he knows.

“You’re looking to get your ass reddened, woman,” Dante warns her.

Sofia grins wickedly. “Promise?” she breathes seductively, moving around the table to stand close to him.

“Enough of that,” Nico orders, irritation in his tone. “Keep your weird-ass foreplay to yourselves when you’re on the damn clock.” He starts to eat, and then turns his attention to me, arching a brow when he sees I’m not doing the same. “Problem with the food, *topolina*?”

I blink, and look down at it. It’s a mixture of eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage, and fruit. “Ah, no,” I say softly, quickly grabbing my fork.

“If you don’t like anything, just let me know, honey,” Sofia says, pulling my attention. “Chef can whip pretty much anything up you like.”

“Oh, no, this is delicious,” I tell her softly, giving her a shy smile. “Please give my compliments to them. All the meals I’ve had so far have been wonderful.”

Sofia nods, pleased. “I will.” She looks at Nico and arches a brow. “Anything else for you, oh great leader? Perhaps you’d like me to scrub and polish the silverware as well?”

I bite back a laugh. And Nico called me sassy this morning. This woman has it in spades.

Nico glares at her. “No,” he bites out. Sofia grins at him, winks at me, and blows Dante a kiss before she pushes the cart out of the room. Once she’s gone, Nico glares at Dante. “You need to have better taste in women.”

“Perhaps, but she certainly is a lot of fun,” Dante chuckles, eating his own food. Nico grumbles under his breath, and I can’t help but smirk. “And how are you this morning, Ms. De Luca?” Dante asks me. His eyes hold a glint of humor. “I hope after your adventure last night you got a pleasant sleep.”

I try not to blush, but I know it’s a losing battle. “It was fine,” I say, avoiding his gaze.

“Which reminds me.” Nico calls out for Sofia again, who saunters back in momentarily. As soon as she stops close to him, he levels her with a hard glare. “Care to explain to me why you didn’t alert me to the fact that Gia was dressed as a maid?” he asks darkly.

I freeze, as the realization hits me that he must have seen her interact with me on camera. Shit. I slowly set my fork down, ready to intervene, but Sofia doesn’t look the least bit worried. Instead, she replies, “You told us not to stop her if we saw her. Since she was in disguise, I acted like she was one of my staff.”

His glare deepens. “And you didn’t think that you should have alerted Dante or I? Or you just wanted to see us chasing our tails?”

“And ruin her plan?” Sofia scoffs. “If I had, you’d have caught her far earlier, and you can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy the chase, Nico.”

“She didn’t help me,” I interject, worried that Nico is about to lose his temper with the woman. Nico’s gaze slides to me, and I hold his stare, even though my heart is pounding. “So you can’t punish her for following your orders. Besides, what does it matter now? You caught me, and I lost. So it’s over and done with.”

“It matters because it seems someone needs to be reminded who they work for,” Nico replies, his gaze going back to Sofia. “I should fire you.”

I gasp softly at that threat, but Sofia doesn’t lose her smile. Instead, she replies, “Go ahead. But we both know you don’t want to deal with hiring a new head housekeeper.”

“I’d prefer it to dealing with you,” he tosses back.

She scoffs. “And I keep telling you, you like that I don’t quiver and simper every time you talk. And I make sure things get done around here.”

Before Nico can reply, I quickly interject, “Please, Nico, don’t fire her.”

His gaze comes back to me, assessing. “Why do you care, Gia?” he asks bluntly. “You don’t know her.”

“Because I don’t want to be the reason she loses her job.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “And, you think she’s going to be an ally to help you escape?” There is a bite to his voice.

I lift my chin. “I told you I wouldn’t try and escape again, and I’m a woman of my word,” I remind him tightly. “So, no, it has nothing to do with that. I would think that a man of your intellect would know the benefit of keeping someone like her close. She’s probably also the one who would tell you if something was wrong here before your men.”

“You think that, do you?” His tone suggests that he thinks I’m crazy.

It’s my turn to narrow my eyes at him. “Anyone that puts up with your growly nature surely has a reason. And considering she’s sleeping with your right-hand man, and you haven’t fired or killed her before this, you obviously trust her. So why would you get rid of that? It’s stupidity if you do.”

Sofia eyes me for a moment, approval in her gaze. I don’t even bother looking at Dante. Instead, I focus on Nico, who’s watching me thoughtfully. “I like her,” Sofia announces. “And she’s exactly what you need, Nico. If she was some simpering mouse that fell in line, you would be bored out of your mind. And as for everything else, stop being difficult. Now, I have things to see to, so if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get back to them.” Then, without waiting for an answer or permission, she saunters back out of the room without a backwards glance.

Nico’s gaze never leaves me. “You’re going to be trouble around here, aren’t you, *topolina*?” he finally remarks, moving back to his food, clearly done with the discussion.

“If you’re going to be a jerk to your staff, then yeah, probably,” I say with a shrug.

He and Dante share a look, but neither reply to that. No one speaks while we finish eating. When we’re done, Nico sits back and says, “I’m going to give you a choice, Gia.”

I look at him in surprise. “A choice?” I repeat.

He gives a abrupt nod. “You can return to your room for the day, or I can show you to the larger library if you would like to spend your time there for a while.”

I blink at him. “Wait, you have another library?” He smirks but nods again. “I want to go there.”

He looks at Dante who says, “I’ll take her.”

“Fine.” He looks back at me. “I want to trust you as a woman of your word, Gia, and that you won’t try to escape, but until you prove it to me, you will have a guard. Do you understand?”

I swallow down a retort, and instead I nod. The more freedom I get, the more I can bargain with later. “Okay.”

He watches me carefully for another moment, before he says, “Alright. Dante, meet me in my office when you finish.” Then he stands and moves towards me. I remain seated, but when he stops beside my chair, he grips the back of my neck, tilting my head back just enough that he can lean down to

take my mouth in a quick hard kiss. “Behave, *topolina*,” he warns, before releasing me and walking out of the room without a backward glance.

I stare after him, face heating. Suddenly, the library isn’t as interesting as the man walking away. Because I want him to come back and kiss me some more.

CHAPTER 18

Nico



“HER FAMILY KNOWS SHE IS MISSING,” Dante announces as soon as he hands me the folder on the De Luca family.

I arch a brow as I open the folder and set it in front of me. “And how do you know this?”

“Our mole on the inside sent through the information a moment ago. The entire family went into a closed door meeting. Then they called in the men who were watching her place, and killed them for letting her get away,” Dante answers, checking the message on his phone again.

“So, they think she left, not that she was taken,” I muse thoughtfully.

“It would appear that way, or at least our mole interpreted it that way. Also said that the eldest son threw some glass and was shouting about how their father should have let him deal with her and this would never have happened. They’re mobilizing the men to search for her.”

“They will never find her.” Of that, I’m certain.

“I have another informant close to the uncle, and he is livid. But that could be because her missing means he just lost his ace in the hole to close the deal with the Sicilians, if he is making a deal with them.”

“Which means we’re going to have some very pissed off De Lucas roaming the streets and possibly our territory. And we’re certain that none of our men or staff are going to let anything slip?”

“Not if they value their lives,” Dante says with a cold smile, his blue eyes glinting dangerously.

“Perhaps a reminder should be in order.”

“I’ll see to it. And I’ll make sure Sofia and the house staff know as well.

After last night, all anyone is talking about is how she almost managed to get away from you.” He smirks at that last little bit of information.

I scowl. “I was never going to let her get away. And everyone needs to keep their damn mouths shut. That way they don’t slip and say it to the wrong person.”

Dante nods. “I’ll add that to the reminder. But I’d like to point out, you started that little game, and you know these things never stay quiet forever.”

“They just need to stay quiet long enough for me to make my next move.” And speaking of... “Where are we with the raid on Seamus?”

“It went off without a hitch. We left tell-tale signs that it was the Russians, but also left a couple of things that could point to De Luca. Eion hasn’t come back with any kind of news, but what I understand from our informants, Seamus’s hit on the Russians went according to plan. Now they are in a little mini battle.”

I smile triumphantly. “Good. Then things are moving along nicely.”

“I’m a little concerned that we have left no possible traces of ourselves,” Dante says carefully. “We’re pointing to every other major family, but not us. Wouldn’t that immediately make it so that it’s pointed our way?”

“Possibly,” I agree after a moment. “Let’s see how things play out, and we can adjust accordingly. But have contingencies in place in case Seamus or Morozov get wise and come calling.”

“We are ready if they do,” Dante assures me.

“Good. Keep an eye on the situation with the De Lucas and let me know any updates as soon as they happen. They’ll eventually come calling here to either see if we have her or ask for our help in locating her.”

“Knowing Leonardo, he’d rather slit his own throat than ask you for help.”

I give a cool smile. “Then we’ll hope for that then, won’t we? But I’m not all that sure it will be Leonardo that comes to me.”

“You think Giovanni or one of his sons will?” Dante asks in surprise.

“Giovanni wants to take over, and what better way than to have someone help him? I’m the bigger of the bosses, and he would no doubt bargain with me to ensure I help him. The question is, what will he bargain with? More territory? I doubt he would be willing to give up any part of his power.”

Dante’s eyes widen slightly. “You think he’ll try to bargain with his niece.”

“A strong possibility,” I agree.

“But if he’s in a deal with the Sicilians...”

“He’ll either break it to side with me, or he’ll string me along and try to take over my territory with the help of his new ties to the Sicilians through whoever he’s negotiated with for Gia’s marriage.”

“These fuckers have no loyalty to their family, do they?” he remarks in disgust.

I arch a brow at him. “And you do?”

“The only ones I am loyal to are you, my mother, and Sofia. Anyone else I have nothing to do with. Not even that bastard father of mine or his fucking family.”

When it comes to the Esposito family, they are a sore spot for Dante. They consider him a bastard and want nothing to do with him. Not even caring it was their son that raped Dante’s mother. Though I also figure the color of his skin has something to do with it. Still, his father tried to keep him as a soldier, dangling the possibility that he would one day inherit it all as a carrot. Dante knew it would never happen, so he finally left. Much to his Father’s anger. His loss is my gain, considering Dante is one hell of a soldier.

“Noted. But until we know which way things are going to lean, keep your ear to the ground and make sure to let me know of any developments.”

“Are you going to let them know you have her?” Dante asks me curiously as he moves towards his desk.

I don’t bother hiding my scowl at the thought of them ever getting near her again, especially after everything I found out last night. “Eventually, but only when I am ready.”

Dante eyes me, then looks at the door. Seeing it closed, he asks me bluntly, “You’re falling for her, aren’t you?”

“No,” I reply instantly, firmly. “I don’t do love, you know this.”

“I didn’t either,” he points out. “But with Sofia...”

I huff out an annoyed breath. “You really are going to tell me you’re falling in love with that shrew of a woman?”

Dante chuckles. “As much as you like to intimidate her, you and I both know you like her. And you like how she responds to you. I don’t know if I love her, but the idea of her not being around doesn’t sit right with me. And I can admit that I enjoy not going to an empty bed at night. She knows this life, knows what she can and can’t ask, and sees me as more than your underboss. It’s not as terrible as I thought it would be, but perhaps it depends on the woman.”

“You sure you don’t want me to check her purse for your balls?”

He flips me off. “All I’m saying is, don’t lump Giulia De Luca in with your conquests. She isn’t that type of woman, and you know it.” Then he turns away, clicking away at his computer, clearly done with the discussion.

I scowl at him but then turn back to my own work. I have better things to be doing than worrying about my relationship with Gia. She’s mine, and I don’t need to label it. Which is why I need to focus on the folder in front of me. If I’m going to take down the De Lucas and make them pay for what they put Gia through, I need to have all the information at my disposal.

The longer I read, the more I realize how fucked up that family is. And it seems Marco has a heavy hand when it comes to punishment. Suggesting a very short fuse on his temper. A weakness I can exploit. Leonardo is much calmer, but much like his son, he can be impatient. Age has helped him handle it better, but there are definitely some decisions that he’s made that weren’t for the better because he moved too quickly. Namely, he didn’t think my father would ever come in and take over a huge chunk of territory he didn’t feel was important.

The other boys, Sebastian, Mateo, Dario, and Antonio are lower on the family totem pole, with most of them preferring the results of the business rather than the work they are supposed to be doing. Still, they are also known for being harsh in punishments they dolled out, and if things go too far, their father and older brother just clean up the mess and let it be.

Then there is Carmen, wife number three to Leonardo. Now, she is a piece of work, and perfectly suited to be the wife of a mafia boss. She’s never had a child, but then again, what does it matter considering how many sons Leonardo has now. She’s living off his hard work, and with the respect of a woman of her station. She’s also known for being a bit of a bitch if you double-cross her. Looking at the picture of her, I can tell that she loves to spend money on nice things, but the majority of her is fake. Fake hair, nails, boobs, and probably fake lips from the size of them in the picture.

None of this information surprises me. It merely irritates me and leaves me searching for more. Everyone has skeletons, and I need to find theirs. I flip through more of the file until I find a picture of Marco leaving an apartment building in the heart of their territory. His hair is mussed, and there’s a self-satisfied look on his face that a man only carries after fighting or fucking. Considering his hands are clear of any injuries in the photo, it would stand to reason the latter is the reason for the smirk on his face. I

search through the rest of the folder, but nothing else comes from it.

I look over at Dante and hold up the picture. "Where is this?"

Dante narrows his eyes as he looks at the photo. "Looks like one of the highrises over in downtown Queens." He turns back to his computer and starts typing away. "It's the Diamond Highrise. Only those with some major coin live there."

"I want a list of all occupants in that building. It seems that our boy Marco has been seeing someone there, and I want to find out who."

Dante nods and sends off a text. "Our guys will have the list shortly. You think whoever he's seeing will be important in taking them down?"

I shrug. "Could be he's just dipping his wick in easy pussy, but Marco is calculating. And I doubt he would fuck someone in his social circle unless it benefits him in some way." Though I don't also tell him that my intuition is telling me Marco is definitely up to something. I glance at the file again. He's in his late-thirties, which means he's probably getting some pressure from his father to settle down and produce some heirs for their empire. He could be trying to forge alliances on his own, woo someone his father has chosen for him, but I don't think so. Knowing Leonardo, he has women picked out for each of his sons that he feels will be advantageous as a match.

Marrying for love is not common in our world. Even for sons that are lower in ranks.

"Well, fuck," Dante says, surprise in his voice.

I look at him expectantly. Instead of answering me, he sends it to my computer. When I look, I arch a brow. Well now, isn't that interesting? And it changes some things. "I think we need to have a meeting with Eion again. Let's find out what we can from him on why Seamus's youngest daughter is living in the middle of De Luca territory and how none of us have picked up on it until now. And then we need to figure out what the hell kind of plans Marco is making with her."

"You think he's trying to overthrow his father?"

"Or Seamus."

Dante's brow arches. "Then the boy is fucking stupid if he thinks Seamus is going to give up without a fight. Hell, I'd be surprised if Seamus didn't already know about it and is just biding his time to see how things play out."

On that, I can agree. But then again, Seamus hasn't always been the brightest in seeing things right under his nose. "We'll keep this information between us until we figure out how to play this. Let me know when the

meeting with Eion will be.”

“Will do,” Dante replies.

We work in silence for the next while, and I’m pleased to see the numbers at the stash-houses that Carlo is now overseeing have risen to where I want them. I make a mental note to do another spot check soon. Never hurts to keep people on their toes.

I eventually get curious to see what Gia is up to and open the camera app on my phone. The room is so damn big it takes me a few minutes to see her curled up in one of the large chairs that my mother placed near one of the large windows, reading a book. I can’t quite make out the expression on her face through the camera, but she seems to be into whatever she’s reading, biting her lip every so often. I narrow my eyes. What the hell is she reading?

Finally, I can’t stand it anymore, and get to my feet, heading out of the office and down the hall to the library. When I open the door, I find Davide just inside, and when he sees me, he steps out, and closes the door behind him, leaving Gia and I alone. Not that she’s noticed my presence, still reading, completely engrossed. She doesn’t even look up when I reach her, stepping behind her chair, and looking down over her shoulder.

I arch a brow at what I’m reading over her shoulder. It seems my sweet little mouse likes to read romance novels. And currently the scene she’s reading is pure filth, considering the man is fucking the woman into the mattress while she’s got her arms tied above her head. Fire shoots through my veins at the thought of Gia in that position. Fuck, I’m definitely going to have to see about that. And from the way she’s biting her lip, I’d say she’s enjoying it. She might be a virgin, but she’s no innocent when it comes to knowing about sex if this is what she reads.

She lets out a gasp of surprise when I lean down, cupping her throat gently and whispering in her ear, “Does that excite you, *topolina*? Reading how he has her at his mercy, able to do whatever he wants with her. I bet it makes your pussy nice and wet, just thinking about it.”

She swallows hard under my hand, and she slams the book shut, making me smirk. “I-It’s just a book,” she rasps out, clearly embarrassed, refusing to look at me.

“Is it? Then why did you just slam it shut, hmm? Maybe I want you to read it to me. Let me see what you like.”

She turns her head slightly and glares at me, embarrassment still darkening her cheeks. “You don’t need to make fun of me.”

I arch a brow. “You think I’m making fun of you?”

Her glare deepens. “Yes, I do.”

I chuckle. “*Topolina*, the last thing I want to do is make fun of you.” I tighten my hand on her throat ever so slightly, making her eyes widen in reaction. “What I want to know is what about this book makes you want to read it. Because books are nothing like real life. And those men, they would never measure up to a real one.”

She gives me a taunting look as she replies, “In your case, you’d be the villain of the story. And you have it backwards. It’s the real ones that can’t live up to the fictional.”

“Ah, but villains have much more fun. None of those pesky morals and good intentions getting in the way. So when the villain gets the girl he wants, he can show her all the dark and naughty things she’s secretly been dreaming of.” I can’t resist nipping at her ear, making her gasp. “Because no woman wants a nice guy in her bed, *topolina*. As much as women want a nice guy on their arms, in bed, they want the villain. Isn’t that right, Gia?”

“I-I don’t...” she stammers out and then trails off, her eyes fluttering closed as I continue to trail my lips against her jaw.

“You were so engrossed in your book when I came in, you didn’t even look up from what you were reading,” I continue, moving down to the smooth line of her neck. “So I think that you like what you were reading, *cara mia*, and I want to know what about it excites you. Were you picturing yourself in her position? Completely helpless while your sweet little pussy was being fucked? Would you scream or would you beg for more, I wonder?” Her breath hitches, and when I move my gaze to hers, she’s staring straight ahead, eyes glazed over as she takes in my words. Even through her bra and shirt, I can see her nipples are pebbled. It seems Gia De Luca has a naughty side, and I don’t think I have ever been so hard in my damn life thinking about how I’m going to bring it out of her. “I can’t wait to find out,” I breathe, pressing a kiss to the pulse in her throat, before gently nipping at it, making her give a low moan.

“Nico,” she rasps, the book falling to the floor as she brings her hand up to clutch my wrist. But instead of pulling it away from her throat, she grips me tighter.

“Mmmm, yes, I want to hear you say my name just like that when I’m deep inside you, Gia,” I tell her. She shudders, her eyes blazing hotter as she slowly turns her head to look at me. “But I also want to hear you scream it,” I

add, before I lean forward and press my mouth to hers, unable to hold myself back any longer.

She may not be skilled, but the woman makes up for it with enthusiasm. She meets me head on, not shying away like I thought she would. I waste no time in removing my hand from her throat, and lifting her from the couch, letting her wrap her legs around my waist. I use one hand to grip her ass, working the other into her thick hair, gripping it in my fist and holding her in place as I devour her mouth.

I carry her to the wall beside the large window, pressing her tight against it. Fuck, this woman, she heats my blood in ways I've never felt, and I can't get enough. I want to take her right here, feel her squeeze so damn tight around my cock. But I won't. I might be a villain in her story, but I won't fuck her the first time against a damn wall.

She gives a low moan into my mouth when I grind against her, letting her feel what she's doing to me. She doesn't reciprocate, not that I expected she would, but she doesn't push me away either, her arms come up around my neck, and into my hair, much like mine is in hers. Her nails scrape lightly along my scalp and send streaks of fire down to my balls.

I rip my mouth away from hers, moving it along her jaw and neck again, before I get to the top of her simple shirt. Fuck, I want this off of her. I look up at her, and see her watching me with heated eyes, ready and willing to give me whatever the hell I want. I have to fight the urge to give in, to tear the shirt to shreds and feast on her. Instead, I watch her as I move my hand from her hair and down along her front, over the swell of her breast, and purposely brushing across her straining nipple. She sucks in a sharp breath, and I give her a slow, smug smile. She doesn't stop me as I move to the hem of her shirt, pushing under it, until I feel her heated skin. She quivers under my touch, and goosebumps follow my fingers as I make my way up to her bra, cupping her breast in my hand. Her eyes go wide as I use the pad of my thumb to rub and then pinch at the hardened peaks.

"Mmm, do you like that, *topolina*?" I ask her in a low voice, watching her carefully.

"I-I-I," she stammers, swallowing hard and letting out a small whimper when I pinch her nipple. Give her that little taste of how pleasure and pain can meld together perfectly.

"You need to use your words, Gia," I instruct, moving my hand to the other breast and giving it the same treatment. "Do you like this?" I ask her

again, pinching a little harder this time.

“Oh, God,” she whimpers. “It hurts, but it...” She trails off when I pull my hand away.

“But it feels good, doesn’t it?” I whisper, pulling my hand from her shirt. “You know what would feel even better, Gia? My mouth. I bet I could make you feel all kinds of good things with my mouth on your pretty tits. I could suck, bite, and soothe them.” Her mouth drops open at my words, but the heat in her eyes tells me she’s on board with the idea. “Though, maybe, you want me to be the villain I am and not ask you, huh? Just push up this shirt, and suck you into my mouth.” She blinks once, twice, and then swallows hard. Her grip in my hair tightens ever so slightly, like she’s not ready for me to stop. And that’s all the encouragement I need. “Then it’s a good thing I’m no hero, isn’t it?”

I don’t waste anymore time, pushing her shirt up over her breasts, reaching behind her to quickly undo the clasp on her bra and pulling the cups down. And before the first gasp leaves her mouth, I lower my head and take one hard nipple into my mouth.

Sometimes, being a villain has its advantages.

CHAPTER 19

Gia



OH. My. God. I have never felt anything like this. Books don't even get close to describing how it feels to have Nico's mouth on me. Or how the sensations moving through me make me want to both crawl out of my skin and pull him closer. Or maybe it's him, but the man is seriously driving me insane.

I should be pushing him away, but all I want is more. More heat; more suction; more nips of his teeth. Enough to heighten the sensation and cause a little pain, but also make me arch into his mouth, and score my fingers on his scalp. I'm starting to think he likes it when I do that, because he groans and sucks a little harder every time I do.

Desire builds in my core, and I'm getting slicker with each suction of his mouth. When he switches to the other breast, I almost beg him to stop, unable to handle anymore. But another part of me tells me to shut the hell up and enjoy this. After all, I agreed to be his, so why should I fight it? Rationally, I know I shouldn't allow him to throw me off course, but my hormones are on fire, and I have no desire to put out the flames.

I squirm in his grip, my center rubbing against him, and I gasp when I hit my clit at just the right angle, making my pleasure sing higher. It's nothing like when I touch myself in the shower to get off. It was the only place in my apartment that I knew didn't have a camera, and even though I had no idea what I was doing, I figured it out quick enough. Still, right now, the only thing I want is to rub against him over and over again, trying to get to the edge.

I grind into him, making him moan, before he pulls his mouth away from

me, and lifts his head to stare down into my eyes. His face is flushed, his eyes burning into mine, as he rolls his hips, giving me exactly what I need. My breath hitches as streaks of sensation move through me, and I drop my hand from his hair to grip at his shoulders. “Fuck,” Nico hisses. “That’s it, Gia, grind on my cock. Show me what you need.”

I barely think about the order, letting my body take over as I move over him. Even with two layers of fabric separating us, the friction is enough to have me climbing higher toward my orgasm. I need more, but how the hell do I ask for more? The words won’t leave my mouth, and my eyes can’t leave his.

Suddenly, he stops moving, and the fire in his eyes dims, confusing me. But then I freeze in shock and horror when he turns his head sharply and barks, “What?” to whoever is behind him. Oh my God. I wrench my hands away from his shoulders, scrambling to pull down my shirt and fix my bra. I don’t even listen to the reply of whoever it is, but Nico lets out an annoyed sigh. “Fine, I’ll be out in a few minutes. Now leave.” His head turns back to me, and I quickly turn away to avoid his gaze. “No point in playing shy now, *cara mia*,” he says, but I still don’t look at him. He reaches up and tilts my face toward him with the palm of his hand. I want to look away, but his eyes hold me captive. “We’ll finish this later.” It’s a statement, not a request.

He eases back, sets me on my feet, staring down at me with an intense expression on his face. Then, he turns around, walks back to the chair, and leans down to pick up the book off the floor. He stares at it for a moment, before a smirk pulls at his lips, and he holds it out to me. I don’t move forward, just stare at him. “Take it, Gia. Finish reading it, but I want you to make note of what gets you excited, because we’ll be discussing it later.”

“It’s just a book,” I mumble, moving forward just enough to take it out of his hand. God, I have never been so mortified in my entire life. “Nothing really to discuss.”

“Come here, Gia,” he commands. The tone of his voice sets me on edge and I glare at him. He narrows his eyes at me in warning. I huff out a little sigh and move toward him. He pulls me into his arms, and slams his mouth down on mine. The heat between us rises instantly, and I sink against him, until he abruptly pulls away and rasps, “We’ll be discussing all kinds of things later, and most of them are going to be about how I’ll be tasting you in ways that will make those fictional book heroes pale in comparison.” Then, he pulls away, turns on his heel, and leaves me standing there staring after

him like an idiot.

When I hear the library door shut, I set the book down on the couch, dropping beside it, and then bury my face in my hands as I try to hold in the scream that's bubbling up in my throat. God. God. What the hell is wrong with me? What the hell just happened? Did I really just let him do that?

I need to get a grip. I need to be thinking about how to get out of here, not how he makes me feel, or the way he expertly plays my body. Which means that whatever plans he has for later, it's not going to happen. I'm not sure how I'm going to distract him from that, but I'm resourceful so I'm sure I'll figure out a way. Hell, if I have to, I'll feign being sick and find a way to make myself puke so he's so disgusted with me he'll stay far away. Yes, that could work.

I lift my head out of my hands, and let out a yelp when I see a smirking Sofia standing in front of me. "What are you, a ninja?" I gasp out, staring up at her.

"You learn to be light on your feet around here," she replies, her smirk turning into a grin. "Now, I'm sure whatever has you looking all morose has to do with the man who just left looking far too satisfied with himself, so I figure it's about time you and I get to know each other. Which is why you and I are going down to the kitchen."

I blink at her in shock. "We are?" I glance around. "I thought Nico said I have to stay in here."

She scoffs. "And when have women ever listened to a man? Are you going to try and escape?" She arches a brow at me. "Because I'll tell you if that's your plan you won't get very far. Not because I'm scared of Nico, but because my man will tan my ass, and while a spanking is fun, I don't relish the idea of not being able to sit properly tomorrow when I have a crap ton of paperwork to do. And I suppose I don't want to piss Nico off enough that he would fire me, but he's the least of my concerns."

She finishes speaking and I can only blink at her. "I, uh, I promised no more escape attempts. So, no, I won't try to escape." That wouldn't stop me from checking out the exits should I ever decide to change that, but for now, I know I need to bide my time.

She gives a short nod. "Alright then. Let's get going." She turns on her heel and stalks to where Davide is waiting for us, arms crossed over his chest as he stands sentry in front of the door. "Don't bother arguing," Sofia tells him bluntly. "We're going to the kitchen, and if I have to kick you in the

balls to get you out of the way, I will. You can follow and I'll take the fall when Nico finds out and loses his shit. So we can do this easily, or you can be an idiot and stand in my way."

Davide says nothing as he assesses her. Finally he looks at me and narrows his eyes. "No funny business," he warns. I just nod, and he looks back at Sofia. "Anything happens to her and it's going to be my ass too, so you better behave, woman."

"You're nowhere as fearsome as Dante," she sneers at him. "But if you want some pointers, I'm sure I could get him to help with that." He glares at her, but doesn't reply, and instead turns and opens the door, waving us through.

I feel like Nico is going to jump out from behind a door at any point as we make our way down to the kitchen. Though when I pass one of the doors, I swear I can hear his voice coming from behind it. Sofia doesn't react though, so I guess I'm hearing things. But by the time we get down to the kitchen, I'm feeling giddy.

Walking in, I take in the large industrial looking kitchen. Nico or his parents didn't spare any expense in here, and from the amount of people, I'd say he doesn't skimp on the staff either. My father's kitchen isn't this grand, though he also didn't skimp on appliances. Still, it looks like the man shouting in Italian at the people around him actually knows what he's doing. A few people flinch when he throws a utensil at one of the other cooks, who expertly dodges it and then just keeps on mixing whatever is in front of him.

"Romeo," Sofia barks, making the chef turn toward us, face dark red and eyes wide with anger. But when his eyes land on me, they cool and assess me quickly. "This is Giulia," Sofia tells him, giving him a pointed look. "Our guest."

I'll give it to Romeo, he doesn't even blink at that. Then again, I guess I couldn't expect him to really correct her and call me a prisoner. Instead, he narrows his dark eyes and purses his lips. "Too damn skinny," he complains, looking me up and down. "What, you do not like my food?" He curses me a bit in Italian, and a small smirk pulls at my lips.

My father's chef is a silent man, rarely saying anything, and I find I like Romeo's blunt nature far better. "It is delicious. I'm sure if you keep cooking for me that I'll fatten up in no time," I say to him in Italian.

His eyes soften, but he doesn't lose his scowl. "Man doesn't want to fuck skin and bones," he informs me crudely, making Sofia roll her eyes and shake

her head at him in exasperation. “We’ll fatten you up. Now, why are you in my kitchen?” he demands of Sofia.

“I’m in the mood to bake and Gia is going to help,” Sofia answers.

“In my kitchen?” he sputters, clearly insulted. “What is wrong with my desserts?”

“Nothing, you old bastard. But sometimes a woman likes to work and talk, and I want to make tiramisu. And we both know that you like mine over your own.”

He glares at her. “You are lucky I don’t have enough time today. Fine, but you do not bother me or my people. And stay out of the way.”

Sofia rolls her eyes at him, but then leads me over to another area with a separate prep table, oven, and fridge. “Romeo doesn’t like to bake,” she tells me with a wink. “So this space is never used except if Nico is entertaining, and then usually he brings in a pastry chef, or I help out. ” She looks at Davide. “Might want to pull up a chair because we’re going to be a while.” He glares at her but does as she suggests. She turns back to me and asks, “How much baking have you done?”

I blush. “I was usually on my own for desserts, so I taught myself how to bake. I love it.”

She nods approvingly. “Good. Then I’ll show you how to make my famous tiramisu. It’s Nico’s favorite, and you will impress him with your skills.”

“Maybe I don’t want to impress him with my skills,” I mutter.

“Of course not. Women do not need to impress men, it’s the other way around. We have a wider selection, but still, it never hurts to show you are skilled at something. With a subtle reminder that you are the one making the food, and you can easily use it to show him that he’s not all powerful.”

I blink at her in shock. Wait, did she just tell me to show Nico I could cook so that I had a way to poison him? She cackles at my expression, turning to grab all the ingredients and appliances we’ll need. God, I don’t know whether to be afraid of this woman or impressed. Still, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to get to know her a little. “How long have you worked for Nico?” I ask her curiously after she shows me how to start the recipe.

“A few years,” she answers. She glances over at me with a smirk. “The last guy left this place in a state. I’d never seen such a mess. Nico had no interest in getting it sorted and left it up to me. I fired almost everyone and started fresh. Pissed off quite a few people, but Nico never questioned me,

told me to handle it, and that's what I did. Probably helps that I've never been afraid of him like some of the others here. Hell, I saw one girl almost throw herself off one of the balconies when he walked by just to avoid him." She shakes her head ruefully. "Got rid of her as soon as I could. Plus, she couldn't clean worth shit. She was more into gossiping and playing on her phone."

"Why aren't you afraid of Nico?" I ask curiously. "Most people would have a healthy fear of a mafia boss." My father's staff certainly did. Though that probably has to do with the fact that he kills anyone on the spot he feels like, and my brothers do the same. When Carmen came along, she too followed suit, and it was hard keeping staff. It hadn't been that way when my mother was alive, though, now that I think about it.

Sofia gives me a wicked grin. "I'm from Sicily, and I grew up in a house of made men. My mother died when I was a little girl, and my father never remarried. I learned how to handle them since they raised me. Lord, my brothers loved to fight every chance they got. And they were some of the wildest men you'd ever seen. Probably why they're some of the favorites of the bosses over there. So when I applied for the position here, and Nico hired me, I told myself he couldn't be any scarier than my brothers or the men back home, and I was right. But the key, *cara*, is to know what battles to fight. So as hard as it is, it's best to bide your time until you know it's the right one. At least, that's what I've been told, and with Nico, I don't tell him about things he doesn't need to know. The ones you hear me make a fuss about are the ones I want him to know."

It doesn't take a genius to realize what she's trying to convey to me. She knows I want to get out of here, but until I can figure it out, I need to bide my time, be careful. I give her a small smile. "I got that feeling when you were arguing with Nico this morning. Does he always threaten to fire you?"

"At least once a week," she replies carelessly as she mixes the ingredients together and grabs a pan. "It's become routine now. If he was actually going to fire me, he'd do it and be done. Or he'd kill me."

I shiver at that. God, it sometimes shocks me that Nico can be so cold-hearted and violent. Especially considering how he was with me in the library earlier. Wait, no, I'm not going to think about that. That is the last thing I need. Still, I can feel my face heat, and I try to ignore it, blaming it on the heat of the kitchen. "I bet Dante would be upset if he killed you," I remark instead.

Sofia shrugs. "I learned a long time ago to never rely on a man. Dante is a

good man, and right now, things are great. But men in his position change over time. They either become too hard due to this life and their role in it, or they die protecting their boss. I take it day by day.”

I don’t know why, but her response saddens me. “So you don’t think that it’ll be permanent?”

Again, she shrugs. “There are no guarantees in life, darling, so I try to enjoy life as it comes and not try to predict the future.” Then her lips pull up in a wicked grin, and she adds, “But the sex is damn good, and I’m enjoying it.”

I laugh. “How long have you guys been spending time together?”

“You mean how long we’ve been fucking?” she asks bluntly, making me stare at her and blush. She cackles. “There’s no point in beating around the bush, darling. Dante and I have been bumping uglies, as you Americans say, for the past six months. Neither of us is tired of the other yet, and as long as he keeps me satisfied in bed, I’m happy to put up with most anything I find annoying about him. You’ll find you’re the same with Nico soon enough.”

I flush but don’t answer that. Something tells me that if I do, it’s only going to encourage her more. “Well, I’m glad you two are enjoying each other. Do you go on dates when you’re both off?”

She scoffs. “Men like Dante don’t date, and I’m not the kind of woman that wants a fancy dinner. We’ve had a few nights where I’ve cooked him something because he gets back after Chef has left for the day, but that’s about the extent of it.”

I frown. “Wait, so you don’t want him to take you out or anything? I thought that was par for the course when a man was interested in a woman.”

She shakes her head. “Darling, if there is one piece of advice that I can give you, never expect men to do the things you think they should be doing. Especially not in this life. In this world, women are for very few things, and most of them won’t waste time trying to woo you. As for me, I don’t mind it. I don’t have any interest in sitting in a crowded restaurant with fancy food that I’ll barely eat and talking about mundane things. It’s not like I can talk about things that we both deal with out in public anyway. So I say skip all that shit and get to the fun stuff.”

“But what if you decide you want to get married or something? Don’t you think it’s important to know things about each other so you’re not fighting all the time?”

“You’re a romantic, darling, and that’s fine for you, but for a woman like

me, I know I probably won't be settling down with a husband and babies. And I'm okay with that. Dante and I are having fun, and I'm happy with that. We'll sort everything out if it changes." She arches a brow at me. "Why all the questions? Are you thinking along the same lines with Nico?"

"Nico?" I scoff. "Of course not. I'm just his little prisoner. Nothing more."

She snorts this time. "Darling, you're fooling yourself if you think that man doesn't want you in his bed and his life."

I give her a bitter look. "I'm nothing to Nico, and he's going to get tired of me soon enough."

She rolls her eyes. "You may have started out as a prisoner, but that man isn't going to let you go, Gia. Nico has always been a possessive man, and he also goes after what he wants with a singular focus. And trust me, you could do a whole lot worse than him. I've heard he's a machine in bed."

I try not to fidget at her words. "I don't care what he's like in bed," I say as we put the pans we made in the fridge.

"Darling, every woman cares what a man is like in bed. If he doesn't know how to use his fingers, mouth, and cock to please you, then don't be wasting your time." My face flames as the images of Nico and I in the library, and this morning in his bed flash through my mind.

Sofia cackles. "Oh, now, I knew something was up. Care to share?" She nudges me in the side with her elbow.

"Nothing to share," I lie.

She gives me a pitying look. "I hate to tell you, darling, but it's written all over your face that you and Nico have something going on. Hell, when I saw you in the library, all I could see was the mussed hair, like he had been running his hands through it, and your lips were red and swollen. I know all about what a woman looks like when a man is making them feel good."

I bury my face in my hands for a moment and groan. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing." I lift my face and wince at her knowing grin. "Look, he kissed me and...did some other stuff, but that's it, and it's not going to happen again."

"We'll get back to the other stuff in a minute. But if you think that man is going to do all that and not finish what he started, you're in for a rude awakening. Besides," she smirks, "I don't think you're as repulsed as you like to think you are."

I scowl. "Of course I am! He kidnapped me and is holding me here

against my will.”

“It may have started out that way, but if I’m not mistaken, he gave you a chance to leave, and you agreed to his terms before you did all of it, which makes you no longer his prisoner, but his willing captive, correct?”

“Willing isn’t the word I would use.”

“Fine, whatever you want to call it, but the way I see it, you have two choices. You can fight it at every turn and wear yourself out over it all, and piss Nico off in the process... Or you can make the best of it and see what happens. Maybe he will get tired of you and allow you to leave and live the life you want, or maybe you decide you don’t want to go and stay here. Though, I’d like to point out there are a hell of a lot of women out there that would love to be in your position.”

Jealousy flares at her words before I can crush it down. “Then I’ll happily trade places with them.”

“That flash of green in your eyes says otherwise, Gia, darling,” she taunts smugly. “If I were you, I’d give some serious thought into making your time here a hell of a lot more pleasurable, if you know what I mean.”

“So you think I should become his whore?” I demand bitterly.

She doesn’t even flinch at my tone. “Women hold a lot of power, Gia. A whore is someone who is expecting payment after the deed is done. You would be giving yourself the freedom to take control of your life in the way you want.” Her face turns serious. “I know exactly who your family is, Gia, and what they’re capable of. And what they have put you through. People in my position like to talk amongst ourselves. And I know that you’ve been sheltered, unwillingly, your entire life. So I say take your power back and do whatever the hell you want. Because your family certainly hasn’t let you, and Nico is giving you that shot.”

She has a point, but I still don’t know that I’m ready for everything she’s suggesting. “I don’t think me sleeping with Nico is going to change my situation. If anything, he’ll probably just get tired of me faster and ship me back to my father.”

She shakes her head. “Darling, you’re never going back there. Nico won’t allow it. And if he does get tired of you, I think you’ll find that he’s reasonable enough and you might just get the freedom you’re craving so much.”

“So you think I should sleep with him and hope I’m so good in bed that he’ll agree to let me go and live my life away from the mafia world?” I ask

dubiously.

“Men have done a lot of things in the past for good pussy, so why would you be any different?”

I sigh. The idea is ludicrous. “Besides, I don’t know what the hell to do with a man. I’ve never been with one.”

She pauses and then purses her lips. “Yes, that could be a problem. But something tells me Nico isn’t bothered by that from what I saw earlier. Perhaps he’s excited to teach you things. But I can always tell you a few tricks.” She sobers after a moment and adds, “And while I know that the idea of sex with Nico, or any man, frightens you, perhaps you should think of it this way. It is your choice of who you give your virginity to. Not your family’s or whoever they try to marry you off to. Yours. And in this moment, Nico is giving you that choice. He may be rough around the edges, but he is a good man, and he will never force himself on you. He may try to persuade or seduce you, but if you say no, then he’ll stop, no matter how much he may not want to. Because deep down, he’s a good man, a fair man.”

Honestly, that’s what I’m kind of afraid of. After our little session in the library, it’s clear the man knows what he’s doing, and he doesn’t find my innocence off-putting. And it makes me think of last night when I was sleeping in his bed. He could have easily done anything he wanted to me, but instead, he merely let me sleep. I don’t know of any other man that would ever do that. And it frightens me how much I liked it. I should be fighting tooth and nail to get away. But where would I go? God, I’m so confused and I have no idea what to do about it. “Thanks for the offer, but I think I’m going to hold off for now,” I say with a small smile to Sofia. Hoping she will let the conversation go.

“Suit yourself, but if you need some advice, or if you have questions, let me know. Now, how about we bake some cookies? I’m craving something sweet.”

I nod and smile. We get to work, but her words keep spinning around and around in my head. Do I really want to use my body to get out of here and hope that I’m good enough for Nico to let me go? Because something tells me it could be him that convinces me to stay.

The man is far too dangerous, and I need to be careful. Especially where his body is concerned.

CHAPTER 20

Nico



“**FUCKING HELL,**” Eion hisses as stares at the picture in front of him. He looks up at me. “None of my team know she’s there, which means she either found the place on her own, or her father knows and there’s a reason he hasn’t shared with the rest of us.”

“Odd, don’t you think that she’s allowed to live there with no security?” I remark, no inflection in my tone. “Or, perhaps, you are not the head of security that you thought you were if something like this sneaks by you.”

He scowls at me, clearly not liking the insult I just levied at him, but at least he has the good sense not to lash out at me. Instead he bites out, “Do you really think that if I knew I would have left her unprotected? Makes me wonder if she’s actually there or if someone is using her name to throw people off.”

I glance at Dante briefly over his shoulder when Eion pulls out his phone to look through something. Dante gives me a subtle nod, letting me know he will look into it. I wouldn’t put it past whoever Marco is fucking to do something like that to throw people off the trail of whatever he is concocting.

After another couple moments of silence, Eion looks back up at me. “I’ll go and check out the place myself.”

I arch a brow. “You’re just going to walk into De Luca territory and investigate?” I ask carefully. I don’t know whether the man is brave or stupid. “Seamus won’t sanction that.”

“You’re not the only one who knows how to get into places unseen,” Eion replies. “Besides, if it is one of Seamus’s girls, I should know about it so they can be protected. As much as I hate their fucking father, those girls

have been damn sweet their entire lives. Well, except for the oldest girl, but she's married off to one of the families back home. Hasn't come back in years. Think she's got a kid or two now."

"Any of the other children showing signs of being unhappy with their father?" I ask carefully.

Eion snorts. "We're Irish, Mr. Armani. We've got hot-blooded tempers, and we don't mind fighting. Seamus and his kids are no different. All of them have had a tiff at one point or another. Lately, things have been quiet, but with our fight with the Russians, it could be that anything they are pissed about is on hold until it gets sorted." His lips pull up in a small smug smile. "Seamus is fucking pissed as hell, and the Russians have decided to get even. Even struck one of our businesses the other day, killing a few men and taking some of the money and guns stored in the basement."

"And the Russians haven't insisted it wasn't them?" I ask, though I'm not really surprised. The crazy bastards will take credit for any damn thing, which is exactly what I'm counting on.

Eion arches a brow. "They're crazy fuckers. Honestly, I'm surprised they haven't taken it as an invitation for all out war and taken out Seamus, but they probably have some kind of grand plan they're trying to make work."

That tracks, and I've already prepared for such a thing. "Fine, then we don't have to wonder if there are any disgruntled family members that might be thinking of colluding with the De Lucas for a takeover," I summarize.

"There's been a rumor going around about the De Lucas having a secret girl somewhere in the family," he remarks, watching me. "Could it be that he's going to meet whoever is watching over her and then using Seamus's daughter's name as a ruse so it's not suspicious?"

"You assume those rumors are true?" I ask, my mind sharpening at the mention of Gia. More and more people finding out about her isn't something I want, but I'm prepared for all possibilities. Dante was careful, so there is no way of tracing her back to me unless one of my men opened their mouths. If they value the lives of not only themselves but their families, then they'll make sure to keep them shut.

"Don't see why not. Those De Luca fuckers are just as batshit as the rest of us. But I imagine if they are hiding her away, she's probably ugly or has some sort of disability or impairment. Otherwise, why would they not have married her off by now?"

It infuriates me to hear those words coming out of his mouth, but I stay

calm and keep my expression completely blank. I shrug and reply, “Not my concern if she is. All I care about is you finding out the information I want.”

“I’ll get on it. See what I can dig up.” Then he stands and leaves the room without another word, leaving the picture behind.

Dante and I don’t speak until we’re back in the car, and he asks, “What do you think?”

I narrow my eyes slightly. “I think Seamus might be either getting brave or stupid and using his daughter as a ruse, but at the same time, it could be that he’s using this as a way to test Eion. See if he notices that one of the kids has slipped into enemy territory.”

“Do you think Seamus and the De Lucas agreed on the space and agreed to leave the girl alone? We don’t involve children, so it could be plausible.”

“Hmm, yes, I suppose. Still, I don’t like missing pieces, and this feels like something big. Something they were all hoping no one would notice.”

“Or they’re getting brazen and letting you know they don’t care if you or anyone else knows they’re working together or have a truce,” Dante points out grimly. “We are larger than them on their own, but if they merge, whether by force or marriage...” He lets that hang between us.

“To do that would be an invitation for war, and we all know that no one wants to do that here. And we have our own allies we can call should we need them.”

“Still, doesn’t sit right with me that this is happening and our men never caught it.” His eyes go hard and cold. “I’ll be seeing why.”

“Good. And check where the rats are from the other families. I want to make sure none of them are in any places they shouldn’t be or feeding information to them.” It’s no secret we all have moles and rats in each other’s organizations. But we also make sure to utilize them smartly

“I’ll look after it personally,” Dante answers.

We just make it onto our street when my phone rings. “Speak,” I order, impatiently.

“Nico,” Giovanni De Luca says briskly into my ear. I still, but calmly wait for him to start talking. “You know, I thought your father taught you better manners than this,” Giovanni scolds me, clearly irked I’m not showing him the kind of respect he feels he deserves.

“Well, my father is dead, isn’t he, so I’m sure you can see how well that turned out. What can I do for you, Giovanni?”

I can all but feel his anger coming through the line, but he manages to

hold himself back as he says, "I'd like to arrange to speak with you. Neutral territory, of course. Perhaps this evening if you're not too busy doing whatever it is you young men do nowadays."

The thinly veiled insult doesn't go unnoticed, but instead of calling him out on it, I reply, "That depends on what you want to talk to me about. And if Leonardo wants to speak with me, then why is he having you do his bidding? I thought you two were above that."

My own subtle dig doesn't go unnoticed either, and the ice in his tone makes a smug smile pull at my lips. "My brother is dealing with some family business he needs to give his full attention. Of course, I've offered to handle things as needed to keep from overburdening him. We have some family business he needs to give his full attention to."

"Well, I hope everything is alright," I say with mock concern.

Giovanni can see right through it, but still says in a completely fake sympathetic tone, "I'm afraid his daughter has gone missing, so I'm sure you can understand how that would leave him a bit preoccupied."

If he's trying to be subtle about trying to gauge if I know about her, he's failing miserably. "I had no idea Leonardo had a daughter," I say, letting a small inkling of surprise enter my voice. "And congratulations to Carmen, since I didn't know she had a kid."

Giovanni snorts. "No, she's not Carmen's daughter. She was his second wife's. He's been taking care of her, and sent her off to some of the best boarding schools in Europe. But she's disappeared, and of course, you can imagine he's putting all his focus into finding her."

"Of course. I'll have my men keep an eye out and let you know if we get any information of course," I assure him.

"Excellent. Now, how about we meet at *La Famiglia's* at eight?" he asks briskly, obviously tired of keeping up the fake ruse of concern. "I'll ensure we can discuss things in private of course."

"I'll meet you there," I confirm.

"Excellent. I'll have my assistant make the arrangements. Good day." Then he hangs up abruptly, not giving me a chance to respond.

"Eight o'clock, *La Famiglia's*," I repeat to Dante. "Get your men working on that information, and I want answers before I leave."

"Consider it done. And I guess your suggestion was right after all. He mentions Leonardo's daughter and how they're trying to find her, and then wants a meeting with you. You think he's going to offer her, or he's trying to

find out if you have her?”

We pull in through the gate, and he pulls up to the front door. “I’ll find out tonight,” I reply as I climb out of the car. “After all, he’s clearly up to something, and I want to find out what it is and how I can use it to my advantage.” We walk inside, and I nod at Tomasso when he steps smoothly in behind me. “Is Davide still with my guest in the library?” I ask him absently but stop abruptly when I hear his answer.

“No. He’s with her and Sofia in the kitchen,” Tomasso informs me. I turn to look at him, my eyes narrowing. “Sofia insisted,” he continues, his eyes flashing uneasily. “They haven’t left in hours, and she’s not made one attempt to escape.”

I don’t like knowing that Sofia and Davide went against my orders, but seeing as Gia has kept her word, I let some of my anger dissipate. “And what are they doing in the kitchen?” I ask darkly.

“Uh, they were baking the last I saw. Kitchen smells delicious,” he replies.

I turn my head to glare at Dante, who is holding back a grin. “I will fire her,” I vow, though without much heat behind my words. “Circumventing my orders?”

Dante falls into step with me as we head for the kitchen. “Maybe she figured she was bored in the library,” he suggests. “Besides, are you really going to complain if they made us desserts? I can think of worse ways for them to spend their time together.”

“Until she figures out how to poison me,” I mutter darkly. As much as I’d love to think that my sweet little mouse is going to settle into her life here, I know she wants her freedom. However, after our little encounter in the library earlier, I know exactly how to convince her to stay.

Thinking of that, my entire body heats, and I know I won’t be able to wait much longer before I have her completely. My body craves her like a drug, and I need my next fix. And this time, I’m going to taste all of her.

When we reach the kitchen, I walk into a lot of noise, but the only thing I can focus on is the sound of Gia laughing. It’s a sound I don’t think I’ve ever heard before, and it hits me right in the chest. I want to be the one to make her laugh. I want to be the one to make her smile. Only for me, no one else. I battle the jealousy as I walk quietly toward where she and Sofia are happily mixing something in bowls. Tomasso was right that the kitchen smells heavenly, but I can’t bring myself to care much when I see the pure happiness

on Gia's face.

If I'm not mistaken, there is some flour on her cheek, possibly in her hair, and definitely on her clothes, but she doesn't care. She expertly finishes mixing whatever she's making before she reaches over to grab a bag of chocolate chips and pours them generously into the bowl. She hasn't noticed me yet, but I see a smug smirk on Sofia's face when my gaze moves to her. I glare back, but she doesn't seem to care, instead, winking at Dante, who is just behind me and no doubt grinning like a fool.

I move quietly behind Gia, bracing my hands on the counter on either side of her, making her stiffen. "I hope you're making some of that for me, *topolina*," I murmur in her ear. "Because I do have a sweet tooth."

I can see the flush working its way up her neck and into her face, and I barely hold back the grin that wants to pull at my mouth as she refuses to turn and look at me. "They're for whoever wants them," she says softly.

"Mmm, but perhaps I want them only for myself. I'm not a man to share, after all. And when I find something sweet, well, I'm downright possessive," I continue in a low voice in her ear. A small, delicate shiver works its way down her spine, and a dark pleasure moves through me. I move my hand from the edge of the counter and up toward the bowl.

Suddenly, she lifts a small hand and smacks it away, surprising me. "I don't know where your fingers have been, so don't you dare put them in there," she warns me, turning her head to glare at me.

I'm a little surprised she slapped my hand, but instead of getting upset, I give her a smug smile. "And just where do you think they've been, *topolina*? Because not long ago, they were on your—"

"Shut up," she hisses at me, interrupting and shooting me a mortified glare, even as she casts a wary look at Dante and Davide. She doesn't even glance at Sofia, who is grinning so wide I'm surprised her face hasn't cracked yet. "We are not discussing that, ever. And it's never going to happen again," she vows, turning her body so that she can stare at me directly.

A dark kind of desire to show her wrong she weaves its way through me at her words, and anticipation of showing her, intertwines, making my cock hard and a smirk twist my lips. She blinks at me, a wary look coming across her face. "Oh, how wrong you are, *topolina*," I purr, getting close and taking a deep breath, her scent filling my lungs, making everyone and everything else completely forgotten. Now, I can only focus on the woman in front of me.

“Remember what I said, darling,” Sofia suddenly says, drawing my gaze. She looks at Gia, ignoring me. Then finally turns to me. “Since you seem to be distracting my sous chef, you can both get out of the kitchen so I can get these finished or no one is going to be getting anything.”

“We’ll be talking about your disregard of my orders later,” I warn her. But right now, I have much more pleasurable things to focus on.

Sofia rolls her eyes, uncaring. “Fine. Just get the hell out so that I can finish this.” Then she turns back to the batter and the cookie sheet laid out in front of her.

“Come along, *topolina*,” I say, turning my gaze back to Gia. “It seems we have some things to discuss.” She looks like she’s ready to argue again, but I don’t give her a chance; instead I swiftly lean down and put my shoulder against her belly, and lift her up. “We’re not to be disturbed,” I tell Dante, who grins widely but nods. Davide and Tomasso have the brains to keep their expressions neutral, but I know they’re just as amused as my insolent right-hand man.

Gia doesn’t say a word as I walk out of the kitchen and head for the stairs, but I know she’s either fuming or terrified by the trembling of her body. When I reach the bottom of the steps, I hear her mutter, “Should have found a book on poison after all.”

Amusement bursts through me. I slap her on the ass just hard enough to have her yelping in surprise, and I reply drily, “I think we both know you much prefer the porn you were reading instead, *topolina*. Besides, if you poison me, who’d show you how much fun we could have?”

“But then I’d be free, and I could attend your funeral and pretend to be sad,” she snips.

I should probably be pissed at her for talking like she would love to see me dead, but I love the spark in her. That little flash of defiance will make her surrender so much sweeter. I make my way down the hall and walk into my office, kicking the door shut with my foot before I move to my desk, use my arm to sweep everything onto the floor, and then put Gia on top of it. I don’t give her time to get her bearings; instead, I step between her legs, cup her face, and crash my mouth down on hers.

She holds herself back for all of five seconds before she melts into my kiss, her hands coming up to grip my shirt tightly as I devour her. Fuck, I missed the taste of her, even if it’s only been a few hours. I can’t get enough. And even now, she’s learning how to respond to me, to let me lead, but also

to hold her own as I thrust my tongue into her mouth. Knowing that I'm the one teaching her, instructing her, *fuck*, it makes me so damn hard.

And knowing that I'm the *only* one who is ever going to see her, taste her, it makes me almost feral.

That feeling, however, is blunted when suddenly she yanks her mouth from mine and tries to squirm back, yanking my hands down and off her face. "I'm not doing this," she gasps out.

Irritation burns, but I tamp it down. I suppose I'm a fool to think that a virgin wouldn't panic because of some heavy petting we did earlier. Though my cock certainly doesn't feel the same. "Doing what exactly, *topolina*?" I ask her calmly.

She swings her legs and scampers across the desk away from me, jumping off before turning to face me. Does she really think that desk is going to stop me from getting to her? Her expression is troubled, but her eyes are hard and full of a determination that makes me even harder. If that's even possible. "You know what. I'm not sleeping with you. All of this has been a huge mistake. I want my freedom, and I want you to give it to me, but I won't do it by sleeping with you."

It's a testament to how much this woman affects me that I'm not pissed and raging at her right now. She gave me her word, and now she's trying to backtrack. Anyone else, I'd be making sure she kept up her end of the deal, but I don't want the next years of my life to be spent trying to win her over. Because she's not going anywhere. "Well, I don't think we'll be doing much sleeping, *cara mia*," I inform her, letting my lips move up in a smug smile.

She glares at me. "Stop trying to play word games. You know what I mean."

The smile falls from my lips, and I narrow my eyes at her. "And you gave me your word that you would be mine for as long as you're here," I remind her evenly. "Or are you going back on your word?"

She falters slightly, her expression changing just enough that I can see the guilt and uncertainty crossing her face. Then she carefully blanks her expression before saying, "And you also said you wouldn't force me. Or are you going to go back on your word too?"

"Did you think I was forcing you last night? Or this morning in the library?" Her face flushes, but she doesn't look away. "No, I think you were very much enjoying what we did, Gia. Or have you already forgotten you melt in my hands when I kiss you? When I touch you? Or maybe you're

forgetting the way you moaned so sweetly, and pulled at my hair as I was sucking on your perfect tits? You were not pushing me away then, *topolina*. You were pulling me closer. Then, when it was too much, you were grinding on my leg like you couldn't get enough. Wanting all the friction to make yourself come." I take a step closer to the desk, and she instantly takes a step back. "Would you like to try again, *topolina*?"

She swallows hard, but firms her mouth and says, "No, no, I don't want to try again. That was a mistake, and I was caught up in the heat of the moment. I won't let it happen again."

I slowly stalk around the desk, amusement trickling through me as she matches my steps, making sure to keep the desk between us. "Tell me why you think you do not want to be mine, *topolina*," I prompt.

"I don't want to belong to anyone," she yells at me. The frustration and anger in her voice are sharp, and it hits me in the chest hard. Still, I don't let it stop me as I stalk her. We've now made it so that we're in the opposite positions we started, and she stops moving once she's in the new spot. "I want to belong to myself. I've never belonged to myself. I was my family's punching bag, the burden they never wanted to have." Her eyes are hard, glittering as she stares at me. "I can't even go to the grocery store. I have to walk a certain route every damn day, never speak to anyone, and if I don't, my family beats me. I can't search online for things, I can't buy clothes unless approved, and I don't watch TV much because only certain shows are allowed. I'm constantly told I belong to them. I have no freedom, Nico. No choice. I am never free. And even now, here with you, you dictate what I can and can't do, you keep me prisoner here all because you saw me and took me." Her stare intensifies even more. "So, no, Nico, I don't want to be yours. I don't want to be anyone's."

CHAPTER 21

Gia



“AND YET, we both know that’s never going to happen,” Nico replies evenly, staring at me intently. “That is not the life you were born into, Giulia. You are a De Luca. The only female De Luca by birth alive, I should add. Which means that even if you were able to go out on your own, you would never be free. You’d always have to look over your shoulder, change your name, your entire identity, and hope no one made the connection. But do you really think that your father won’t have allies searching for you too? There is no place on this planet you would be able to hide.”

“I could if you helped me and made sure they couldn’t find me,” I counter. “Or are you trying to tell me what you promised me if I escaped was a lie.”

“I was never going to let you go.” I shouldn’t be surprised by that answer, but still, it makes my stomach drop. “Not completely. I was going to allow you to get the taste you wanted before I brought you back.”

The betrayal of his words makes me both furious and equally hurt. “So I will never be free,” I reply bitterly. “I’m nothing more than a puppet for you to use and then control in any way you want. The same as my family.”

He narrows his eyes at me in warning at the comparison. “I am nothing like your family,” he says icily. “In time, you will see that, but for now, let’s focus on the problem at hand.”

“The problem being you expect me to sleep with you and give in to whatever you want,” I snap.

“I expect you to hold up your end of our deal. You agreed to not escape, and you agreed to belong to me as long as you’re here. I’m being patient

given the circumstances, but even I have my limits.” He leans forward, bracing his arms on his desk and staring at me intently. “And what about being mine is so wrong?”

“You kidnapped me!” I grit out. “You took away my choice. That’s what my problem is. I never get to choose what I want. I’ve been told what I can and can’t do my entire life.”

“So, what, you wanted me to approach you, woo you, and then hope like some lovesick fool you would decide to grace me with your presence in my home and bed?” he scoffs.

I glare at him. “I’m not naive. I know you wouldn’t do any of that shit. You’d probably barge in, demand to take me to dinner, and then seduce me into bed, all while planning on how to keep me here and making me think it was my idea until I suddenly realized you still took away my choices.”

He doesn’t disagree. “Or, I’d have done what I already did after we went to dinner and decided that I didn’t want to let you go.”

The audacity of this man knows no bounds. “You’re only proving my point.”

“I’m merely stating facts. But let’s play devil’s advocate. What if you hadn’t captured my attention, hmmm? Where do you think you would be now? You’d be stuck in your lonely little apartment, wondering when the next time your family would be over to use you as their punching bag. Or you’d be married off to someone they want an alliance with, with no choice but to bed whatever cold-blooded bastard you married. And you certainly would kiss your freedom goodbye, considering the men your family associates themselves with. They view their women the same as your family, if not worse. And yet, here you are, with me, where you are safe, you aren’t beaten or forced to do things you don’t want, other than to stay put.”

I hate that he’s right. I hate that he’s trying to use logic when I don’t want to be logical. I want him to understand. I want him to see why I’m so angry about this whole thing. “So, if I say fine, I’ll stay here, sleep with you and be your little whore, you’re going to give me more freedom to do what I want? I can go shopping and do all the things I want to do without having to ask your permission?”

His eyes narrow even further until they are almost slits, and temper glitters there. “Refer to yourself as a whore again, Gia, and I won’t hesitate to put you over my knee,” he warns me darkly. “Staying here means you will be safe, and you will be with someone who wants you with them.” Slowly he

stands, the movement making the muscles beneath his clothes bunch and flex, briefly distracting me. But then he pulls me right back when he says, “As for the rest of it, even with me, you will never be truly free to do everything as you like. Not because I want to control you, but because I have enemies, and you can’t be without protection. And right now, there is a possible war brewing that could mean you getting caught in the crossfires, and I won’t allow that to happen. And with me, you will be safe, you will get to enjoy the things you read about in your books full of porn.”

I flush at the mention of the books but glare at him. “They’re not porn,” I say through clenched teeth. “And we both know you’re just saying whatever you need to to try and convince me I should just throw myself at you and let you do whatever you want with me. Thinking I’ll be grateful you’ve saved me from whatever my family has planned for me.”

“I’m not looking for your gratitude,” he snaps back at me, a harshness to his tone now that makes me want to take a step back, but I hold my ground. And I continue to hold my ground as he circles his desk and makes his way toward me. I won’t retreat. I refuse to let him have any upper hand in this little battle. When he finally stands in front of me, he doesn’t touch me, doesn’t even reach my way, instead, he stares down at me, his face dark and body imposing as he towers over me. Then he says in a low voice, “You want to know what I thought the first time I saw you, Giulia? I saw you and knew I wanted you for my own. To possess you. To make you scream for me. To beg for me. To feel your mouth wrapped around my cock as you tried to take as much of me as you could into that pretty little throat, swallowing me down as I spilled into it. Then I thought about you spread eagle on my bed, tied and at my mercy, all while you screamed my name and begged me to let you come. That, Gia, is what I thought of the first time I saw you.” Now, he does reach out and wraps a hand around the back of my neck, holding me in place.

His grip is firm, but not tight, and I stare up at him in shock at his words. And also turned on. Hell, who wouldn’t be when a man like this says something like that to you? It still won’t sway me, but I allow myself a small moment to feel the heat that’s working through me. “And you think that’s just going to make me want to jump right into bed with you?” I ask softly.

He lowers his head a bit more. “I think that you’re running scared, and you know everything I’ve said is true. And while you’re trying to argue with me, your body betrays you. It wants me just as much as I want you. Because even as you stand here, your nipples are hard and begging for my mouth, my

hands. Your thighs are pressed together like you're trying to ignore that aching and empty feeling. Because you need me, *topolina*. You want me, and you want all the things I promised, to make you feel so good that you'll never want to leave me. Because I'll be the only man who will ever satisfy you." He uses the grip on my neck to tilt my head back, but then brings his other hand to my hip and then over the curve of my ass, cupping it. I gasp in surprise, but I don't struggle, too shocked and turned on to say or do anything. What is it about this man and his ability to render me unable to think? "And I'll be the only man to make you happy and give you the freedom you so desperately crave," he continues in a low voice, almost a whisper. "Because I know exactly what you need, and you only need to reach out and take it. And the first thing I'm going to do is make you realize why being in my bed is a damn good idea."

I don't have time to process what he says before he's lifting me up so that his mouth is on mine. The kiss is hard, possessive, edging on brutal, and yet, it doesn't dampen the desire inside me. It only makes it hotter. Any thoughts I have or arguments that I want to make disappear in a puff of smoke, and I can only focus on him and the way he tastes and makes me feel.

He lifts me higher, and I instinctively wrap my legs around his waist, but then he suddenly spins us and he's lowering me to his desk. He presses his erection tight to my center, making me gasp, sparks of fire going through my body. And giving me a cool dose of reality of what is about to happen. He must sense that I'm no longer in the moment, because he yanks his mouth from mine and stares down at me with glittering eyes as he grips my hips tighter and grinds harder against me. "Do you feel that, *topolina*?" he rasps, watching me. "Do you feel what you do to me? How hard and desperate you make me? Feeling your hot little pussy against me, even through all these clothes, is so fucking good. I can't wait to feel it gripping me so damn tight as you come."

"Nico," I gasp out, shocked at the words, but so hopelessly aroused at the same time. I should push him away, but then he yanks me so that my ass is almost hanging over the edge of the desk, and he is able to grind himself directly against my clit,. The earlier memories of the library rush back, and I can't stop my body from moving to meet him, trying to get that feeling, that sensation, back.

"Mmmm, yes, that's it, Gia," he grunts, watching me as his face flushes and his eyes darken even further. "Make yourself feel so damn good,

topolina. Feel what I can give you. Take what you need.” Then he leans forward, burying his face in my neck, licking and sucking on the skin there and driving me insane as the pleasure inside me starts to build to impossible heights. But it’s not enough. And even when I try to go harder, faster, it’s still out of reach. He must sense I need something more, because he suddenly lifts his head away from my neck, stills my hips, and looks down at me. “What do you need, Gia?” he purrs, watching me.

“Nico,” I breathe, unable to get anything else past my lips. My body is buzzing, a low burning sensation working through my veins, and it’s both strange and addicting. I want more of it, I want it to burn hotter, burn higher.

“Tell me, Gia,” he orders, his hand moving from my hip and up over my stomach toward my shirt. He moves beneath it easily, quickly moving to my breasts and pushing a hand inside my bra to cup me and then circle my hardened nipple with firm movements of the pad of his thumb. I give a small cry, arching into his hand. Arousal rushes into my core, and I can’t even bring myself to care about how wet I am at this point. But then he tweaks my nipple, pinching it for just long enough to have pleasure and pain blurring, and I whimper, making him give a low chuckle of pure satisfaction. “Is that what you need, *topolina*?” He moves to the other breast and gives it the same treatment. “Or do you need something else? Something more?”

“I-I-I,” I stammer out, unable to get my brain to work enough to formulate a coherent sentence. Especially when he suddenly yanks his hand from beneath my shirt, and moves it to press his hand to my center, cupping me there. I jerk at the feel of him touching me in a place no one else but myself has touched or seen. But then he moves his fingers, and oh God, it feels so good, that I press against them for more. Wanton and uncaring about anything else but the way I’m feeling right now.

“Mmmm, yeah, this is what you need, isn’t it, Gia?” He circles his fingers, and from the movement of his fingers, along with the feel of the fabric of my underwear and pants, my entire body is trembling. I still need more, it’s not quite enough, and along with desire, frustration is simmering right beneath it, ready to overtake it all. I stare into his eyes, needing that connection, that lifeline to keep from feeling like I’m going to lose my mind without it. I arch into his touch, and his lips pull up into a smug smile. “That’s it, Gia, use my fingers and make yourself feel good,” he praises, and it’s like a switch flips in my brain at those words, and I do exactly what he wants.

Later, much later, I'm going to be horrified at what I'm allowing him to do to me, but right now, I don't give a rat's ass. I only want to reach that peak. But still, even after a few minutes, of rubbing myself against his fingers, of gripping him like my life depends on it, it's still just out of reach. I still, letting out a groan of frustration. "Nico," I grit out.

A soft chuckle leaves his mouth, infuriating me. How dare he laugh at me when I'm about to snap and kill him for tormenting me this way? The cruel bastard knows exactly what the hell he's doing to me. "You need more, don't you, *topolina*?" he says seductively, before slowly sliding his hand up toward the waistband of my pants. "The only way you're about to get relief is with my fingers, and mouth on that pretty pussy. So you better tell me right now if you don't want that, and we'll stop right now."

Stop? *Stop*? Is he crazy? Well, that's a given I suppose, but still, he dares to get me so hot and bothered and now he's suggesting we stop. But at the same time, the logical part of my brain is screaming at me, that he's using my body against me, that he's trying to make me give in and take over my life. That if I give in, I'll never be able to escape.

Unluckily for my brain, my body is in full control and I find myself arching into his hand again and begging, "Nico, please. Please."

"Please, what, Gia?" he asks, moving his hand over my hips and pulling my pants and underwear down just above my pubic bone. "Tell me, Gia, do you want me to pull these off you and show you all that you're missing out on? Show you what it's like in the real world, and how those books you read will pale in comparison. Or do you want me to stop? It's your choice."

I logically know what he's doing by uttering those last three words, but right now, I don't care. I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of being angry and desperate to feel in control. He might be making my body crave him, but this is my choice. It makes my heart pound, and thoughts of him not being so bad after all try to intrude before I shove them away. I just look at him and nod, unable to push the words past my lips.

Unlucky for me, that's not good enough for him. "I need the words, *topolina*. Open that pretty mouth and tell me yes or no. Now."

I swallow hard, before I lick my lips, trying to get them to work. It takes a moment, and Nico watches me, patiently waiting, his fingers brushing my skin and sending my already sensitive nerves into overdrive. Finally, I gasp out, "Yes."

Nico's eyes flash, and I don't miss the victory in his eyes before he

wastes no time in yanking my pants and underwear down and off my legs, leaving me bare from the waist down. I gasp at the suddenness of the action, but that quickly trails off into a whimper and then a moan when he throws them aside, kneels between my legs, and spreads them wide, before cupping my ass and putting his mouth on me.

Oh. My. God.

Oh, books can't hold a candle to the feel of this in real life. Especially with a man like Nico, who clearly knows what he's doing. I gasp and cry out when he sucks hard at my clit, making my body arch and bow as the rush of sensation moves through me. "Nico," I cry, unable to stop moving, unable to process everything that he's making my body endure.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he pulls his lips away, before moving them down to my entrance and licking me there, while moving his fingers to my clit and putting them to work. The dueling sensations have me gripping the edge of the desk, trying to keep myself grounded. And I let out a soft scream when he thrusts his tongue inside me, both startling me and making my legs squeeze around his head to keep him in place.

He gives a low chuckle, and the vibrations push me closer to the edge. I'm so close. My entire body is strung tight, poised for it, until he suddenly pulls away, forcing my legs open, removing his hand from my clit, and pushing them open and apart. "No!" I cry, struggling.

"Shhh, *topolina*," he soothes, making me still and stare at him, even though I'm not really sure it's him I'm staring at right now. No, I'm sure he has to be the devil himself. Who else would torture me this way? "Keep your legs wide," he orders, lifting my legs so they're bent and my feet are braced on the edge of the desk. It's a bit uncomfortable, and it exposes me in a way I'm not sure I'll ever be comfortable with, but then he says, "Eyes on me, Gia, and watch as I make you feel so damn good."

He wants me to watch him? What?

I barely get the thought finished, when he puts his mouth back on my clit, and sucks. My mouth falls open on a silent scream, but I somehow manage to watch him and not let my eyes fall closed. I've read about plenty of women watching their men pleasure them with their cocks and their mouths, but this, this is so much better. Or maybe it's because Nico reminds me of a man who's starved and is eating my pussy like it's his last meal and he plans on savoring every last bite. My entire body quakes when he sucks on my clit a little harder, lashing it with his tongue, and sending my orgasm barreling

even closer. But then he pulls away just enough that I barely have the fortitude to keep myself from growling at him in annoyance. Still, he must see it on my face, because he smirks, before he starts all over again, but this time, I feel his fingers press at my entrance, making my eyes widen.

I tense at the invasion, and he stills his fingers but doesn't stop sucking and licking at me. He just watches me, changing the strokes of his tongue to easy and slow, almost soothing. Slowly, I force myself to relax and bite my lip at the uncomfortableness of him stretching me. He lifts his mouth away from me, and rasps, "Relax for me, Gia. Let me in." I take a deep breath and try to tell my body to relax. It takes a moment, but finally, his fingers slip inside further, making me feel uncomfortably full. I squirm, and he lets out a low groan, making me still, worried I've hurt him somehow. "You're so fucking tight," he grits out, pulling his fingers back and then moving them forward. Repeating the shallow strokes until my muscles relax to accommodate him. "You're going to strangle me when I get inside you," he mutters, almost half to himself. I should be terrified of those words, but the only thing I can focus on is his fingers filling me.

Even when I touched myself in the shower, I was too unsure and nervous to ever touch myself this way, and now I'm wondering why the hell I've didn't, because, wow, this is so much more. And soon enough, I'm lifting my hips in time with the thrust of his fingers as he works them in and out of me, sending my orgasm spiraling higher and higher.

My undoing is the moment he starts thrusting them harder and faster inside me and then returns his mouth to my clit and sucks on it. Hard. My orgasm hits, sweeping through me like a tsunami, and I'm powerless except to be swept away in the wave. Nico's name is both a plea and a curse on my lips as it rolls through me, and he yanks his fingers out of me, pressing his mouth to my entrance and swallowing everything down. The feel of his tongue thrusting in and out of me has my orgasm going on and on, until finally, I collapse against the desk, exhausted, my body trembling and buzzing, as I try to figure out what the hell just happened.

I feel Nico pull away, and I vaguely hear him getting to his feet. When his face appears over mine, I can only stare up at him as I try to get my breath back and try to calm my pounding heart. "Fuck, Gia," he rasps. "I will never get tired of the way you scream my name when you come. And I want to hear it again and again. So now you have another choice, *topolina*. Are you going to let me have you? To show you how much better it will be once I am inside

of you. Or are you going to say no, get dressed, and walk out of here? Because make no mistake, once I have you, once I feel that tight pussy wrap around me, you're not leaving. You will belong to me in every way, and I will show you everything I want from you. Everything I will give you, and then we work together to make you happy here. So, make your choice, Gia. Are you mine?"

CHAPTER 22

Nico



I HAVE NEVER SEEN anything more beautiful than the woman lying on my desk, face soft and rosy after I just gave her an orgasm with my mouth and fingers. If she was anyone else, I'd flip her over, and take her from behind until she was screaming once more, but I have just enough restraint to not do that. No, my sweet little mouse will have her first time in a bed, where I can fuck her hard and make sure that she won't hurt herself in the process.

I also need her to understand that once she's in my bed, she's mine. Even now, my cock is hard as fucking steel, and the idea of her finally being in my bed is enough to make it leak pre-cum into my pants. I barely manage to resist reaching down and gripping myself to ease some of the hunger, but I hold myself still as I watch her.

Her body might be slack and sated, but her mind is starting to come back online, and the haze in her eyes is starting to clear. I'm growing impatient, but something tells me if I rush this, she'll slip through my fingers and I'm going to have to start all of this bullshit all over again. And I know I don't have the patience for it. Not now that I've tasted her; heard her cry my name in that soft voice. Fuck, this moment is going to be a core memory for me until the day I die, I almost wish I recorded it so I can replay it over and over again.

"Nico," she breathes, pulling me from my thoughts. I narrow my eyes at her when I see the uncertainty in her eyes. I'm ready to push it a little more, but stop when she takes a slow, deep breath, and I see the change in her eyes. The acceptance, and I know her answer before she even utters the words, but

I still need to hear them. Even as a savage wave of possession and triumph runs through me. “Okay, but please don’t hurt me.”

I know she means more than physically. “Never, *topolina*,” I vow as I reach down, and help her sit up so I can pick her up. “Lose the shirt and bra, Gia,” I order her gruffly. She hesitates for a moment, but then does as I ask and tosses both aside, leaving her perfectly naked in my arms. Fuck, she’s beautiful, and I plan on exploring every inch of her.

I make my way toward the wall lined with books and pictures, putting my hand over the invisible pad, opening the door with a quiet click. It shuts quietly behind me before locking, and then I’m hurrying through the tunnel toward my room. “I figured you had one of these in your office too,” Gia murmurs, leaning back enough to look me in the eyes.

I smirk down at her. “A good mafia boss always has some secrets up his sleeves.” It’s the last thing I want to talk about, but I don’t want her changing her mind or panicking. I don’t mind giving her another screaming orgasm to calm her again before I finally get to be inside her, but I don’t have the patience for much more.

“Yeah, I know,” she says with a slight nod.

Thankfully it doesn’t take long for me to get to my room, and when I emerge from the tunnel, I shut the door quickly behind me with a kick of my foot before I hurry out of the closet, through the bathroom, and then through to my bedroom. I feel Gia tense, but I don’t pay her any attention. I’ll handle her nerves, but for right now, I need her in my bed.

When we reach it she lets out a small shriek of surprise when I toss her onto it, but then I crawl up on the bed, putting my body over hers, and take her mouth once more. Instantly, she melts underneath me, and any trace of nerves seems to vanish. Thank fuck. Still, I get to work on making sure she’s ready for me.

When I take her perfect breast into my mouth, she moans and wiggles beneath me. And then she gasps when I pinch the other nipple hard, giving her a little bit of pain with her pleasure, and like she did in the library, instead of pushing me away, she grips me tighter, trusting me to keep her safe, to not hurt her any more than I know she can take. I like rough sex, and we’ll work up to it eventually, but right now, I want to see her reactions and hear her cries as I bring her to the brink again.

When I move down her body to taste her once more, she moves to stop me, but I push her hand back to the bed and give her a warning look. “I need

to make sure you're ready for me, *topolina*. So I want you to come for me again, and then I'm going to feel this pretty pussy around my cock."

Her mouth forms an O in shock at my words, but then it drops open when I take her clit into my mouth and thrust my fingers inside her. She's still sensitive from her earlier orgasm, and it's not long before she's crying out my name, begging and pleading for me to let her come. Unlucky for her, she tastes so fucking sweet, so fucking perfect, and all fucking mine, so I'm going to take all the time I damn well please.

Still, my cock is not happy that I'm making him wait and has made his displeasure known, considering how hard he is and how tight my balls are. Fuck, I need to be inside her soon or I'm going to embarrass myself. I thrust my fingers in and out of her harder and faster, suck on her clit a little harder as well, and she's coming hard and fast, her scream filling the room. Fuck, yeah, that's what I need to hear. That right there. This time, instead of drinking her down, I pull my mouth away and watch.

I see the ecstasy on her face, the flush on her skin, and the way her body reacts as I pull every last drop from her. I have never seen anything more perfect.

Finally, when she subsides, I pull my fingers from her, bringing them up to my mouth to suck them clean. She watches me in surprise, but she doesn't say anything, her body still trembling from the force of her orgasm. And I know I can't wait any longer. I've waited far longer than I ever have for any other woman, and I already know that no other woman will ever compare to Gia. A fact that should probably piss me off, or frighten me, but it only makes me want her more.

I push off the bed, and quickly undress, dropping my clothes and shoes in a pile on the floor. I grip my cock tightly, stroking it slowly as she stares at me. Trepidation fills her eyes, and I bite back a grin. "Don't worry, *topolina*," I assure her as I remove my hand and move back up the bed. "We will fit, and while there may be some pain the first time, I'll make sure that you enjoy it."

She stares at my cock another moment, before saying huskily, "I think your idea of fit is very different from mine."

I chuckle softly. "A greater compliment can never be said to a man, but I promise you will be fine, *topolina*. But we have something to discuss before I fuck you." The trepidation on her face turns to suspicion. "When was your last period?"

She stills at my blunt question, and blinks at me in shock. "Ah, I uh, I

should be getting it in a couple of days,” she finally answers, her face flaming with embarrassment. “Why?”

“Because as much as I want to take you bare, a baby is not something I want to worry about right now.” She startles at that; clearly the thought never entering her mind. “Considering the timing, we should be in the clear. But I’m going to arrange for our doctor to get you on a contraceptive soon.”

“Oh, ah, okay, yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” she agrees, still looking shocked.

“I told you that you’d be safe with me, and that’s in all things, *cara mia*,” I assure her as I lower my body over hers. She gasps when my cock comes in contact with the top of her mound, and I have to bite back a groan at the feel of her heat. “And that means from me too. I’m going to take you bare, because I want nothing between us. So for your piece of mind, I’m clean, and I’ve never taken a woman ungloved. Ever. Do you understand?”

She’s silent for a moment, watching me, but then whispers, “I understand.”

“Good.” Done with waiting, and done with this discussion, I put my mouth over hers.

She relaxes, and her hands come up around me, her nails scoring my back as she takes her time exploring. I don’t stop her, content to let her explore for a little longer. I’ll last until then. Barely, but I’ve got some damn good self-control. Still, I move my hips, rocking my cock against her, making her moan softly into my mouth, and her nails dig a little harder.

Her hands continue down my back to the top of my ass, but her arms are a bit too short to go much further. Still, by the time they move back up to my shoulders, I’m done waiting. I adjust my hips, pressing myself against her entrance. She tenses, and pulls her mouth from mine. “Relax, *topolina*,” I soothe, keeping my eyes on hers as I move my hand between us, and press her legs further apart. I reach between us to keep myself steady as I press against her tense muscles. “Come on, Gia, I need you to relax,” I try again, but the fear in her eyes is starting to take over.

I press firmly against her, and then move my hand from my cock up to her clit, circling it with my thumb with just enough pressure that she gasps, and instantly her attention is diverted away, loosening her muscles, and I have to bite back a groan as I sink in more. Sweat beads on my brow as I force myself to push slowly forward, though it’s damn tough. Fuck, she going to strangle my cock so much it might kill me, but I don’t care. I’ll die a damn

happy man.

It takes time, and firm pressure on her clit and suction on her nipples, but I'm finally pressed against her hymen. I lift my head and look at her, watching her for any pain or discomfort. She shifts slightly, but I see the trust in her eyes, and it's nearly my undoing. No one has ever looked at me that way. Especially not a woman. And before I can stop the words, I rasp, "Last chance, Gia."

She doesn't answer, but instead, she tightens her muscles around me, and digs her nails into my skin, holding my gaze. Then she surprises me by lifting her mouth to mine, kissing me, and it says all I need. This is her choice, and she's okay with it. I pull back slightly, then thrust forward, and swallow down her small cry of pain. "Nico," she pleads into my mouth.

I pull my lips back. "It's alright, Gia. There's always some pain the first time, but soon you'll forget all about it." Then I take her mouth again and I start a slow, steady pace.

At first, she doesn't do anything but lie there, but it's not long before the discomfort must fade because she awkwardly lifts her hips to meet me thrust for thrust, lifting her legs to wrap around me. Thankfully, my *topolina* is a fast learner because it's not long before she is matching my rhythm perfectly. Small gasps leave her mouth and I can see the pleasure on her face.

The only thing I focus on is the feel of her. God damn she's perfect. No other woman has felt this right. This mine. And that is exactly what Giulia De Luca is. She's mine, and she will always be mine. I start to move faster inside her, pulling my torso away from hers as I move up to my knees, gripping her thighs so that I can keep her stable as I pound into her with harder thrusts. Desperate to mark her as mine. To make sure she will always feel me; always crave me.

"Nico," she cries, her body flushing with the oncoming orgasm as I make sure to angle myself to hit all the perfect spots inside her. "Oh fuck," she gasps, her hands dropping to the sheets and gripping them tight.

"Mine," I grunt as I move as hard and as fast as I know she can stand, feeling her inner walls tightening and rippling with the impending orgasm. "You're mine, Giulia, and I'm going to make sure you feel me every time you move. Every time you sit that perfect ass down, and every time you lay in this bed, craving me to fuck this perfect pussy."

"Nico," she gasps out, her breath hitching. Then she comes hard, screaming my name so loud I'm sure the entire house can hear her.

It's all I need to let myself follow her over, and I groan her name as I spill my cum inside her. My vision goes dark for a moment with the force of my orgasm. When I finally come to, I look down and see Gia watching me, eyes hazy, and her expression completely sated.

Neither of us say anything, and neither of us move for a long moment, just watching the other, until finally, I lower myself down and press my mouth to hers in an unhurried kiss. Her inner walls clench around my now softening cock, making me hiss into her mouth. "Fuck," I mutter, pulling away and pressing my face into her neck as I try to regain some of my control. Because I would love nothing more than to lie here and stay connected to her.

Finally, I manage to lift my head as I carefully ease out of her and slide off the bed. She hisses in discomfort, and I head for the bathroom to get her a wash cloth and start a bath. I don't know much about virgins, but I know she's going to be sore. I clean myself off, a primal kind of satisfaction filling me when I see traces of red mixed in with our mess. I'm the only man that will ever know the perfection of having her in his bed, and while normally I wouldn't care, with Giulia, it's the final piece that clicks into place.

She's mine, and I will always be the one to help her through her firsts. Because we are going to have many more if I have anything to say about it.

I wet another cloth and move back out to the bed, where she's still lying, looking uncomfortable and unsure. When she sees me, her eyes slide away instantly and her face flames. Ah, my shy little mouse is back. Can't have that, though. So I move to the bed, and press the cloth between her legs, making her gasp in surprise and try to push my hand away. "Nico, don't, I—"

"Don't tell me I won't be taking care of you, Gia," I warn her. She quiets and gives a small nod, but she doesn't hold my stare for long. We'll be working on that.

Once she's cleaned up, I toss it aside, and then I lift her into my arms, making her inhale sharply. "What are you doing?" she asks nervously.

"We're going to have a bath," I tell her absently as I carry her into the bathroom and then set her on the edge of the tub. "Let that fill up a little more," I order her before I turn to the vanity and search underneath for the Epsom salts that I know Sofia put in here. Once I find them, I go back to the tub and pour some in, ignoring the way Gia takes me in. One of her arms now over her breasts, while the other rests in her lap and covers her from my view there as well.

Once I put the salts away, I turn back to her and indicate for her to get in. She hesitates for a moment, but then awkwardly stands up and climbs in. However, I notice the discomfort on her face as she does. She's hurting, and I won't allow it. Not that she's uttered one complaint. I wait until she situates herself in the tub, and then I climb in across from her, cursing under my breath at the heat. I turn off the taps as soon as the water is at an acceptable level and my body can handle it. Giulia lets out a soft moan, and I see some of the strain around her eyes and mouth ease, which tells me is working on soothing her.

"Come here, *topolina*," I tell her, motioning her forward.

She scoots over, and I motion for her to turn around, and then pull her back against my chest, her ass pressing against my cock, making it semi-harden once again. She startles and looks over her shoulder at me in shock. "You can go again already?" It takes less than a second for her to realize what she just asked, and she looks mortified before she quickly looks away.

I chuckle. "When it comes to you, *topolina*, I can do a lot of things, but for right now, you can ignore him and relax. You're too sore to do anything else for a while." She doesn't relax, holding herself stiffly against me, but she doesn't pull away either. A small step, but something I hope she gets past soon.

Neither of us says anything for a few long moments, and I'm content to relax here, letting my fingers move over the skin of her hip and outer thigh. I can't stop touching her, and I'm finding I don't want to stop. And I can still make out the wheels turning in her head. And the last thing I want is for her to have doubts. So I say, "Tell me about your life growing up."

She startles slightly at my question, before turning to look up at me warily. "I already told you what happened growing up," she reminds me tightly.

I glance down at the faint scars on her back, lifting my hand to run along them, and relishing the thought of knowing that very soon the fuckers who did this to her will pay in the bloodiest way possible. "I want to know what you did day to day when you weren't under the thumb of your family."

She doesn't answer right away, just watches me, trying to work out in that smart mind of her why I want to know. My clever little mouse is intuitive that way, but I don't let her in on anything as I hold her stare. Finally, she says carefully, "I was a normal kid, and I mostly was tutored or spent my time in my room or in the kitchen. My father insisted I know how to at least cook for

myself, because no one would want a wife that can't even boil water."

Her father is a bastard, but that's for another time. "And you enjoy cooking? You certainly seemed to know what you were doing in the kitchen earlier."

She shrugs slightly. "I'm good enough. When you're on your own, you have to be resourceful. And my father and brothers like to snack when they come to my apartment. So I make sure I keep all the things they like on hand in case of a surprise visit."

And no doubt to keep herself from dying of boredom. "And are you better at baking or cooking?"

"I can do both. Why do you want to know all this? I highly doubt that my cooking skills are of much use to you when you have your chef and Sofia."

"And why are you so guarded in what you tell me? Or do you think I'm going to have you slaving away in the kitchen now that I know this little tidbit?"

She narrows her eyes at me, turning her body slightly so that she's half facing me, and this time, not hiding her body from me. I glance down at her breasts, now visible, but before I can reach up to cup her in my hand, she says, "I never know what you're going to do, so it's not out of the realm of possibility. Like now. We've just slept together, and you're sitting here with me in a bath when you probably want to be anywhere else and down in your study or out ruling the empire you're residing over."

"You think I want to be anywhere but with you right now?" I ask with a scoff. "*Topolina*, I couldn't give a damn if the entire place was burning down around us as long as I get to feel you against me. Besides, I know your mind is probably spinning a mile a minute now that you're no longer a virgin and officially mine." Her face flames, even without the heat of the water already making her skin a rosy red, and embarrassment fills her eyes. I use that to spin her around completely, pulling her in my lap fully, and scooting forward so that she has some room for her legs. Which of course presses my now fully hard cock against her mound, and she inhales sharply at the contact. "So, let's clear the air shall we?"

She swallows hard, her body subtly moving and brushing against my cock again. I have to grit my teeth to keep the growl that wants to slip from my throat. I silently tell my cock to cool it, we can't take her again so soon, but he's not getting the memo as he throbs against her. I manage to ignore him when she whispers, "I don't know what to do with you or with myself

now, Nico. I've given you something, and now I can't take it back. And I don't mean my virginity. I mean something else, and now I'm waiting for you to tell me what's going to happen next."

"What happens next is we finish this bath, and then you're going to take a nap while I attend to some business. Then I'll be back, and I'm probably going to have you again as long as you're not too sore. And if you are, well, there are some other things that we can try," I tell her seductively.

She shudders slightly, her body breaking out in goosebumps despite the hot water, and her eyes take on a dark fire that tells me all I need to know. My sweet little mouse likes the sound of that, even if she isn't sure what it means. And, I will definitely enjoy showing her. "That's not what I meant," she breathes after she blinks a few times to clear the desire from her mind.

"It's the only thing we need to think about right now." I don't want to discuss anything else. I don't want her regretting being mine. Because I will never let her go. I don't believe in love, but I know obsession, I know desire, and I know possession. And I feel all those things for her, and I'll be tying her to me as soon as I can.

"Nico," she starts to argue.

"Not now, *topolina*," I tell her with a shake of my head. "We can fight later."

She glares at me. "I never said I was going to fight."

I chuckle. "*Topolina*, that's all we do, and while any other time I would relish it, I'm trying to remember you are sore and you need rest before you entice me to take you again so I can work some of that anger out of you."

"Sex isn't a fix-all for everything," she mutters.

"Perhaps not, but it certainly helps." She rolls her eyes. "How are you feeling now?" I ask her, changing the subject.

She looks away. "I'm fine."

I cup her face and turn it back to me. "Gia, don't hide from me, and don't look away."

She gives a small huff. "I'm fine, Nico," she mutters. "Of course, I'm a bit sore. It's not like you're small."

"That may be, but you don't hide things from me. You tell me the truth, always. Even if you find it embarrassing or uncomfortable. I won't have you in pain."

She flushes again. "I'm fine, Nico. Honestly, I've been a hell of a lot more sore, so this is nothing in comparison."

I search her gaze, assessing, but finally, I allow myself to relax slightly. In this, I'm going to have to trust she's telling me the truth. Though I don't like her reference to pain, because it only makes me want to tear her father and brothers limb from limb.

And I'll relish every second of it. Because no one will ever hurt her again.

CHAPTER 23

Nico



I PURPOSELY DON'T WASH my face after I finish dressing and head down to meet Dante at the front door so we can head for the restaurant to meet Giovanni. Is it sick and twisted that I'm going to sit with her uncle at a restaurant, smelling of her? Probably, but I don't give a fuck.

Dante and I say nothing for most of the drive to the restaurant, until finally, Dante says, "Think this is going to be a trap?"

"I don't care if it is. Giovanni won't do anything without his brother's permission in public that would cause damage to us."

"I've instructed more guards and patrols of the house while we're out," he says as he turns onto the street of the restaurant. "Just in case this is merely a distraction and they want to try something stupid." I nod, pleased. I wouldn't put it past the bastards to do something, but my men will handle it.

When we arrive the place is busy, but of course, as soon as they see Dante and I emerge from the car, most of those waiting move quickly out of the way to allow us inside and to our booth in the back room of the restaurant. It's private, and we're the only ones in here. Giovanni is just being seated, and he almost looks annoyed when I sit across from him seconds later. Like he was hoping I would be late and give him something else to complain about. Unfortunately for him, I already know the games and tricks he's going to pull, and I will never allow him to think he has the upper hand. As much as Giovanni would love to think that we are equals, or better yet, above me, I have no issue reminding him of his place.

"Nico," Giovanni greets with a cool, calm smile as the waiter pours our wine and scurries away. I don't even glance his way, or at Dante, who sits at

the table with Giovanni's guards. It amuses me that Giovanni feels he needs two guards to protect him, when I only need Dante, who puts the other two men to shame. There is a reason he is feared, and even now, I sense the uneasiness from the other guards.

"Giovanni," I say. "What is it you wanted to discuss?"

Annoyance flashes across his face but it quickly smoothes out. "I do not like to discuss business on an empty stomach. Bad for digestion you know."

I arch a brow. "You were the one who wanted to speak, and your digestion is of little concern to me. I am a busy man and do not have time to sit around and eat for hours on end. Being a Don is a never-ending job, after all." I let that sit just long enough that the fury in his eyes gives him away. He does not like to be reminded of his position, and I'm going to enjoy getting that dig in as often as possible. "But, I'll indulge you this once since I have a little time to spare. How is the search going for your missing niece?"

His jaw clenches but he gives a careless shrug. "She has disappeared. Nothing of hers was taken, so it does not appear she has run away. Leonardo is eager to get her back so he has our best men working on finding her."

"Of course. Would you like me to request some of my men join in the search?" *And make sure they throw you completely off the trail.*

Giovanni shakes his head. "I don't believe we will need to call on anyone for help just yet, but I'll let Leonardo know of your willingness, of course. I'm sure we will get her back quickly and we'll deal out justice once we find the men responsible."

"I'm sure. Though, what is the loss of a woman? One, I'm sure could be easily replaced."

Giovanni brings his wine to his lips, but I can tell by the look in his eyes he agrees with my sentiment. "Yes, well, she is his only daughter, and there are marriages and mergers she will be useful for." There's a sly look in his eyes, and I sense that my gut was correct on why he brought me here. Still, I say nothing more and let him do most of the talking. "You know, the more I look at you, the more you remind me of your father," Giovanni says conversationally after we've placed our orders to the nervous waiter. "You have a ways to go to match him for his skill and wisdom, but I'm sure in time you'll get there. A sad way for him to die. Though, a good thing for you I suppose."

I give him a cold smile. "Come now, Giovanni, we both know my father was a bastard. And well, we both know I like to surpass him in everything I

do.”

“Hmmm, well we all try to surpass our father’s don’t we? I hear you are doing well in your territory. Well, other than that unfortunate business of one of your men dipping their hands into the business and taking what doesn’t belong to them.” His smile turns sharp, cunning. Like he thinks his knowledge of the workings of my organization should surprise me, or infuriate me. Another difference between him and his brother. Leonardo would already know I let him have that information, not because their spy managed to get it.

I give him my own sharp smile, and his falters for the briefest of seconds before he rights it. “Yes, well, it seems my father let certain things slide, and I’ve corrected those problems.”

Giovanni doesn’t reply, since our waiter brings our food, but I can see that my unaffected answer wasn’t what he wanted to hear. If he’s hoping to put me in my place, he’s going to have to work much harder than that. We eat in silence for a few minutes, but I barely taste my food. Thankfully, he doesn’t make me wait too long to get to the point of this little posturing session.

“It seems, Nico, you and I have some things that, while you are still young and making a name for yourself, we can work together,” Giovanni says casually as he takes a bite of his chicken parmigiana.

I take another bite before I respond. “How so?”

He regards me carefully before he finally says, “Our families have always been allies, though perhaps not as close as we could be. I think it’s time we change that. Make a strong, united front, and if we were to merge together, we would be unstoppable. Especially with the nonsense happening between the Russians and Irish.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that they are feuding. Though I’m sure it will be resolved soon enough. They never fight for too long.”

“The damn Irish and their tempers,” Giovanni sneers lightly. “And the Russian fuckers are no better. All brawn and no brains, which is why they were stupid enough to try and mess with Seamus in the first place. But it does bring up the problem that they could start turning their attention to us, and while it would be an easy victory, it could be one entirely avoided should we join forces.”

I arch a brow at him. “And your brother is in agreement with this? I think it’s been clear enough that Leonardo and his sons have never been a fan of

me or my father. Seeing me as an obstacle in the way of them gaining access to my territory and suppliers.”

“My brother will come around,” Giovanni assures me. “After all, he has asked me to handle making sure our family remains strong and our operation grows. I am not one to ignore a possible merger to ensure that happens.”

“And how would you secure this merger? Especially considering Leonardo is not going to be on board with this idea without some kind of assurances from me.”

Giovanni’s smile is confident, edging on smug. “You are still young, and you will need an heir. For that, you will need a wife. Men such as ourselves, we love the variety of women we have at our disposal, but of course, those are not the women who bear our children.” I don’t reply, just wait, watching. “My niece has not yet been betrothed to anyone, and considering she is the only female in our family. And now that people know of her existence, I’m sure many will be beating down our doors looking for her hand to secure our alliance with them. But what kind of uncle would I be if I didn’t first speak to someone that could benefit from our association. And one much closer to home.” His eyes go shrewd, cunning. “And one that is still learning the ropes, so to speak. We could take over the entire city between both our families, and be the most respected, and feared, in the country with the work we can accomplish.”

And there it is. The exact thing I figured he was going to do. He’s offering Gia up like a damn broodmare for sale, all so that he can live out his agenda to secure a powerful merger and a way to the top. And I’m not an idiot. I know if I ever agree to such a thing, he’ll kill me and his brother before the ink is dry.

“You mean you want me to consider marrying your niece that is now missing and could very well come back as damaged goods?” I ask tightly. The words are sour in my mouth, because in no way is Gia damaged goods, but I can’t give anything away. I need to make sure I play this right or everything could come crashing down. No one has figured out I have her, and I want it to stay that way until I’m damn good and ready for them to know it.

Giovanni doesn’t react to my question. “She will be found soon, and I doubt she will be damaged. Not if whoever has her knows what’s good for them.” There’s a cold, hard edge to his tone. “After all, if they are hoping to ransom her, they will know the wrath of our entire force and allies should she be damaged.”

I don't react to his veiled threat. "And yet, there is a chance they have no plans on using her to get to you. Depending on who has her. Perhaps they are wanting her to marry someone they have chosen to force your hand."

He waves that away, effectively dismissing me. I tamp down my irritation, but barely. I'll be putting this son of a bitch in his place soon enough. "My brother is already onto her trail, and she has only been gone one week. And, well, if she comes back damaged and no one wants her, then we'll deal with her. Still, I have full confidence she will be home very soon and no worse for wear. And if so, then I'll allow you to have the first look at her. Though I warn you, my niece is a beautiful girl, and there will be many men who will want her hand and our alliance."

"You seem to think I need you, Giovanni, when we both know I don't. Just like I also know your brother probably has no idea of this meeting, and has not agreed to any terms you are laying out to me. I also haven't decided when I will take a wife, and while your niece may be beautiful, by your own admission, she hasn't been around our world. The last thing I need is a simpering little wife that's too afraid of me to be anything more than a pretty decoration and someone to fuck on occasion." All of that is bullshit, because the only woman I will ever consider marrying is, indeed, Giulia De Luca.

Giovanni's jaw clenches. "Your inexperience is showing, Nico. A smart don would not dismiss such an offer quickly. Especially one that could go badly for him should the tables turn."

I give a bland smile. "You mean, you plan on marrying off your niece to someone else you think will be able to assist you in taking me and your brother down?" Time to lay some of the cards on the table and see where they fall. I'll give him credit; he doesn't react in shock that I know of his plan, but the look in his eyes and the slight change of expression on his gives him away enough to know I've hit the nail right on the head.

He gives a dry chuckle. "Well, I see someone has his delusions well in hand."

I ease back in my chair and regard him coolly. "Come now, Giovanni, let's not kid each other. You think I don't know that you want me out of the way so you can have territory of your own. But what you really want is the empire you think should be yours. So what better way to get it than to align yourself with me. Then take me out and take out your brother and his sons so that you and your boys will own both territories. Plus all the contacts with it, and then also make connections with others back home. How am I sounding

now?”

At first, he doesn't react, but then he loses the easy look and replaces it with the shrewd one. “You certainly do have more brains and a mind for business than your father than I thought,” Giovanni remarks calmly. “And what's to keep me from killing you now to ensure you don't make sure such traitorous accusations aren't mentioned to my brother? I mean, my brother would never believe you over his own family.”

I don't react to the threat and give Dante a quick signal with my hand not to do anything when I see him stiffen ever so slightly out of the corner of my eye. “You know, it takes a man with some foolish ideals to think he can threaten another don without inciting a war. After all, you, Giovanni, are not a don, as much as you want to be. So I will only tell you once. Do not threaten me, especially when we both know that should I decide to kill you, I'd be within my rights and not even your brother would lift a finger to save you. Are we clear?” I pour every ounce of authority I have into my words, and I see the rage in Giovanni's eyes because of it.

It never hurts to remind those of their place, and Giovanni is about to learn some hard lessons. He may make a move on his brother, but he won't be doing it with me. And if he is stupid enough to try, he'll lose everything and then some.

He opens his mouth to reply, but then a voice behind me says, “Giovanni, it's a surprise to see you here.” I bite back a smirk when I turn and see Leonardo and Marco standing there. Leonardo is good at hiding his emotions, but his son is far from as skilled. Because the surprise on Marco's face is quickly replaced by anger and suspicion. “Ah, Nico, I had no idea you and Giovanni were meeting this evening,” Leonardo says smoothly as he extends his hand to shake mine. I don't miss the look he sends his brother.

“An impromptu meeting. You look well, Leonardo. Marco,” I say with a curt nod, before dismissing him. Considering that Marco is older than me and feels I should be beneath him, I'm sure he's not pleased with it. It takes every ounce of control not to kill them all for the abuse they inflicted on Gia, but I tamp it down.

“Yes, Nico and I were talking about mutual things that could benefit both our families,” Giovanni says smoothly, standing and gesturing for his brother and nephew to join us. Both oblige, and since the booth is so large, there is plenty of space, though that puts Marco close enough to me for me to see he's got the makings of either a bruise or a large hickey on the side of his

neck peeking out from the collar of his crisp white dress shirt.

“Nico, I heard of your achievements in doubling production in your area,” Leonardo says conversationally after giving a quick order to the waiter. Marco does the same, but comes off more rude than brisk. It seems he still has much to learn from his father. I don’t reply, instead, I incline my head slightly. “It seems you and your father ran things differently, but it’s clear he taught you a few things,” Leonardo continues.

“I suppose. I hear you have been having some trouble, Leonardo. Giovanni mentioned your daughter is missing. A surprise since I didn’t know you had one, but I can understand how you would worry about getting her back.”

Leonardo’s face is cool as a cucumber, though he does give a dramatic sigh. “I’m sure you can understand, Nico, why I’ve let few know of her existence. It was this exact thing that I didn’t want to happen should anyone learn of her. Thankfully, my sons are hot on the bastard’s trail.”

“Glad to hear it. As I’ve already told Giovanni, please let me know if you need any extra resources in securing her.”

“Appreciate that. At first, I thought it was a bit of rebellion and she ran off. You know how women can be all flighty with hardly a brain in their head,” he says with a wave of his hand. “But it was clear she didn’t leave with anything, and that’s not like her. She loves her shopping.”

“Women do love to shop,” I agree. “And no signs of a struggle? Nothing on the cameras?”

“Nothing,” Leonardo says grimly. I can feel Marco regarding me shrewdly, no doubt trying to figure out if I’m lying. Unluckily for him, I’m excellent at letting people see only what I want them to. “Whoever grabbed her certainly knew what they were doing. But they weren’t counting on my sons,” he says proudly, clapping Marco on the shoulder. “Never doubt a boy’s dedication to his family.”

“Those bastards won’t know what hit them when we get ahold of them,” Marco boasts. “No one touches our sister and gets away with it.” He looks at me directly, almost as if giving me a warning. Foolish of him, but I merely arch a brow and regard him.

“All the best to you then, and again, let me know if I can be of assistance. How is your wife, Leonardo? Last I heard, she was spending your money like it is water.”

Leonardo gives a low chuckle. “Carmen does love to shop. But she’s the

perfect wife. Took me a few tries to get to her, but she gives me no trouble.”

“I was just saying to Nico that it will soon be time for him to take a wife,” Giovanni interjects with a pointed look at his brother.

“A man must carry on his legacy,” he agrees. “You must have your eyes on someone then, do you, Nico?”

“And as I told Giovanni, I’m not in the market for a wife at the moment unless someone catches my eye that I feel will fit the role perfectly.” Now to see if Leonardo catches on to what Giovanni is looking to accomplish out of mentioning that.

By the thoughtful look in Leonardo’s eyes, it seems that he might be connecting the dots. Unfortunately for him, I have no interest in merging with them. After all, I’m going to be taking apart their empire and taking it over completely.

Finally, Leonardo says, “You are young. Some beautiful girl will catch your eye. I have heard there are many families in Sicily that are looking to make alliances with families over here, so perhaps one of them will interest you.”

“Perhaps.” I look over at Marco. “And you, you’re not in the market for a wife?”

Marco shrugs. “Haven’t seen one that interests me. I’m selective,” he says with a sly grin. “Can’t have my future wife looking like a hideous hag now, can I?”

“No, I suppose not,” I say noncommittally. I glance at his neck and then back at him, careful to keep my expression blank, but there is no missing my hint. “Something tells me your interests run toward a particular type of woman, so I wish you all the best.”

Marco doesn’t react, but I see his hand itching to reach up and feel his neck. All the signs to show me that bruise is indeed from someone getting a little too eager with their teeth. Now to find out who.

“I like ‘em feisty. So much more fun when you want to break them, eh?” He smirks. “If you ever need some pointers, Nico, you just let me know. I’ll happily help you out. Got a few tricks up my sleeves for the ones that resist a little harder.” He gives me a cool wink, and I resist the urge to punch him in the face. The image of Gia’s scars flashes in my mind, and I fight to remain calm when all I want to do is clench my fist and let it fly into his pretty boy face.

“Sir,” Dante says in a low voice, pulling my attention. I turn my head

back to him, and he whispers, “Just as you suspected, Sir, De Luca men were captured trying to get in through the back gate at the house. They were not Giovanni’s men, but Leonardo’s. And one of Leonardo’s sons. They’re being held for questioning in the dungeon.”

I give a curt nod. Then I turn back to the men across from me and give them a dark look. “Gentlemen, it seems we have a problem. My men have just captured multiple De Luca soldiers, along with one of your sons trying to get into my home.” Then, without warning, I pull the gun from my back and press it to Marco’s temple, all while staring hard at Leonardo and Giovanni. I hear a couple of grunts as Dante easily knocks out Giovanni’s men. Leonardo and Marco were stupid to leave their men outside, but I’m sure Dante can handle them as well. “Care to explain?” I continue, calm and collected. “Or would you like to lose multiple sons tonight? And touch either of your guns, and you will lose one before it’s even drawn.”

Leonardo’s face is stone cold, and Giovanni’s is much the same, but I don’t miss the surprise flit through his eyes. He didn’t know anything about this plan. The question is, was that on purpose or spur of the moment? Something tells me Leonardo isn’t as in the dark about Giovanni’s plans as Giovanni likes to think. Thankfully, both men heed my advice and don’t move to take out their guns. “Put the gun down, and let’s talk this out,” Leonardo orders.

The look I give him lets him know what I think about that idea. “I’m losing my patience. You have three seconds before I blow his brains out, and Dante will kill you both before either of you will be able to retaliate. So, I suggest someone gets talking and fast.”

“It was me,” Marco grits out. “I sent them to your house. My father and uncle didn’t know anything about it.”

I don’t reply to that. Instead, I turn my head to look at him, my gun steady on him. After I clamp down on my urge to shoot the stupid fuck, I press the gun tighter to his temple and order, “Start talking.” Marco doesn’t answer immediately, and I see him glance over at Leonardo. “Leonardo,” I warn darkly. I make sure that when he looks at me he knows I will do what I threatened. He’d be stupid to test me.

“What did you do, Marco?” Leonardo asks calmly, but rage is simmering under it all. Both at me and his son for doing something so idiotic. The son of a bitch is ready to start a war.

“He has her,” Marco replies tautly. “He ran into her in the street, twice,

weeks before she was taken. Right outside the library. So I sent our men to get her back.”

“Get who back?” Giovanni asks carefully.

“Gia.”

Both men look at me. Now comes the moment of truth. Do I lie or do I lay my cards on the table? “And who is Gia?” I ask tightly.

“You know exactly who she is, fucker,” Marco seethes. “You took her and you sit here acting like you’re all concerned, wanting to help us when you have her right where you want her.”

“These are some very heavy accusations, kid,” Dante butts, voice hard as granite. “And ones that will get not only you but your men and brother killed.”

“It’s true. You’re the only one she spoke to in those weeks,” Marco sneers at me. “And you’ve been at the bakery in that area a couple of times.”

“You deduced I took your sister because I bumped into her and then went back to a bakery,” I repeat. “You’re a special kind of stupid, Marco. I’ve been back to that bakery a few times, and haven’t seen your supposed sister. Or did you miss the fact that I went in, ate, and then left?”

Marco’s sneer deepens, but then it drops when Dante interrupts. “And we both know that Mr. Armani is not the only one to frequent that bakery. In fact, your own family, the Russians, and the Irish all frequent it. So are you going to be checking out all their homes as well?”

Marco’s face gives his answer away immediately.

“You idiot,” Leonardo hisses, barely containing his rage. “You sent your brother to his possible deaths if he was caught. And considering how easily Nico’s men caught him already, I should let him shoot you.”

“He has her,” Marco protests, looking at his father pleadingly. “I know he does. He was the only man who bumped into her.”

“I have also bumped into a couple of other women coming out of that and other businesses. Perhaps you think that I’m picking up women constantly to keep prisoner in my house? Idiot. I have so many fucking women at my disposal, I don’t need to pick them up off the street. And I certainly won’t remember one woman out of all of them. Hell, I had no idea you had a sister until Giovanni called me this afternoon.”

“Liar,” Marco hisses. “And we will get her back.”

“You’re willing to start a war over it?” I ask. “One you will lose considering it will be over before it begins should I decide to handle it

myself. All for a woman?"

"She's our sister, and she's ours to handle as we see fit. And we're not about to let her whore herself out for you," Marco hisses.

"Marco, silence," Leonardo barks.

Of course, Marco doesn't listen and keeps on talking. "Once we get her home, I'll make sure she's married off to the first man who offers me enough for her. After all, who will want to marry a stupid useless whore? And I'll be making sure that whoever gets her knows how to keep her in line. A few good smacks with a whip, and she'll be as quiet as a fucking mouse for the rest of her miserable life," he vows, venom in his voice.

It takes all my control not to pull the trigger. He's talking about his sister, his family, his own flesh and blood. Sick fucker. I can't wait to kill him, but it's not time yet.

Leonardo snarls, "Marco, silence!" before looking at me. "I'll handle him, Nico, and I apologize for the insult. I think we both know my word is good."

I slowly pull my gun away, but then swiftly bring it down on his temple, hard enough to have him falling to the side, still breathing, but out cold, blood spilling from the large cut. It's deep enough it's going to scar. I shove him away from me, letting him slump in the booth, and neither his father or uncle flinch or move to help him. They just watch me.

"Seems to me you have some rogue sons that need to be reined in, Leonardo," I say in a tone as cold as ice. "Your other son will be returned to you, but don't expect him to look pretty." Then I slide out of the booth and stand.

"Nico," Leonardo says behind me. "If my son is right and you have my daughter, I'll kill you myself."

"I think you should be more worried about the company you keep. It seems you haven't kept up on your son and the people he associates himself with." I don't even glance at Giovanni. I could out him easily enough, but I have a plan that involves him fucking up. Then, without another word, Dante and I leave the restaurant.

Neither of us speak until we're in the car and on our way home. "What are you going to do?" he asks me quietly.

I glance at him. "She's mine, and they're never going to get her back."

"Now the question is, are you willing to go to war over a woman?"

I don't answer, but I already know when it comes to Giulia De Luca, I'm

willing to burn down the entire fucking galaxy to make sure she's safe and where she belongs.

CHAPTER 24

Gia



I NERVOUSLY TURN the handle on Nico's bedroom door, surprisingly finding it unlocked. I'm not sure if Nico meant to do that or if he forgot, but I'm done being cooped up in his room. So I shut the door quietly and head down the darkened hall to the stairs. This time, since I'm not running or being carried up, I can see that this area of the house is like the others, but also different. It's not as cold, but with hints of warmth.

I should be panicking and using this time to my advantage and try to get the hell out of here, but I'm far too confused. I gave myself to Nico, and after the blow-up before that, I'm feeling too emotionally drained to try and figure out a way out of here. So, instead, I focus on trying to sort out my thoughts and feelings because it feels like everything has changed and I'm on the precipice of something monumental.

At the end of the hall I come to the stairs that will either take me down toward the main halls, or I can go up back to my room. I consider both options but decide I need to clear my head. I go down the stairs, but I don't head toward the front door and the kitchen, instead I head the opposite way and just keep walking. Nico might be pissed when he can't find me, but I don't care. He has his cameras to locate me.

Right now, I want to be alone. I can't focus when he's around. He's too overwhelming.

I walk past many doors, paintings, and art pieces. Spaces I would love to explore later, but right now, I don't pay them any mind. Instead, all I can think about is the fact I've gone and done the one thing I told myself I wouldn't do. I said I wasn't going to give in to Nico, I wouldn't surrender,

and yet, here I am, tied to him in ways I'm not sure I will ever be able to wrap my head around. Even now, my core is sore, and my thighs ache with each step. And yet, if I'm honest with myself, I'm not upset about it. And I think that's what's worrying me the most.

I don't regret giving Nico my virginity. Hell, how can I when he made me feel the way he did? How can I when that man took any ideas I had about sex turned them on their head? I can see why so many women throw themselves at him, especially if he treats them all like that.

Even as that thought enters my mind, my gut clenches and my heart twists. I don't want to think about Nico and other women, because eventually, I'll just be one of them. Only a memory. Soon enough, he'll be tired of me, and I'll be cast aside and someone else will be in my place. I should be happy about the prospect, especially since that means he'll be done with me and I'll get my freedom, but Nico's words from earlier come back.

Even if you were able to go out on your own, you would never be free.

I hate that he's right. When he's finished with me, there are only a few options for him, and I have a feeling he won't want to go to the trouble of keeping me out of reach of my family. No, he'll probably return me to them, or he'll kill me and be done with it. And if I'm honest, death would be kinder. I'm sure my father would kill me anyway, or he'll determine me to be useless and sell me off to the highest bidder, or give me to his men.

My stomach tightens at the thought. God, Nico could do that to me as well. I'd rather die. And I'd probably end up killing myself if that was the case. But even as that thought enters my mind, I reject it immediately. Nico won't do that. He thinks he's a big bad man, but I've seen the softness and the kindness underneath all the rough and sharp edges. There is no mistaking Nico is a dangerous man, but he's not cruel from what I've seen. He's tough, but he comes off as fair.

Hell, I've seen cruel. My family is terrible to those that report to them. Their staff, their soldiers, and those who come across their paths. They think they are untouchable, and I hope one day they get a large dose of karma that shows them it's not true. I probably shouldn't be thinking that, but here, in the quiet of my own thoughts, I can admit it.

My life growing up was hell, and I long ago accepted my family never loved me. Never wanted me. Even my own mother was absent at best. She blamed me for her husband falling out of love with her, despite the fact she gave him five sons before me. I think that hurt me more than my father and

brothers hating me. Knowing my mother did too, it was that knowledge that led me to be as silent and out of the way as possible.

But here I am, all grown up, and doing the same thing, other than the last couple of weeks with Nico. For the first time in my life I've allowed myself to be who I want to be, and not just a quiet and timid mouse that tries to stay out of the way and not be seen or heard. I've fought him, I've yelled, I've screamed, and I've leaned on him even when I probably shouldn't. I'm finally allowing myself to realize who I am and what I can do when I'm no longer under my family's thumb.

I reach the end of the long hallway and find another set of stairs that go down and curl toward the right. I carefully head down them, and find another long hallway, but with fewer doors. God, this place is a maze and I hope I can find my way back when I finally get done with this little self-reflection walk.

Curiosity gets the best of me when I smell the faintest hint of chlorine. I follow it and slowly open a door that reveals a marble staircase leading into a lower level. I walk down, curious, and then I let out a soft gasp when I reach the bottom and see the huge indoor pool area that takes up a large part of this level.

The room is dark, much like the rest of the house, with gothic looking pillars and arches around the pool. Surrounding it are some lounge chairs, and small tables, which tells me people used to hang out here a lot. I wonder if Nico ever uses this. He doesn't strike me as the swimming type, but I always was. Though I rarely got to indulge when I was living at home. I had swim lessons because my father didn't want me to drown and cost him the chance at being able to use me and bargain my body in the future. But he awoke a love of the water, and I have to fight the urge to strip down and dive in. Instead, I slip off my shoes and socks, roll up my pant legs to my knees and sit on the edge of the pool, dipping my feet into the water.

I sigh at the warmth on my feet. I guess Nico likes a heated pool as well, which I won't complain about. Instead, I lean back on my hands, and look up at the intricately painted and carved ceiling and let myself relax. I don't know how long I can stay here, and I want to enjoy it.

I close my eyes, letting my thoughts wander.

It's the first time I've ever really felt calm and at peace. No one here to bother me. I don't have the threat of my father, brothers, or cousins finding me and making my life hell. I don't have to go about my boring routine every day, and I don't have to worry about surprise visits.

Maybe I've finally lost my mind. Just finally snapped and now there's nothing I can do but go along for the ride. At what point did I stop fighting? No, that's not true. I've always been fighting, but I'm just so damn tired that I don't want to anymore. A small part of me wants to tell Nico I never want to leave. That I'll stay here as his prisoner forever. Hell, I don't care if he makes me fake my own death and I have to live under his roof as part of the staff for the rest of my life. I'd give up my freedom, but I'd be alive, and it would be my choice.

A larger part of me reminds me if I stay here, I'm giving up the chance at having a normal life, even if only for a little bit. I want to be able to walk the streets and go into a shop just because I can. I want to be able to sit at the park and watch children playing, sweet young couples cuddling and walking together. I want to know that I can do it without worrying that someone will stop me. I can't do that here.

Even if Nico decides to keep me around and in his life and bed, there is no guarantee he would let me live a normal life. Mafia men are possessive and overbearing even at the best of times, and Nico strikes me as being even more so. Which means that even if I got to do the normal everyday things, I'd have him or guards with me. Someone always watching over me. Even now I hate the idea, but it's the reality of my situation.

I'm a mafia princess, even if I've never thought of myself as one. I'm a De Luca, and even if my family isn't after me, someone will be when they figure out my identity. Which means there is always going to be a chance I'll be taken. But by whom and for what is the question.

I suppose I should be grateful to my father that he kept me out of the public eye, and off the radar of everyone. I was spared the horror of being kidnapped and used, but at a price.

Though, it's not lost on me I was indeed kidnapped. I allow a small smirk to pull at my lips. My kidnapper has surprised me at every single turn. After all, what kind of man kidnaps a woman because she bumped into him and intrigued him? Apparently Nico Armani, and the man is far from ordinary. And I suppose, if I'm truly being honest, if I was going to have to endure a kidnapping, I'm glad it's been with Nico.

He's given me choices, for the most part, and he's treated me better than anyone else would have in his position. I've heard the horror stories of what women in other families have endured, and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Still, I'm not an idiot. Am I having Stockholm Syndrome and now

I'm convincing myself I'm better off with Nico because he treats me better than my other jailers?

Therein lies my problem. Not to mention I'm probably letting amazing sex blind me. Then again, we've only had sex once and who's to say he'll do as great a job next time? Maybe he was showing off this time to seduce me into bed, and from now on it's going to be shit?

Yeah, right. Because men that fuck like Gods just stop being good at it?

See, even my own conscience doesn't agree with me. Still, the sex can't be a reason for me to stay. So I need to figure out what I'm going to do. Because it would be so easy to fall into a routine with Nico and forget all about what I want. This is my chance to finally grab the life I want by the horns and live it for as long as I can. So I need to keep my wits about me and make sure I'm not blinded by amazing sex and some nice treatment. Nico is still a mafia don, he still kidnapped me, and he is still planning on keeping me from achieving that goal.

"Even if he does have a huge cock and knows what to do with it," I mutter to myself under my breath.

"Mmmm, I do love your obsession with my cock, *topolina*," Nico's amused voice says above me, making me jolt and my eyes fly open to see him standing a few short feet away, looking down at me with a hungry look on his face. In the dim light of the room, he looks even more lethal, but other than feeling embarrassed I'm not scared of him.

I just have to hope with the lighting he can't see how red my face is right now. "Shut up," I sigh. "You really need to learn to make some more noise when you come into a room."

He gives a low chuckle. "Kind of defeats the purpose of being a don, doesn't it? I'm supposed to be able to get in and out of places without being seen or heard. Exploring were we?" Crouching down beside me, he reaches out and runs a hand over my hair before settling on the nape of my neck.

"Needed to walk," I reply honestly, watching him. "And since you didn't have a guard posted outside the door, and you left it unlocked, I figured that was okay with you."

"It is," he says, surprising me. "Though I won't lie and say my men didn't see you on the cameras and let me know where you were."

I shrug. "I figured as much. I wasn't trying to escape or hide where I was going. And the only reason I found this spot was because I smelled the chlorine."

“Do you like to swim?”

I give him a soft smile. “I love to swim. But I was rarely allowed, so I didn’t get to do it much.” And I also learned my lesson of never swimming when my brothers were around.

He releases my neck and stands. “Then why aren’t you swimming now?”

“I just wanted to sit and think. And I didn’t bring a suit. And with the cameras in here, I didn’t think you would like it if I went skinny dipping.”

“Mmm, no, I would not,” he agrees. “I don’t want anyone to see any part of you. Especially my men. Your body is for my viewing alone.” He pulls out his phone, taps out something, and then shrugs out of his jacket. “But I just told them to turn the cameras off to this room, so I say we get in and enjoy the water, don’t you, *topolina*?” I blink at him. Wait, he wants to go swimming? Now? Really? I glance warily at the stairway. Anyone could walk in. “No one will come in here, Gia,” Nico assures me as he strips off his tie and gets to work on unbuttoning his shirt. “Not if they want to leave here breathing.”

I don’t reply, just stare at him as he strips out of his shirt before he moves to the buttons of his pants. He smirks as he kicks off his shoes and socks, before sliding them and his boxers down and stepping out of them. He stands in front of me in all his tattooed, hard-cocked glory. Because even now he’s hard, and I’m instantly wet thinking about him inside me again. God, this is what I should be avoiding, because now the only thing I can think of is how good sex with him is and how I want to do it again. And often.

I’m not sure what kind of bravery overtakes me, but I pull my feet out of the pool and turn toward him, lifting up on my knees and reaching for him. He doesn’t move, just watches with burning, lust filled eyes, as I awkwardly wrap my hand around his length. I’ve read all about blowjobs in books, but I’ve never really thought about how I would feel about giving one. Right now, I’m nervous and I have to try and keep my breathing even, though my heart is pounding furiously in my chest.

He’s so hard, yet his skin is soft and warm. I’m not sure what exactly I expected, but as I move my hand slowly over him, exploring, I’m intrigued. He jerks slightly in my hand when I bring my other hand up, running my finger gently on the underside of the head, and I pause, looking up at him in worry. His jaw is clenched, and I didn’t think it was possible to stare into someone else’s soul, but damn this man somehow accomplishes it. “I’m sorry, did I hurt you?” I manage to stammer out.

“Fuck, Gia, you have no idea how good it feels to have your hands on me,” he grits out. “Hurting me is the farthest thing you could be doing.”

I relax and continue my slow exploration. Though when I get to the head of his cock, I notice the drops of pre-cum. My mouth waters as I wonder what he tastes like, and glance up at Nico again to see him watching me. Again, he stares at me, but he doesn't say anything. I swallow hard, and whisper, “I need you to tell me if I do something wrong.” I barely hear him curse in Italian before I let my tongue lick at the drops. The salty taste is different, but not terrible. I give him another lick, and more hits my tongue.

Suddenly, Nico's hand grips my hair, and I stop, looking up at him in surprise, and concern. “Fucking hell, Gia, you're going to kill me if you keep doing that,” he manages to hiss out between clenched teeth. “Suck me down, pretty girl. Let me feel that mouth wrapped around my cock nice and tight.”

I hesitate, but do as he says, taking him into my mouth and sucking on him lightly. He groans, but he doesn't push for more, just lets me continue to set the pace as I slowly start moving my mouth over him, trying to make sure I don't catch him with my teeth, and figuring out what to do with my tongue. It takes me a few awkward tries, but finally, I find an easy rhythm for myself, and start to suck a little harder, moving my tongue over him as I stare up at him to make sure I'm doing alright. Considering the grip on my hair and the way he's staring at me, I think it's safe to say he's enjoying it.

“That's it, Gia,” he encourages, his voice not much higher than a rasp. “Fuck, your mouth is so fucking good.” He curses again in Italian, before he slowly and gently puts pressure on my head to take more of him. I don't fight him and try to do as he wants, but stop quickly when I hit my gag reflex. He eases up and back, and I start again, careful not to take him too deep. “Soon, I'm going to fuck your throat, *topolina*, but not quite yet. Right now, I want you to get used to having my cock in your mouth, because it's going to be there a hell of a lot. Fuck, yes, just like that, Gia. Suck a little harder.” His instructions give me confidence, and I start moving my hand in time with my mouth. It's a bit jerky at first, but he doesn't complain or stop me.

Soon enough, I'm forgetting everything else and only focusing on making the man above me lose his mind. His grip on my hair is intense, and any other time I might be worried he's going to pull it out by the roots, but the little flashes of pain only seem to make me want to do it more. Like I know he's so close to losing control he can barely hold himself back.

More pre-cum coats my tongue with each suction, and I can see the

muscles of his stomach and thighs tighten. It encourages me to move my hand a little faster, suck on him a little harder, and he lets out a low groan. “Bloody hell, your mouth,” he hisses. “I want to come down your pretty throat, Gia. So if you don’t want that, you better stop.”

Do I want him to stop? I wonder what he tastes like? Instead of answering, I continue working him with my mouth and hand, and stare up at him, letting him know I’m alright. His eyes flash with heat and he growls, “I want you to swallow every last drop, Gia. All of it. I want to see that pretty throat work as you work to take my cum.”

I love when he talks so dirty. Even now, I’m so turned on knowing I’m affecting him this way. I had no idea a woman could be this aroused from giving pleasure to someone else. And I want to see what happens when he finally lets himself go. Thankfully I don’t have long to wait.

I groan low in my throat when his other hand comes up to the back of my head and he starts to move a bit harder and faster. At one point I’m sure he’s going to choke me, but he manages to stop before I gag on him. “Breathe through your nose, Gia,” he instructs through clenched teeth. “Don’t panic, I’ve got you. You’re safe with me.”

I can’t really respond, but I stare up at him hoping that he understands. I fight back all the panic and breathe through my nose as best as I can as he powers into my mouth. I stop trying to use my hand and move it to his thigh to keep myself steady, digging my nails into the hard muscle there as I feel him swell. “Gia,” he grunts out. I try to fight the panic as his cum fills my mouth and I fight to swallow it all. “That’s it, Gia, swallow it down,” he gasps out, never looking away from me and still moving in my mouth. Then he moves his hand from my hair and down to my throat, cupping it lightly.

When he finally pulls out, I draw in a deep breath, but I don’t have much more time to collect myself before Nico is hauling me to my feet and taking my mouth with his. I should be grossed out, but apparently he isn’t so I let myself fall into the kiss. When he yanks his mouth back, he orders, “Get out of those clothes, Gia. Now.”

I don’t hesitate this time, and quickly strip them all off, anxious to see what he’s planning. Once I’m standing here naked, he scoops me up and carries me toward the water. “Wait, what are you doing?” I ask, surprised and confused.

He doesn’t reply, he just walks to the stairs and I let out a small gasp at the feel of the water on my already heated skin. He walks into the pool and

then toward the edge. When he's about waist deep in the water, he sets me up on the pool's edge, and orders, "Lean back and don't move." I barely have time to do as he says, before he's spreading my legs as wide as they can go, and shoving his face between them, wasting no time in driving me crazy.

"Nico!" I cry, as he sucks and licks at my clit, before bringing two thick fingers up and thrusting them inside me. I cry out again, both in shock and a bit of pain. I'm still sore from earlier, but that discomfort quickly dissipates as the pleasure overwhelms it. "Oh, fuck," I groan at the onslaught of sensations.

I'm already so wet from giving him the blow job that he has little resistance as he fucks me, curling his fingers and brushing a spot inside me that I never knew existed and has me reaching down to grip his hair. Both as a lifeline and to make sure he doesn't stop. My orgasm barrels toward me, and I can't do anything other than go along for the ride. I shamelessly grind myself into Nico's mouth, desperate to get him to send me over the edge. I'm also a little frightened by the intensity of it.

"Nico!" I scream as he moves his fingers in and out of me faster and harder, and the suction of his mouth on my clit increases. It tips me over the edge, and my cries echo off the walls. It like he's turned me completely inside out and then put me right-side up again, by the time I finally come back to myself.

Nico pulls his mouth away from my clit, slowly licking down to my entrance and lapping at me there, before licking his fingers. When he lifts his head to look at me, the intensity in his eyes has my stomach clenching again. There's something in his gaze I can't quite decipher, but my entire being is reaching for it, and I don't fight or complain when he pulls me into the water. I wrap my legs around his hips, and let out a small gasp when I feel him brush against me, fully hard again. His hand slides up my back to my neck, gripping it, before he rasps, "Are you too sore to take me again, Gia?"

"No," I whisper, desperate to have him inside me. I want to feel that sensation again, and any pain is of no consequence.

"Don't lie to me, Gia," he warns me, his grip on my neck tightening slightly. "Are you sore?"

"Just a little," I assure him. "I can take you, Nico. Please." I wantonly move my hips so that he's pressed against my entrance, moaning at the feel of him hard and heavy against my center. I try to sink down on him, my body instinctively knowing what to do, but he uses the other hand on my ass to

hold me still, watching me. “I’m fine, Nico,” I try to reassure him again. “I promise.”

“I don’t know that I can be gentle this time, Gia,” he warns me. “I need you too much.”

Is that supposed to scare me? Because it’s doing the exact opposite. His eyes are pure fire, but he doesn’t move. “Show me,” I gasp out. “Show me how you need me, Nico. Please.”

He seems to believe me this time, because he doesn’t waste any time thrusting hard inside me. I cry out at the shock of it, and I grip his shoulders tightly as he uses my body. He leans me back against the smooth side of the pool, planting his feet on the bottom, and letting go of my neck to grip my other ass cheek.

His cock pounds hard and fast inside me, and my clit rubs against his pelvis with each thrust, sending me right into another orgasm. I’m still so sensitive from the last one that it seems like it’s never ending and all I can do is cry out his name and hold on for dear life. God, I never knew it could be like this.

“Fuck, yes, Gia, just like that,” he groans into my ear, as he pounds even harder inside me. Something I didn’t think was possible. “Come all over my cock, my sweet little mouse. Squeeze me so fucking tight.”

I’m going to have bruises on my ass tomorrow from the grip he has on them, but I don’t care. The pain only heightens the sensation.

He growls my name in my ear as he spills inside me. When he finally stills, both of us are breathing hard, and I’m still trembling with the aftershocks of my orgasm. Hell, if Nico wasn’t holding me right now, I’d probably slip into the water and drown. I feel like a limp noodle, and I barely have the strength to hold on to him. So I lay my head on his shoulder and focus on trying to calm my raging heart and breathing.

I’m in so much trouble, and while I should be panicking, I can’t. It feels right to be right here. In his arms, having him holding me close, and pressing a gentle kiss to the side of my head. It’s a simple gesture, but a tender one, and one that no one would ever think a mafia boss would be capable of.

But Nico Armani is no normal man, and that’s what scares me the most. He’s the kind of man who can break my heart. And if I don’t find a way out of here soon, there is a good chance I’ll never leave.

CHAPTER 25

Nico



I NEED to get out of here and see to my *guests*, but I don't want to move. I want to stay right here, in this pool, buried inside Gia, with her wrapped around me, and the both of us satisfied. Hell, I don't think I've ever been this satisfied and content as I am right now.

It's not the sex. Well it's a little bit the sex, but it's also Gia. It's her trusting me in ways I never figured we would get to this quickly. A small smile pulls at my lips as I think about her awkward and unskilled attempt at giving me a blow job, but she caught on quickly, trusting me to guide her. I don't want her to be perfect; I want her trust, and I want her to let me show her what I want, what I need. And she did it so much better than I thought. She didn't fight me other than when I went a little too deep in her mouth, but after taking my direction, she was fine. She'll get better with time, and something tells me she's one who loves to learn.

I pull back, turning my head to look at her. She's got her face against my shoulder facing toward me, her body trembling, but such a contented look on her face that it makes my heart tighten. All I want to do is hold her close, seeing that small smile on her lips, and the utter relaxation on her face. I press a soft kiss to her temple, before pulling away and murmuring, "You, *topolina*, are full of surprises."

She opens her eyes and lifts her head. "How?" she asks huskily, her eyes sleepy.

I don't answer her, wanting to keep that to myself for now. Instead, I pull out of her, watching her for any signs of discomfort. She winces slightly. "Are you alright?" I ask her. "How sore are you?"

She blinks, and some of the sleepiness dissipates at my question. "I'm fine," she tells me softly. "A bit sore, but the warm water is already helping."

I stare at her for another moment, assessing, but I believe her. "You'll tell me if that changes," I inform her firmly.

She rolls her eyes at me. "I'm fine, Nico," she chides. "Now, are you going to hold on to me the rest of the night, or can I finally swim?"

I smirk at her. "You are a nice handful." I give her ass another quick squeeze to punctuate my statement, making her moan softly. I take her mouth in a quick hard kiss because I can't resist, and then I release her. She moves around me and swims to the middle of the pool, turning back at me and smiling. I lean against the side of the pool, my arms along the edge as I watch her. "Tell me what you've been up to while I was out." I didn't check the cameras, mostly because I want her to tell me.

"I was asleep most of the time," she admits, treading water. "Your bed is surprisingly comfy."

"Good thing because that's where you'll be from now on."

"But what if you snore or I want some space?"

I scowl at her. "You'll be sleeping in my bed, *topolina*. There is no sleeping in another bed. I don't care how pissed you are at me. I want you with me, not on the other side of the damn house."

She arches a brow at me. "And yet you put me there when you first brought me here. All my clothes are there."

"I'll have them moved to my room."

"But you don't have the cool library in yours," she says, moving around in the water slowly, seemingly enjoying herself.

"Then I'll build one," I say carelessly. "You're not going to be away from me, Gia. End of discussion."

"You know, I think you really should learn that you can't dictate everything. It's giving you a complex."

I arch a brow at her and give her a hard stare. "I think my position says otherwise, *topolina*. And when it comes to you, I'll do whatever I have to do to make sure you're where you belong. Now, other than sleeping and then wandering down here, what else did you do?" I ask, changing the subject.

She narrows her eyes at me, but thankfully lets it go. Not that I don't enjoy when she argues and fights with me, but she's much too sore for me to take her again, and I know I won't be able to resist fucking the anger out of her. Hell, even now my cock jerks at the thought. With this woman, it doesn't

matter what she does, I always want her.

“I took another shower and then I started walking around,” she answers, pulling me out of my thoughts. She licks her lips nervously, and I wait to see if she’s going to tell me what’s on her mind. Finally, my brave little mouse asks, “So does this mean I don’t have to stay in my room under lock and key?”

She sounds so hopeful, and I have to wonder if that’s because she’s happy I trust her more now, or because she’s still trying to find a way out of here. A part of me knows she’s always going to try. I don’t want to dwell on it too much right now.

Instead, I reply, “You’re free to roam around the house and grounds. But, Gia, you will have a guard with you.”

She doesn’t reply for a moment. “You still don’t trust me, huh?” she says softly.

“I don’t trust someone not to show up and try to take you,” I reply instead of telling her the full truth. Which reminds me, I need to see to my guests, but I want another few minutes with Gia first. A few moments where I’m relaxed and don’t have to play mafia don.

She arches a brow at me. “You really think someone is going to get past all your guards and dogs to get to me? The woman that no one knows where she is? And that most people don’t know exists?”

“Your family is searching for you, and more people know who you are now.”

She startles at that, making the water splash slightly as she swims towards me. “My family knows I’m missing?” A flare of panic is in her eyes, and I move away from the wall and pull her into me. She doesn’t fight me, instead wrapping her legs around my waist and putting her hands on my chest as she stares at me.

“You have nothing to fear from your family, Gia. I won’t allow them to take you or hurt you again. You’re under my protection now.”

She stares at me, looking unconvinced. “You’re not going to want to keep me forever, Nico, and eventually they’ll figure out I’m here. And if you won’t let me go, they’ll take me back by force.”

“You are safe here. You’re mine, Gia. And that means no matter what happens, you will be safe from them and anyone else who might harm you.”

“Even you?” she whispers.

The idea of hurting her in any way repulses me, but I give her the

assurance she seems to need. “Even me.” Her eyes search mine, before she suddenly presses her forehead to mine, closing her eyes, and taking a deep breath. I hold her close, neither of us speaking.

“I’m terrified of them finding me,” she whispers. “Marco will probably kill me. And if he doesn’t, my father might.”

“No one will be killing you,” I tell her firmly. Hell, the very idea makes my blood boil. No way in hell would I let anything like that even remotely happen. “I will protect you, Gia.”

“If anyone can, I feel like it would be you, Nico,” she whispers. “Even if you did kidnap me,” she adds, her lips quirking into a smirk.

“Mmm, that just means you know the lengths I’ll go to make sure I have you where I want you,” I murmur, pressing my mouth to hers. She sighs softly as she sinks into the kiss. I pull away, though, before I allow it to get too deep and distract me. “I have some things I need to see to,” I tell her gently, and I see the flare of disappointment in her eyes before she smiles and nods. Satisfaction rolls through me knowing she wants to spend time with me, but I can’t dwell on it. “I won’t be long, and when I’m done, I have a few other places to show you.”

Now she’s intrigued. “You already have a cool library, a pool, and a huge kitchen. What else could you possibly be hiding here?”

I chuckle and start moving us towards the steps, carrying her out. I’m not quite ready to let her go. “You’ll find out soon enough.” I give her a light slap on the ass before I set her on her feet. She gives a soft yelp and glares at me, but at least she’s not moving to cover herself, seemingly comfortable with being naked and exposed to me. It almost gives me hope she’s getting used to the idea of being with me. And considering what I want from her, that’s exactly the direction I want her to be heading.

I go to one of the doors along the wall, open it and find the thick towels stacked neatly inside. I pull out a couple and bring them to her. She takes one and starts to dry off, while I do the same, watching her. If I had more time, I’d be drying her off in a whole other way. Unfortunately, that’s not in the cards right now, so I tempt myself by watching her. When she starts to pull on her clothes, I force myself to dry off briskly and do the same.

Once we’re dressed, I take her hand and lead her up the steps and out of the room. When we emerge, I’m not surprised to find Dante and Davide waiting. Gia stumbles slightly when she sees them, and I can see her face reddening, but neither man says anything to her, only focusing on me.

“Davide, you’re with Gia,” I tell him briskly. “Dante, you’re with me.” They both nod, and then I turn to Gia, who’s looking everywhere but at my men. I bite back a smirk. “Behave yourself, *topolina*.”

Her gaze moves to mine and she arches a brow, that little bit of sass making my hands ache to pull her over my shoulder, smack her ass, and find the closest surface to fuck it out of her. “I’m sure with my guard, I doubt you have much to worry about,” she replies, flicking a glance at Davide.

“With you, *topolina*, anything is possible. Now, kiss me goodbye.” She looks startled by that order, but she makes no motion to do so, glancing at Dante and Davide warily. I don’t have the time to argue with her, so I reach out and haul her into me, and lower my head to take her mouth in a quick and brutal kiss. I don’t care what my men think. They better get used to it, because I plan on taking her mouth as often as I damn well please. When I pull away, she stares up at me dazedly, and then blinks at me when I murmur, “I don’t give a fuck who’s around, Gia. When I want this mouth, I expect you to give it to me. Because I want the taste of you in my mouth when I leave.” Then I release her turn to head down the hallway. I have work to do.

However, I can feel her eyes staring into my back, and when I glance over my shoulder at her, I see her standing there glaring at me. I wink at her, before turning back and heading down to the dungeon with Dante. I am all business by the time I descend the stairs and see the men hanging from the ceiling. Including Leonardo’s youngest son, Matteo. Matteo holds my stare giving nothing away, while his men move nervously. They’ll break easily, but they’re not the ones I want answers from.

“You planning on just standing there and staring at me?” Matteo asks, all cocky bravado. “Seems to me you aren’t living up to your reputation of the big bad don that will kill you if you cross him.”

“That’s not what they call him,” one of his men sneers. I don’t let him finish that sentence. Instead, I lift my gun and shoot him between the eyes. He stares back at me with unseeing eyes, and the others go still and silent, including Matteo. His eyes widen slightly, and I see him swallow hard.

I set the gun down on the table next to me and step farther into the room, only stopping once I am in front of Matteo. “Now that we’re clear I’m going to give you the courtesy of knowing you’re going to leave here alive. Mostly because I told your father you would, but I also told him you won’t be as pretty when you do. How ugly you leave here is up to you and how easily you answer my questions.”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

I look back at Dante, who is leaning against the wall smirking. “They always say that. And yet, they all do.” I turn back to Matteo. “Unlucky for you, your brother already gave me some of the details, but I want to know how you got the information.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he lies.

I sigh. Before he can react or brace, I bring my fist up and connect it to his jaw, making him groan as his head snaps back. “Second thing you should know about me,” I inform him conversationally, “is that I don’t tolerate lies. A funny thing for a mafia don, I realize, but well, there are some standards I won’t budge on. I’m sure you’d feel the same if your father lied to you every day of your life. Or your mother.” He gives a small jerk, barely noticeable, at that, and now I know how to push. It seems someone has a soft spot for his mother. Typical. But I’ll hold off on that for now. “So, I’m going to say it again. I want to know where you got the information that I am holding your sister here, and you’re going to tell me.”

“You sick bastard,” he sneers. “You did take her, didn’t you? I thought Marco was losing his mind, but you do have her. You’re going to die as soon as my father finds out.”

I laugh darkly. “You really think your father is going to do shit to me? All because of you and your idiot brother, you gave me the excuse I need to start a war. One we both know you and your family lose, and then I’ll take everything you worthless lot leave behind. You’ll lose everything because you thought you knew something when you really had no clue.”

“You have our sister, asshole,” he grits out. “Did you really think we were just going to leave her here with the likes of you?”

“You seem to think you know a lot about what’s going on here. How about you enlighten me and I’ll tell you if you’re right?”

Like the stupid boy he is, he starts talking. So much for being harder to break. I wonder if Leonardo knows he’s raised a pussy of a son, and one that doesn’t know how to keep his damn mouth shut. “We know you took her, and we know you’ve been hiding her here. Probably fucking her and using her like your own personal whore. What, you think just because she’s part of our family you can use her against us? You thought wrong, because she’s nothing. Women are nothing more than whores and used to give us heirs. Fucking worthless. So as far as I’m concerned, you can keep her, but Marco has plans, and they involve her so we’re going to take her back and we’re

going to kill you and take everything. Everything.”

I turn and look at Dante, who shakes his head in disbelief. I look back at Matteo who is glaring at me murderously. I’m almost tempted to let him go and see what he’ll do, but first I need some more information. “Odd way to speak about your own flesh and blood. You don’t really sound like you care about your sister, and neither does your brother, but here you are sneaking in to supposedly take her back because you think I have her. A bit of an odd thing. So, what, you and your sister have a falling out or something and you’re holding a grudge?”

He sneers at me. “I told Father he should have killed her the moment she was born, but he apparently thought he could use her. We’re De Lucas and we only have sons. We don’t need women fucking things up for us with all their whining and nagging.”

“And is your sister the whining and nagging type?”

He’s lips curl back into a smug smile. “We beat that out of her early. She learned to keep quiet. The way it should be.”

I want to kill him now for the very admittance he dared to lift a finger to Gia, but I say nothing. Let the fucker keep talking and racking up the pain I’ll make him endure before I’m finished. “So despite you hating your sister, you want to use her to further some cause your brother has cooked up,” I muse. “Surprising, considering your father is in charge, and not your brother. Or your uncle. And since your Father didn’t seem aware of this little plan, I’m sure he’s going to have lots to say when you eventually make it home.” Matteo pales at that, but he quickly recovers and glares at me angrily. “Still, that’s no matter considering I don’t really give a damn about any of your family drama.”

“Let me go, give me my sister, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

I chuckle. “He still thinks I have his sister,” I say to Dante. “All of this over one woman.”

“We know you have her,” Matteo snarls, jerking against the chain.

“And yet, here you are, unable to tell me how you know. Considering until earlier today, I had no clue you have a sister,” I lie.

“You bumped into her twice, you followed her,” Matteo seethes. “And you took her. We know all about what you did. All because she was a dumb cunt and wasn’t watching where she was going.”

I want to pound my fist into his face, but I hold back. “You really think that because a woman bumped into me I’m going to kidnap her?” I scoff.

“You think I’m that hard up for pussy I need to take it now? I’m starting to see why you boys aren’t married and acting like idiots. Letting your cocks over-run your brains.”

There is a small glimmer of doubt in his eyes, but it quickly vanishes as he glares at me. “Wouldn’t take much to find out who she is. And once you knew, you figured you could use her to your advantage.”

“I think we need to clean out your ears,” I remark, before I swiftly bring my fist up and hit him in his left ear, making him swing and cry out in pain. I wait a moment, before I continue, “How the fuck would I be able to find information on a woman that doesn’t even exist on paper, huh?”

He gives me a smug smile and laughs hoarsely. “I thought you said you didn’t know anything about her?”

I punch him in the gut for good measure. “I’m starting to think you De Luca boys have no brains after all since you haven’t been listening. I told you I found out about her earlier today. From your uncle in fact. And you thought I wouldn’t start digging?”

He loses the smile and stares at me for a moment. But the cocky little shit doesn’t give up. And I have to give him props for holding himself together as much as he has. He’s not the kind of kid that’s ever been in this type of situation. He’s too green, and he’s got little to no experience like his elder brothers. “Doesn’t matter, we still know you have her, and I’m here to get her back. And Father’s not going to let you keep me here. He’ll come for me, and we’ll kill you.”

“Your father isn’t coming to save you, kid,” I tell him as I step back and grab a knife. I’m about done playing with him and ready to move on to the fun part of the evening. It’s time to give young Matteo a few lessons on interrogation and what kind of world he’s signed up for, since it seems his father and brothers haven’t educated him properly. His eyes flash to the knife in my hands, and the worry sets in, followed by panic as I slowly make my way toward him. He starts to struggle, and I try not to let my pleasure at that show. “And I’m about to share a valuable lesson with you, so make sure you pay close attention.”

Before I reach him, I turn to the man closest to him, bring the knife up and press it tight to the man’s throat. He thrashes as he tries to pull away. Are all of Leonardo’s men such pussies? Fucking pathetic, and they don’t deserve to walk out of here alive. “Unlucky for you, you were chosen for this particular mission. So one of two things is going to happen. You’re going to

tell me what I want to know and you'll die a quick death. Or you don't, and I draw this out for hours, or maybe even days until you do. So what's it going to be? I'll give you until the count of five to decide. One..."

"I'm not telling you nothing, asshole," the man hisses with a quick flash of confidence.

"Two."

"Fuck you."

"Three." I press the knife tighter to his throat and sweat starts to drip down his face and neck.

Panic overrides bravado as he pleads, "Please. Please just let me go."

"Four," I say darkly, letting my face show how serious I am.

"Okay, okay!" he cries desperately, "I'll tell you."

I pause and narrow my eyes when he goes silent. I dig the knife into his throat, making him thrash in panic. "I'm losing my patience so I suggest you start talking," I warn him.

"Don't you fucking dare," Matteo screams at him, thrashing and swinging himself as he tries to get himself out of the chains.

"Shut him up," I order Dante, who is already moving. Within seconds he has Matteo gagged, though it doesn't stop him from trying to get loose. I look back at the man hanging expectantly, keeping the knife pressed tight to his throat. "Start talking."

"Keep your mouth shut, Aldo," another man hisses.

I don't even have to speak before Dante goes over, puts a gun to his forehead, and pulls the trigger. The remaining men thrash and scream, pleading for their lives. Dante silences them. A quick punch to the gut for one and an uppercut to the jaw for the other. Once the room is silent, minus Matteo's muffled screams and thrashing. "You were saying," I say expectantly to the man in front of me.

He swallows hard. "I don't know the name of the person, but it's someone who works for you. He's been giving away secrets about your operation for weeks to try and get Leonardo to give him a shot at a higher title in the organization."

So I have a rat. Fury burns in my veins, but I ignore it for now. I have more information to extract first. "And what exactly did this guy say? That he saw me or my men take the De Luca woman?"

"Uh, yeah, pretty much," he stammers out. "He said you kidnapped a woman and she was being kept against her will and that you had your men

searching for information on that woman. And that you had men staking out the area that you saw her, which is where the De Luca girl was being housed.”

So my rat has been privy to a good amount of information. “What else did he say?”

He swallows and looks at Matteo for a moment before he looks back at me. “That you are getting ready to make some big moves and there is a chance that you’re going to start a war.”

I glance over at Dante. “Apparently we’re going to start a war,” I repeat in amusement. “All by ourselves, over a woman.”

Dante gives a mocking smile back. “He apparently doesn’t know your reputation if that’s what he thinks.”

Indecision moves over the man’s face when I look back at him. “What else?” I demand.

“I, uh, I-I don’t know of anything else,” he stammers. “That’s all I knew. Now let me go.”

“No, see, that wasn’t in the cards for you. I told you if you started talking, I’d give you an easy death, and since I’m a man of my word...” I step back, grab the gun off the table, lift, and fire. Then I turn to the other two men. “Now it’s your turn. If you have something you’d like to add, I suggest that you get talking. I was nice to him, and I’m not about to be as nice to either of you.” Neither men speak, but of course, that’s to be expected. Matteo’s screams are growing hoarse now, and it’s much easier to ignore him. I turn to Dante. “Normally, I’d handle both of them myself, but I know you’ve been chomping at the bit to get a turn, so take your pick.”

“Gladly,” Dante says, stepping forward.

By the time Dante is finished, the man is crying for his mother and begging to die. I stare at the now bloodied man in front of me, his head hanging forward as he gasps for air. I’m sure Dante broke some ribs, and from the weak sounds coming from him, I’m sure he’s pierced a lung. “I suggest you get talking,” I tell the man darkly. “You’re about to die a very slow and painful death otherwise. One more chance and Dante here will put you out of your misery. If not, you can suffocate on your own blood and not be able to draw in enough air.”

His eyes lift to mine in panic, and the air in his lungs starts to wheeze faster. “Giovanni,” he gasps out, his words no more than a whisper. “Sicilians. Coming. Want girl.”

“What girl?” I demand. “The sister?”

“Yes. Kill me,” he begs on his next breath.

Knowing he’s not going to be of any use to me, I give Dante a cool look, letting him know I’m done. Dante, being a little less kind than I am, grabs a knife, and slices the man ear to ear, letting him bleed out. I turn to the final soldier hanging, and he gives me a mutinous stare. This one, he’s going to be harder to break. But I love a challenge, so I let him see the cold, cruel smile pull across my lips, and I get to work.

It takes a while, and I have to admire the man’s stamina, but he, like everyone else, gives in when he can’t take anymore pain. Though that probably has something to do with Dante cutting off each of his fingers on his right hand. I always have to admire his technique, because Dante damn well knows how to get shit done and fast. I step forward after the last digit falls to the floor and say calmly, “What do you have to tell me?”

“Family is fighting,” the man gasps out. “Marco wants control, and so does Giovanni. Both are p-planning something. Girl is key to them.”

“The sister?” I prompt.

“Yes,” he gasps out. “G-Giovanni wants to marry her off to a Sicilian family and has already promised her to the son to secure their alliance, but they found out she’s missing and are coming to get her.”

“And they think I have her so they’re coming here?”

“I don’t know,” he gasps out. “But they’re coming to talk to Giovanni.”

“Hmmm,” is all I say, but my mind is already working on what to do with this information. After all, the Sicilians are a crazy bunch, and while I have no problem going toe to toe with them, it’s going to be a bloody war, and I’ll lose men before it’s over. “And what is Marco’s plan?” Matteo’s screams increase, and the venom in his eyes speaks volumes he doesn’t want his soldier telling me anything. Thankfully, the soldier doesn’t even look his way.

“Marco wants to take over everything and get rid of Giovanni and his father. So no one has a claim to the territory but him.” He lifts his gaze to meet mine. “Like you did,” he adds bravely. I don’t react to his statement. It’s old news by this point, and one I’m proud of so if he thinks that’s going to set me off, he’s wasted a precious final breath on it. When he doesn’t get the reaction he wants, he continues, “He’s planning to overthrow all the families in the city.”

Ambitious, and stupid, but not something that surprises me. Marco and

Giovanni both have a hard-on for power, and they're going to fall because of it. "And how exactly is he going to do that?"

"I-I don't know, but I heard him talking about it to his brothers. Something about a merger, but he needs the girl to do it."

"The girl as in the sister, or another woman?" I press.

"I assumed he meant the sister, but he's been seeing a woman, so it could have been her."

"And who is the woman he's been seeing?"

"I don't know. He never said, and I was always on another station," he gasps out. "He keeps things close to the vest. But I heard something about he'll kill them all and he's planning on having the Sicilian's as back up."

I glance over at Matteo, whose face is almost purple from anger. The murderous look he's giving the soldier speaks of how truthful the man is being. I look back at the soldier. "The same Sicilian's as Giovanni, or another?" I ask him.

"D-Different," he gasps out. "The Caruso's."

Now that gives me pause. The Caruso's are a well known family that does things as brutally as possible. They also have never aligned with anyone outside of those in Europe, thinking that those of us here in North America are soft and weak. "And how did he plan on getting them?" I demand.

"M-Marriage," he gasps out, "I think to the sister."

So it seems that on all sides the Sicilians have been contacted. Looks like I have to get work. Instead of replying to the man, and knowing there isn't much more he's going to be able to give me, I grab the gun and kill him, giving him a much more merciful death than he deserves. Then I turn to Matteo. I put the gun to his head as I say, "Seeing as I told your father I will let you go, you're going to take back a warning to your brother and uncle. They have no idea what they're up against, and they will keep whatever family squabbles they're trying to settle away from me and my territory if they want to live. As for your sister, if I find her, she won't be going back to any of the likes of you."

"Uff 'ou," Matteo snarls behind the gag.

"As much as I would love to make you pay for that, I don't have time considering I have some calls to make," I tell him darkly. "But remember, I did promise your father you would be coming back less pretty, so how about we get to work on that?"

CHAPTER 26

Nico



I DON'T KNOW where Gia is, but I don't feel like dealing with her questions right now. Things are about to come to a head and I need to make sure I'm ahead of them. My gradual build-up to taking over territories is now coming to a screeching halt. The Russians and Irish will have to wait.

"Get Sofia and bring her to my office," I order Dante as soon as I step out of the shower in the gym, wrapping a towel around my waist.

"Already done," Dante replies, handing me a pair of lounge pants and t-shirt.

Once I'm dressed, I don't waste time in heading to my office. I resist the urge to check on Gia. She's safe with Davide, and he'll ensure she's not getting herself into trouble either. "When you drop that little bastard off, make sure the guys do it as roughly as possible."

"Told them to get some energy out on the way there. But to make sure he stays alive."

I nod, pleased. When we get to my office, Sofia is sitting on the sofa in the corner, waiting. "You want me to contact my family," she says knowingly before I can get out a word.

Her brothers and father all work for the Caruso's, and it's because of her I have as good of a relationship with them as I do. Well, assuming she hasn't told them how often I threaten to fire her or outright kill her. Those bastards are insane, and if anyone was going to find a way to kill me, it would be them. Though, I'd give them a run for their money. "Yes. It seems Marco De Luca is planning on a merger with the Caruso's and I want to know what the hell is going on with that."

She doesn't answer, just pulls out her phone, presses some numbers, and puts it to her ear. Within seconds, I hear a male voice sing out to her happily. "Hello, Papa," she greets in English. "I have Nico and Dante here and they want to ask you some questions."

"You're in trouble?" her father asks, all joviality gone and a dark menace replacing it. "If they have hurt you—"

"I can handle myself," she interrupts him with a dark scowl on her face. "Who do you think has kept this place afloat?"

"Of course, you are my daughter so it only stands to reason," the man agrees. "Well, put them on so we can talk. And you, *Principessa*, best be planning on coming home to visit soon. I have men dying to meet you."

Dante's expression turns stony at that, but he doesn't say a word. Sofia gives a smug smile his way. "Perhaps, Papa, but we'll discuss it another time. Now, talk to Nico and Dante before they decide to throw me in the dungeon or something for wasting their time."

"You would dare throw my daughter in a dungeon like some filthy good for nothing soldier?" her father demands furiously over the speaker.

"That depends on if Sofia deserves it. Your daughter is headstrong and is a pain in my ass on a good day, Signore Cattaneo."

"She is a strong woman, just like her mother," he replies proudly. "A man knows when he has a treasure like that you don't let her go. Or is that your intention, Signore Armani? You think to try and ask for my daughter's hand?"

Sofia bursts out laughing, while I glare at her. "Papa, he'd rather kill me than marry me."

"Why the hell would he not want to marry you?" her father demands. "You are a beautiful woman, smart, and you can take care of yourself. Any man is lucky to have you, and if he can't see that, then he is an idiot."

"I'm not interested in marrying your daughter, as lovely as she is," I tell him.

He huffs out a breath. "Then why the fuck are you having her call me?"

"I need to know if you've heard any word of your boss or any of his men speaking with a man by the name of Marco De Luca," I reply, sitting in my seat and putting the phone on the desk. Sofia and Dante move closer, and I don't miss the way Dante has positioned himself beside the woman who is purposely ignoring him, but has a light of mischief in her eyes that doesn't bode well for my Underboss.

“De Luca?” her father repeats. “I remember that name coming up in a conversation. Why do you need to know that?” There is a hard edge to his voice, telling me he doesn’t care he’s speaking to me about something I shouldn’t know about.

“The De Luca family runs a rival territory here in my city, and it seems they are planning on starting a war,” I reply calmly. “And considering the source, I’d say it’s reliable. So, now, my question is, what is it going to take for you to arrange a call with your boss?”

“I’ll call you back,” he says, dropping the call.

“Something is definitely going on,” Sofia remarks, staring at the phone. “Normally he’d string you along to get more information out of you without giving anything away.”

“If it gets me answers, I don’t care what we need to do,” I say irritably. The audacity of the man to hang up on me, but I also know that when it comes to the Caruso’s and their men, they do as they damn well please because no one would dare tell them otherwise. I don’t have the manpower to go against them, so I need to make sure I turn this into something that works for me.

“And don’t think you and I won’t be having a discussion,” Dante adds to Sofia, his tone dark and dangerous.

Sofia tilts her head up to him, giving him a sly smile. “What? You don’t want me to go and visit my family? Perhaps I should mention your little threat to my father and we’ll see what he says.”

“You think I care about your father?” Dante scoffs.

“As entertaining as this is,” I interrupt before Sofia can reply, “do it elsewhere. I don’t have time for your lover’s bullshit.” Thankfully they drop it, but I don’t miss the looks they give each other.

My phone starts to ring, and when I see the unknown number, Dante rushes to his computer and quickly puts a trace on the call. He nods at me and I answer calmly. “Armani.”

“So you are looking to speak to me,” a deep voice on the other end says in the same manner.

“That depends on who I’m speaking to,” I reply, sitting back in my chair. He sounds too young to be Pietro Caruso, the head of the family. So my assumption is this is one of his sons.

Silence is the answer on the other end for a moment before I hear, “You have balls, Armani, I give you that. And also lucky for you I’m in a good

mood and willing to overlook your lack of manners. You Americans certainly have lost your way when it comes to showing respect.”

“And for all I know you’re not one of the Carusos but an underling that’s trying to figure out business that is of no concern to you. Considering you have yet to give me a name. And as for my manners, well, my mother was a lazy bitch that preferred alcohol, drugs, and fucking men other than my father, so I’d say she didn’t have much time to drill those in to me.”

“Mmmm, that we have in common then,” the man says in amusement. “Though ours was foolish and decided to sleep with the enemy and thought she could live. And I am Alessio Caruso. My father, unfortunately, is seeing to another matter at the moment, so you get to talk to me.”

I’ll take what I can get for now. “I’m looking to find out what kind of deal Marco De Luca is promising you in exchange for an alliance with him,” I say bluntly.

I am met with silence on the other end. “Yes, Aurelio did say something about that when he spoke to me,” he replies after a moment. “I don’t see how that involves you, but I’m sure there is a reason for this call.”

“Considering his brother was found trying to break into my home to search my grounds for their missing sister, and his men oh so helpfully provided that information, I thought it best to reach out. While also letting you know that whatever they promised, you won’t get it.”

“And what exactly did this man say? I’m sure you can’t believe the words of a lowly guard who was trying to save his own skin.”

“Normally, no,” I agree. “But considering the brother just about yanked out his own arms trying to get out of the chains to silence the man, I’m thinking that it’s credible.”

“And the brother, he is still alive?”

“I gave my word to his father. I didn’t say anything about the kind of condition he would be returned in. I’ll spare you the details, but let’s just say the entire De Luca family is about to fall apart, and they are going to be dragging you down with them if you consider keeping the alliance.”

He’s quiet. “And how do you know this?” he asks, though I note something else in his tone and I know he’s listening very carefully.

I bite back a smirk. “Well, I was invited to dinner by the idiot’s uncle, who informed me of his plans to offer up his niece, the idiot’s sister, in exchange for an alliance with him to overthrow his brother, Leonardo, the current don. Naturally, I was curious, but before we could get into detail,

Leonardo, and his son Marco showed up. And, well, that was when our dinner went south and I had to leave behind a perfectly good piece of fish to find out why the youngest De Luca boy was breaking into my home. And now, come to find out, not only is the uncle trying to take over, but so is the son. It's all very messy, and I'm sure you can see why that would be a problem."

"Hmmm, yes, I can. Let me call you back, Armani." Then he drops the call.

I pull the phone from my ear, annoyed that once again someone has dared to hang up on me, and look at Sofia. "What do you know?" I demand.

"Alessio is the oldest son and is set to take over for his father. There are two other brothers, they're known for being men you don't cross, but fair. When I was younger, I was taken, and Alessio was the one who came for me and killed them. They treat their soldiers like family, and their men are some of the most loyal out there. So they are the men you want on your side."

"And the father?"

She gives a soft smile. "Pietro is like his sons, though a little harder. His wife betrayed him, and he loved her more than anything until that day. He was the one who killed her along with her lover, and for a while, we weren't sure he would come back from that. But his sons helped him, and he came around. He was always kind to me, like a grandfather of sorts. He was the one who paid for me to go to school. He also was the one who paid for me to come here, despite my family trying to convince me otherwise. He offered me a place in his home working for him, but I wanted out, so he gave it to me. He's not going to take it well if someone has double-crossed him."

"What are the chances of him aligning with us?" Dante asks her curiously.

She shrugs. "I'm not sure. But if you can offer him something, I'm sure he'd consider it. Alessio has always wanted to expand, but he's careful and makes smart moves according to my father."

Something promising. And I suppose we have an ace in the hole when it comes to Sofia working with us if they have as much affection for her as she states. "Did they know you were taking a job with me?" I ask curiously.

"I came here to explore, but when I saw the position open, I called and asked for details about you. Wanted to make sure I wasn't going to work for a selfish prick," she adds with a smirk my way. "Or, at least not one that I couldn't handle." Dante snorts, and I pin him with a glare, which he ignores.

“Either way, they know where I am, and it might mean that you have a better chance than the De Lucas of getting whatever you need out of them.”

Before I can reply to that, my computer starts to chime with a video call coming through. I answer it and am greeted with the faces of Pietro and Alessio Caruso, and two other men I assume are the final sons in the family equation. “I hear you have some information that might be of interest to us, Mr. Armani,” Pietro says as he stares at me with dark assessing eyes.

The man doesn’t look a day over fifty, but must be pushing seventy by now. His face has some lines, but it looks like he keeps himself in good shape. His hair is salt and pepper, and he sports a clean-shaven face compared to that of his three sons. But there is no mistaking the power of this man. Still, I won’t be intimidated. I’m a don, and that means he and I, we are on equal ground. “Perhaps. It is good to see you in such good health, Signore Caruso. I don’t think I’ve seen you since I was a boy.”

“Your father was a fucking idiot, so I hope you turned out better,” Pietro says bluntly.

I let my lips quirk at his description of my father. “On that we can agree. Which is why, I’m sure the information we have will make you reconsider any deal with the De Lucas.” *And align with me*, but I leave that unsaid.

“Hmmm,” Pietro replies. “My son has given me the gist. But before we begin, I would like to speak with Sofia.”

I arch a brow, but nod to Sofia to come around to stand beside me. Her lips pull up into a warm smile. “Pietro, you handsome devil. I hope you’ve come to your senses and kicked my brothers’ asses to the curb.”

Pietro laughs and a smile pulls at his lips. It’s clear he has a lot of affection for my housekeeper, and from the looks on his son’s faces, they feel the same. I see Dante edging closer to Sofia’s side out of the corner of my eye and nearly roll them. Fucker needs to get a grip. “They are far too good at their jobs to do that, *cara mia*,” Pietro tells her. “You are well?”

There is a wealth of questions there, but unsurprisingly, Sofia says, “Would I not tell you if I wasn’t? Though, I should probably be upset that you would question that I can’t handle myself? You and your sons were the ones who insisted I be taught to keep all you men in line after all.”

Pietro’s expression is full of pride. “That I did. You must come home soon, Sofia. I miss seeing your pretty face around here. Perhaps now that you have spread your wings you will consider settling down? Your father tells me many men are lined up to meet you.”

Sofia smirks. "I'll come home for a visit soon," she promises him.

"Good." He slips his gaze toward me. "That won't be a problem for you, will it, Signore Armani?" It's phrased as a question, but I know it's an order.

"If it gets her out of my hair, I'll send her to you tomorrow," I reply drily.

Sofia snorts, and Pietro raises a brow. "He likes to think he is in charge, Pietro. And I take great pleasure in reminding him who actually runs this place."

Pietro chuckles. "You are much like your mother, *cara mia*. She would be proud. As am I." Sofia's face softens and I can see the longing in her eyes at the mention of her family. I make a note to send her home as soon as she's ready. There are days I want to murder her, but she has indeed kept my house running smoothly ever since she started here. "Now, we must get down to business, *cara mia*, so we'll talk later, *si*?"

"Of course, Pietro." She blows him a kiss and then walks around the desk and out the door. Not even glancing at me or Dante. I see the worry in Dante's eyes as he tracks her steps, but then it's gone and he's back to my ruthless Underboss when he steps into the screen.

Pietro loses all friendliness as he looks at me. "You will let her come home whenever she wants."

"She's always been free to leave whenever she would like. I have offered many times, but she's devoted to her job and she feels that if she leaves the place will fall apart. I do not keep my staff hostage."

"No, but you do take women against their will from what I've heard," one of the sons remarks, leaning forward. He looks like a younger version of his father, but instead of dark brown hair, his is darker blonde. His dark eyes are hard as he stares at me.

"Zeno," Pietro says calmly.

"A lot of people have been saying things lately. The question is, how are you hearing them?"

"I'm tired of the careful speak," Pietro huffs. "We are men, and I am tired of these stupid games you Americans think to play. So let's just get things out on the table, hmm?" He gives me an assessing gaze and then he leans forward. "You are correct that Marco De Luca approached us for an alliance. Normally, I would not be interested, but he assured me that it would be an excellent alliance and one that would make us both rich and powerful." He scoffs. "As if I need more power, but I was intrigued so I listened."

"And what did he offer you?" I ask, since we're going to put all our cards

on the table.

“He offered me a marriage contract for the lone female De Luca member,” Pietro replied. “His sister, I believe. And the very one that you have in your possession now.” He stares at me, daring me to lie to him.

I have two choices. I can lie, and hope that I get it past him, or I can tell him the truth and let him know Gia will never be available to him or his sons. Knowing little about this man, I need to be careful. But like he said, my father was an idiot, and I’m much better than him. So I lean forward and reply, “Gia De Luca is in my home, my bed, and my life, and no one else is going to have her. Not even you.”

None of them react. I have essentially informed them I did indeed take the woman promised to them, and the one who could very well start a war if they take exception to it. Especially since I’ve also just admitted the virginity promised to them is gone.

Finally Pietro looks at the son to his right. “Alessio? You were the one she was promised to,” he remarks.

I look at the man who I spoke to on the phone. He’s also a younger version of his father, but a slightly thicker beard than his brothers. His face gives nothing away as the two of us stare at each other. Finally he asks, “Did you take her knowing she was promised to someone else?”

“No. I took her because I wanted her, and before I knew who she was.”

Alessio arches a brow. “And now?”

“Now, she’s mine and I will never let her go.”

“And she is willing to stay with you?”

“She does not want to return home.”

“So you are holding her hostage, and while she, according to you, does not want to go home, you are not giving her an option of another spot.” His voice is hard.

I narrow my eyes at him slightly. “Giulia De Luca is mine, and she’s not going anywhere.”

“I want to speak with her.”

“No.”

“Then I can only assume you are worried she’ll speak to us and tell us that she wants us to rescue her, because she is indeed unwilling,” Pietro interjects. “Which would mean that you are giving credence to the De Luca claims you are trying to keep her from fulfilling her contract with us.”

I grit my teeth as I try to figure out what to say. Any of it makes me

sound like I am indeed playing right into the De Luca's plans, and will no doubt cost me the alliance that I want. Especially one that will stave off a war on multiple fronts. Fucking hell, this is a fucking mess. The damn De Lucas are going to die slowly and painfully. Finally, I reply, "Gia has been through years of abuse and isolation at the hands of her family. She is safe here with me, and considering you are not the only family she has been offered to, I will do whatever I have to do to protect her. Even if that means keeping her away from you."

"How can she be safe with you when you have kidnapped her and are holding her against her will?" the third son demands. This one must look like his mother considering the slightly softer features, dark blonde hair, and hazel eyes. Though he certainly has his father's scowl and hard glare.

"Because I will make sure that no one harms her again," I snap. "And she is safer with me than anyone else." My frustration is mounting and I'm barely able to keep from turning off the computer and ending the conversation right now.

"It sounds to me like you care for her, Signore Armani," Pietro says thoughtfully. "Though Massimo's question is a valid one. Your feelings are only a small part in a bigger puzzle."

Suddenly the door to my office opens, and in walks the woman we are currently discussing. And the expression on her face tells me that she's been listening for a while. Without a word, she shuts the door as soon as Davide steps in behind her, looking harassed, and says, "I'll talk to them."

I stiffen, because there is no way the men on the call haven't heard her. "Gia," I say warningly, while also glaring furiously at her guard. He's going to get the beating of his life when we're finished.

She lifts her chin, her gaze defiant. "I want to talk to them, Nico, and I'm not leaving until I do."

Before I can reply, Pietro says loudly, "Come around so we can see you, *cara mia*."

Gia and I don't move, staring each other down. I fight back the panic that wants to bubble up inside me. There is no way Alessio won't find her beautiful, and if he decides he wants her, he'll attempt to take her, and I will never let that happen. No man is going to come between Gia and I. Ever.

After another long moment, she moves around the desk, and steps in front of Dante. She looks at the screen and blinks a couple of times before she awkwardly says, "Hello."

All of the men watch her for a moment. “Hello, my dear,” Pietro says warmly, his tone friendly, those his eyes are shrewed. “I must say, seeing you, even if it is through one of these blasted screens, I can see why Signore Armani does not want to release you. Aren’t you stunning.”

She blushes, and I clench my hands on my thighs. I barely resist the urge to grab her and hold her close, or better yet, take her completely out of here. “Thank you, Signore,” she replies. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name and I don’t want to be rude.”

“Now, see, she has learned some lovely manners. I am Pietro Caruso, *cara*. And these are my sons, Alessio, Zenò, and Massimo. And it seems that there are a lot of people looking for you.”

I stew in anger, but I manage to keep my mouth closed.

Gia surprises me, however, by saying, “Yes, I know. My family seems to think that getting me back will be the answer to all problems. But I’m afraid, Signore Caruso, that I am not of much value to them.”

Pietro doesn’t react to that other than an arched brow, but his sons are not as careful in their expressions. Especially Alessio, who looks slightly pissed. “Ms. De Luca, I can assure you that you have great value,” Pietro tells her, “Your hand has been offered to many families, including my own. Your brother proposed you marry Alessio. I would think that a brother who would want to secure a strong marriage like this one would mean you have great worth.”

Gia gives him a rueful smile. “I’m sorry, Signore Caruso, but my brother is much more interested in securing power than making sure that I am happy and taken care of. If it were up to him, I wouldn’t be around at all.” She sounds so sad about it that I don’t even stop my hand from coming up to wrap around her waist and pull her to my lap, holding her when she looks at me in surprise.

“And what of your uncle?” Pietro asks her curiously. “Surely he has your best interests at heart.”

She shakes her head. “My uncle is worse than my brother. He wants to be top dog, and he will do anything to get it. Including auctioning me off to the highest bidder.” Pietro’s mouth turns down in a displeased frown. To a man like him, family is everything, and he certainly isn’t a fan of the De Lucas after this conversation.

“I think the bigger question is your current situation,” Alessio says, leaning forward. “I have no intention of forcing you to live up to the deal

your brother struck, Ms. De Luca, but if you don't want to be with Signore Armani, all you need to do is say the word and I will ensure you are safe. I did not plan on taking a wife this soon, but I can assure you that you will be happy, and you will also be safe. And I will ensure, personally, that you are free to come and go as you choose."

Panic mixes with fury at his words. At what he's offering her. He has just given her the option of the one thing I can't give her. The question is if she will take it. And if she does, what I'm going to have to do to make sure it doesn't happen. Because I'm not about to let my little mouse go, no matter how hard I have to fight and how much blood I need to wade through.

CHAPTER 27

Gia



I DON'T NEED to look at Nico to know that he's not happy with Alessio's offer. And it's not lost on me what he's offering to me. Freedom, but with strings. And in another country and far away from my family. Far away from the life I lived here. But also far away from Nico.

That's the crux of it, though. As much as I want to be free, I also can't bring myself to agree to it. And that's the goddamn problem, isn't it? I told myself that I would get away, that I would be free, and here I am with the opportunity and I can't say yes. What the hell is wrong with me? I should be jumping at it. Hell, I should be screaming it.

So why aren't I?

My mind is spinning, and the man in front of me is watching me expectantly. He doesn't push me, he just holds my gaze, communicating things to me without saying anything at all. I don't know why, but he strikes me as a good man. One that many believe he's the son of the devil, but I see something else. Maybe it's because I've never seen that expression on any of my family members' faces that I can recognize it. Still, I don't know this man, and men are very good at hiding their true nature until it's too late.

"Giulia," Alessio prompts, bringing me out of my thoughts.

He wants an answer and I need to give him something. I take a deep breath and I say, "Thank you for the offer, but I want to stay here."

No one reacts to my words, not even Nico. Alessio's eyes bore into me. "You want to stay there," he repeats. Suddenly, he lifts his hands and surprises me.

Alessio: Are you being told to say that or are you saying that because

you want to?

I stare at him for a moment. Wait, how does he know American Sign Language? And how does he know that I know how to speak it?

Me: I'm saying that. No one is forcing me. Nico has treated me well, and I'm sorry, but I don't know you. And how do you know that I can understand you?

Alessio: I made it my business to know everything about my potential future bride. And that is fair, but I promise you will be safe here. Sofia is a valued member of our family, and she will vouch for us.

I'm surprised at that. Wait? They know Sofia?

"What the fuck are you two doing?" Nico demands.

We both ignore him, though I don't miss the flash of amusement on Alessio's face before he quickly masks it.

Me: I'll keep that in mind. But if I need you, will you still be available for me to call?

Alessio's face softens slightly at that.

Alessio: Of course. But one more question. Are you staying because you love him, or because you're scared of taking a big risk?

Well, that's blunt, isn't it? I don't answer right away. There is a whole lot to unpack with that question. Do I love Nico? That would be crazy. I mean, I've been here a short while, and yes I've seen him every day, and slept with him, but you can't fall in love that fast. I may love to read, but real life isn't a romance novel, and Nico is more villain than hero.

As for the second part, he's right, I am scared to take any kind of step toward someone I don't know. Sofia might vouch for them, but what do I even know about Sofia? God, this is all just a big jumbled mess. So I answer him as honestly as I can.

Me: I don't know.

Alessio nods. "Then know that my offer is always open to you, Giulia. Say the word, and I'll have you out of there so fast his head will spin."

"What the fuck?" Nico snarls, clearly having lost his patience.

I can't help the small smile that quirks my lips. "Thank you, I appreciate it."

"Someone had better start talking," Nico grinds out between clenched teeth.

"*Cara*, you really should reconsider," Massimo suddenly says, a sly grin on his handsome face. "He seems like a bit of a grump and cranky too. Here,

it is sunshine and nothing but good cheer all the time.”

Nico lets out a low growl, even as the other men start to chuckle. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, ignoring Nico when he mutters something under his breath.

“Well, now that that is settled, it seems we have some other things to discuss,” Pietro announces. “*Cara mia*, it is your choice if you wish to stay. I’m sure it is not a pleasant thing.”

“She’s staying right here,” Nico announces tightly. “She’ll probably just stand in the door and listen anyway.” I don’t deny that. He’ll probably read me the riot act later, but that’s fine. Perhaps this conversation will help me sort things out.

“Alright,” Pietro says briskly. “It seems, Signore Armani, that we have some things to sort out.”

“We do,” Nico replies.

As they launch into whatever they are trying to figure out, I tune them out and try to understand what the hell is wrong with me. Why the hell didn’t I say yes to Alessio? I mean, sure I don’t know him, but he was offering me something I’ve always wanted. And here I am, sitting in the lap of the man who kidnapped me and is holding me prisoner like I want to be here. God, I really have lost my mind.

Hell, I should want to go even if I don’t end up keeping my end of the bargain. I’d be out of America, in another country, living far away from my family and the assholes who work for them. I mean, I’ve always dreamed of traveling the world, getting to do the things I’ve been dreaming about since I was a child.

My family used to go on vacations and things all the time. Without me of course. My brothers would pitch a fit if my father even hinted that I could come along, and then my mother would make the point that I shouldn’t miss any schooling. So I was always left behind. And here I am, finally getting the chance and not taking it?

Maybe Alessio is right, and it’s fear holding me back. Fear of stepping into another bad situation since I can’t seem to get out of those. Stepping into another family dynamic where the women are nothing, and the men rule with iron fists and hard, pointed shoes. And in a country I might not be able to escape from.

I glance at Nico, who is paying attention to whatever is being said on the screen, but still, he hasn’t moved me, and every so often, like he seems to

know my inner turmoil, he rubs my thigh with his hand soothingly. Would it really be so bad to stay with him? I mean, it's not like I don't know what I'm getting. But at the same time, is that all I'm going to get? Having to stay in this big house for the rest of my life and never going anywhere or getting to do anything. That's not the life I want to live.

God, all of this is so exhausting. I settle into him and lean my head against his shoulder as my mind works overtime to sort it all. I hate not being sure of myself, and I hate that I'm letting a man make me question myself. Especially a man I should be wanting to get away from as soon as possible. I mean, he's a mafia don, and if I stay here, I'm never getting out of this world.

You were never going to get out of it. You're the daughter of a mafia don, and the ones who are offering you shelter are also in the mafia.

Damn it, I know it's right, but is it wrong of me to wish I was someone else? That I could be someone other than Giulia De Luca and the bargaining chip for so many men. There are probably women who would love to be in my position right now, and have so many choices of men who want them, but not me. No, I know the reality of what happens to most of those women, and they'll never recover from it. I may not have known any of them, but I used to hear my mother, and later Carmen, talking about them. Though, decidedly in different tones. My mother was at least sympathetic. Carmen was far more amused and considered it a right of passage that women need to go through. After all, look what it made her.

I suppose if I'm going to stay in the hands of someone in this world, I need to pick someone that I can live with at least somewhat happily. But is that Nico? Or am I fooling myself?

The image of the two of us in the pool flashes in my mind, our foreheads pressed together as we floated. And then the flash of his expression when he found out the whip marks on my back. The utter fury, the promise that no one would hurt me again. It makes my heart pound a little harder in my chest. Men don't make those kinds of statements for nothing. Especially not in this world. Hell, my father would laugh at me for being a romantic sap. My brothers aren't much better. I feel terrible for the women they end up marrying.

Would Nico do that? Force someone to marry him and have children just to keep his line going? Even as soon as that thought enters my mind, I reject it. No, Nico won't do that. He'd never force his children to marry either. At least, I hope he wouldn't. What do I know about him really, other than what

I've seen since he brought me here? Sure, we've had conversations, but a lot of the time I've been here, I've been trying like hell to get away.

God, has it really only been a couple of days since I agreed to stop running? It feels like a hell of a lot longer. It's more like months or years, and I don't know if that is a bad sign or not. And I'll admit that it hasn't been all bad. I mean, I've had a nice big bedroom with a library, and Nico has started to let me move around the house freely. Does this mean that he's also going to be letting me out of the house?

Or at least after the whole issue with my family is sorted out. I don't want to give my family the chance to grab me, so I suppose it makes sense to stay hidden. But once that's all sorted, I don't want to be a prisoner anymore. I want to be able to walk down the street because I feel like it; go out to a restaurant; hell, just to go shopping or meet with some friends. Something I've never had, and it's scary to think about trying to make friends, but I want it so badly. I want someone to talk to, someone to confide in, and someone I can support when they need it. But I can't do that in my current position. Is Nico willing to give that to me? Am I willing to make sure that it happens by calling up the Caruso's?

Would calling them even be smart since it appears by doing so that I would be agreeing to a marriage I don't want? Hell, I don't know if I want to be married at all. Would they be willing to help me without the promise of marriage to Alessio? God, this whole thing is a mess. I hate that I'm basically a pawn to all these men. A pawn they can trade and use however they please because I wasn't born a man. It's archaic, misogynistic, and yet still, it's the hand I've been dealt.

Irritation makes me shift on Nico's lap, who glances down at me, arching a brow. I eye him for a moment, before I close my eyes and try to ignore him. Try to drown out all the voices talking around me, which is easier said than done when I hear Pietro say, "You are about to have a war on your hands, Signore Armani, and I hope you know what you're doing. But you seem to have far more smarts and grit than your father, I suppose we could consider an alliance. Provided we can make it worth each other's while."

"Gia is not marrying your son," Nico says, voice hard like granite, and his grip tightens on me. I should be pissed, but my already confused heart swells just a little bit over how much he seems to want me here. God, I really need to get a grip.

"Yes, you've made that clear," Pietro says patiently. "And I don't fault

you for wanting to keep her all for yourself. So instead, we will discuss it when we arrive.”

“Arrive?” Nico says carefully.

“We will be there in two days,” Pietro confirms, a smug amusement in his tone. “We will also discuss what we’ll be doing for each other. And it will give us a chance to see sweet Sofia. Her father and brothers will be joining us of course.”

I open my eyes and look up to see Nico’s expression is blank, but his eyes say a wealth of things, and I have to bite back a grin. Oh, he’s not pleased with that. He wants the alliance, but he doesn’t want them here. Whether that’s because he doesn’t want them here to convince me to go with them, or if it’s because he doesn’t like people in his house. Either way, he knows that he can’t say no. “You know that the news you are on your way here and coming to stay with me will be just the invitation that is needed to start this war?”

This time I turn my head and now I see why these men are feared and dangerous. The dark and anticipatory look on their faces has a shiver going down my spine. I can only be grateful that they seem to be on this side and not aligned with my family.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been able to participate in a good war,” Alessio says easily, a lethal smile on his handsome face.

“Besides, you’re going to need us if another family is on their way to try and collect your woman,” Massimo points out. Nico doesn’t correct his assertion, and I look up at Nico in surprise. He doesn’t look at me, and now I’m even more confused. Sure, Nico has constantly been saying I’m his, but does he really mean it? I figured that him saying I was his meant he would keep me until he was tired and then that would be it. But does Nico want me forever?

God, this whole situation is enough to do my head in.

“Do you have any idea which family it is?” Zeno asks, leaning forward on the table in front of him.

“The soldier didn’t know,” Nico replies. “My men are already on it.”

“We’ll add ours,” Pietro announces. “The faster we figure it out, the sooner I can tell you how to defeat them. After all, there is a reason we are the most feared.” He sounds very proud of that, but then again, I suppose in this kind of world, being on top is what matters.

“Alright,” Nico agrees. “Then I will see you in two days. I’ll have my

men meet you at the airport to bring you here.”

“Good,” Pietro says briskly. “In the meantime, watch yourself, Signore Armani, because this is not going to be an easy battle. It’s going to be hard-won, but something tells me you’re going to be a hard one to take down.”

Nico doesn’t reply to that but instead gives him a smile that has me seeing why people fear him. “Your team can send my Underboss the details of when you’ll be arriving and anything you need.”

“Pleasure doing business with you, Signore Armani,” Pietro says. “And, Ms. De Luca?” I look at him and see the gentle smile on his face. “I’ll see you soon, *cara mia*, and we’ll talk.” There’s a wealth of things in that statement, but I nod and give him a soft smile in return. I don’t even need to look at Nico to know that he’s pissed at that, but thankfully is smart enough to hold his tongue.

They end the call, and no one says anything for a long moment. Nico is strung so tight, I’m surprised he hasn’t snapped yet.

Finally, Dante says, “I’ll see to the arrangements. And I’ll let Sofia know her family will be coming with them.” There’s a dark edge to his voice at that, and as much as Sofia says that Dante and her are casual and nothing else, I don’t think Dante is on that same page.

“Fine,” Nico says, rising and setting me on my feet. He takes my hand and he pulls me around the desk and out of the room. He doesn’t even look at me, his entire body vibrating with tension and anger. My heart pounds, and I’m instantly wary. I don’t think Nico is going to hurt me, physically, but he is pissed, and I actively like to avoid men in this state as much as possible.

He pulls me to the door, glances at Davide but says nothing, and then he yanks me into the hallway. He pulls me down the hallway, like he’s going to take me back to his room, but he pulls me right past the steps and down another corridor. It’s a larger hallway that’s just under the grand staircase, and when he reaches a set of double doors, he yanks one open, ushers me inside and then slams it shut.

I look around, gaping. Holy shit. Now I see why this was built as a castle. The ballroom that he’s pulled me into is huge, and I’m shocked that I didn’t know it was here. It’s in the center of the house, which means the rest had to be built around it, and much like the rest of the house, it’s decorated in dark Gothic carvings and paintings. But also woven into it are massive chandeliers that glitter with diamonds, gold, and silver; and a marble stone floor that looks like glass and ice mixed into one. There are only a few windows, but

also what looks like a walkout at the far end of the room to a terrace. It's beautiful and frightening. Much like the man who is standing silently behind me, boring holes into my back.

I finally turn to look at him, and the look on his face has my breath catching. The predator is back, and this time, I'm not certain I'm going to survive if he decides to pounce. My heart pounds, and I swallow hard. This isn't Nico Armani the man that has seduced me into his bed and held me in his arms like he doesn't want to let me go. This is Nico Armani, the mafia don, and a man who is used to getting what he wants, no matter what. And when he doesn't get it, he'll take it.

"What did he sign to you?" he finally asks, his voice surprisingly calm and even. Though I don't miss the anger layered underneath.

"Alessio?" I ask carefully. Yes, I know I'm stalling, but I need to be careful. I can feel it.

"Yes, Alessio," he says through clenched teeth, his jaw like granite.

I lick my lips and reply, "He wanted to make sure that I wasn't being forced to say anything to him. That you weren't coercing me."

"And what did you say?" he asks, stepping away from the door and toward me. I instinctively take a step back. But he just keeps coming, keeps prowling toward me. "Did you ask him to rescue you, Gia? Tell him I'm holding you here and that your life is in danger from me?"

"No," I say instantly, stopping, but by now, we've made it a quarter of the way into the ballroom. "No, Nico, I told him that you aren't coercing me and that you had been treating me well."

He stops in front of me, staring down into my eyes and looking like he wants to both grab me and also kill me. It's a frightening combination, but one that also makes me feel almost hopeful. Jesus Christ, I really need to get out of here. I'm losing my mind. "He wants to take you away from me," Nico says rigidly. "And I hope you know I will never let that happen, Gia. You're mine."

Maybe another woman would be thrilled to hear those words, and if I'm honest, deep down, I kind of am, but it's like they flip a switch inside me. All those thoughts and questions from when I was in his lap in his office rise right back to the surface, and this time, I don't try to stop them from bubbling out. Maybe I'm finally just snapping and losing my mind, but I let the anger, the fear, the desperation consume me as I scream, "I'm so sick and fucking tired of people telling me I belong to them. I belong to my fucking self. I'm

more than a possession to barter or marry off to further your causes. I am Giulia De-Fucking-Luca, and I will not belong to anyone other than myself. Not even you. I could give a flying fuck that you are a mafia boss, or if you're the King of England. So you can take your fucking possessive streak and fuck right the fuck off."

And before I can tell myself it's a very stupid idea, I turn and take off running for the terrace exit. I may not know what the hell I want to do where Nico is concerned, but I do know I don't want to be here right now and I need to get the hell out.

I hear Nico let out a low growl and a thrill spreads down my spine even as I move faster. It's like *deja vu* all over again as I hear his feet pounding on the marble floor. And I curse the fact that this room is fucking long and huge. Still, I move as fast as I can, even as I hear Nico gaining on me. I swear I'm going to start working out more so that I can build my speed.

I barely reach the end of the room before he's on me. And much like before, he tackles me to the ground, rolling us so that he takes the brunt of the fall, and then rolling us once more to straddle me, pressing my wrists onto the cold floor. He's barely breathing hard or breaking a sweat, the bastard. I glare defiantly up at him, even as he stares down at me. "I'm starting to think tying you to the damn bed is a good idea," he rasps, narrowing his eyes at me.

That only pisses me off more. "Because I'm nothing more than a prisoner to you," I sneer. "Only of use until you figure out how I can benefit whatever plans you have going on. I've been so stupid to it all. Sitting here acting like you're going to keep me around and actually treat me like a person. But in reality I'm going to be nothing more than something for you to possess. You got your hands on the unknown daughter of the De Lucas, and now you're going to use that to make sure that you keep my family in line and advance whatever cause you have going on in that head of yours. And I'm tired of it. I'm a person. I have thoughts, I have feelings, I have desires, and plans that don't matter to any of you because you don't give a damn."

"Are you done?" he asks tightly.

Wrong thing to say. I struggle against him, not that it does much good. I let out a loud cry of frustration before I stop moving and I hiss up at him, "Before you took me, you said you watched me. You said you stalked me and you decided you wanted me. Which means you would have seen exactly what kind of life I lived. That I wasn't allowed to do anything. I have no friends, and until now, I have never been out of my routine. Nothing. And still, even

with all of that, you didn't think, hmm, maybe I should rescue her, and then let her go. She deserves some kind of life. Instead, you took me, and you are doing the exact same thing. You're keeping me locked away, you're keeping guards on me, and you're making sure that I can't escape. All because you think that's your right. Because I'm nothing more than a plaything at best, and a pawn at worst. And you don't care what I want. I don't matter." Those last three words are torn from me, and I hate that my voice cracks and tears pool in my eyes before I can blink them back.

Nico doesn't move or say anything for a long moment. He just stares down at me. Until suddenly, he's moving off of me, hauling me up to my feet and then gripping my upper arms as his expression morphs into one of fury as he glares at me. I don't think I've ever seen him this angry at me, but I'm not afraid. Even now, as he grips my upper arms hard, he's careful not to do it hard enough to leave marks. "Don't matter? Don't matter? Are you fucking serious, woman? Of course you fucking matter," he yells before he suddenly wrenches his hands away from me and steps back, thrusting a hand through his hair before he turns away from me, pacing angrily along the floor.

"Funny way of showing it," I say sarcastically. "You know what, maybe I should leave when the Caruso's come. Maybe they'll finally let me have some freedom."

He whirls on me, and the feral look in his eyes has me stepping back just one step before I stop myself. *Uh oh. I may have pushed a little too hard.*

CHAPTER 28

Nico



MINE. *Mine. Mine. Mine.*

Those are the only words chanting through my mind right now. Everything inside me screaming at me to grab her and hide her away. And I know it's insane, that I've obviously lost my mind, but the rational part of my brain has finally slipped away. And now I'm only acting on pure instinct. Pure driven need to make sure Gia knows that she will never be free of me. Because she belongs to me. She will never get to leave me, and I'll kill anyone who tries to take her.

The small rational part that is trying to push through tries to tell me that I need to be careful, that I need to make sure that I don't scare Gia, and that I need to let her know she is not going to be a prisoner forever. But I don't pay any attention to it. No, I need her to understand. I need her to stay, because I can't let her walk away. Especially not into the arms of those damn Caruso's. Alliance be damned. If they dare to try to take her, I'll go down in history as the first man to take them on and win.

"You are going nowhere," I tell Gia furiously as I stop in front of her. My focus on her is laser tight, and I couldn't give a damn if anyone else walked into the room right now. She is the only thing that matters. A thought she clearly doesn't seem to echo. "You are going to stay right here, with me, because that is where you belong. Not with some fucking pretty boy wanna be mafia don who probably doesn't know how to find a clit with a road map."

She stares at me. "What?" she demands incredulously.

"You heard me," I hiss. "You really think you'd be happy there? With someone you don't fucking know? Someone that—"

“Someone offered me the freedom you haven’t,” she interjects loudly.

“Freedom?” I sneer. “No one is free, Giulia. No one. Not you, not me, and not anyone else in our way of life. Do you really think you’ll be able to go over there without backup or guards and think you can live a normal life? That no one else is going to try and take you and use you as the very thing you say you don’t want to be? You think Italy is any better than here? It’s fucking worse, Giulia. It’s the hub for all things mafia. It’s the place where wars happen all day every day to gain the upper hand. And you want to go running right into all of that? Don’t be stupid.”

“It’s not stupid to want to finally be able to live my life,” she screams, her voice echoing through the empty room. My heart and stomach both clench at the emotion in her voice. And some of the fury inside me dissipates when I see the tears pooling in her eyes again. Fuck, I don’t think I’ve seen her cry even once since she’s been here. And seeing it now guts me. But before I can reach for her, she steps away from me. “I have never had a life, Nico. I’ve been a prisoner for twenty-four years and I’m so damn tired of it. At this point I don’t care if I went there and only got one day. It would be one day that I would finally be free. Finally get to be happy. Get to be the person no one has let me be before now.”

Her words are like spikes and they burn as they hit. Because I know she’s right. “And you think that you can’t have that here?” I demand.

She scoffs. “You’re joking right? You might treat me better than my family, but you’re still a mafia don, and you’re still going to always be in control of my life. And as long as my family or anyone else are after me, you’ll never let me leave. Oh, sure, you’ll sit here and tell me it’s so you can protect me, but I’ll never see outside those gates. I’ll never get to go to the library, the store, or live my life. And like I said when you first brought me here, you let me trade one prison for another. Because no matter how you look at it, it’s just a pretty prison and you are my jailer. You’re a hell of a lot nicer than my last ones, but you’re still the one who holds the key.”

I hate that she’s right. Not that I want to keep her locked away, but that I will always protect her and always make sure she’s safe. And if that means making sure she’s not out in public where she can be taken, or worse, then so be it. “And you think the Caruso’s will set you free? That they’ll give you a key, and even if it means another jail, as you call it, that you’ll be happy?”

“I don’t fucking know,” she cries. “I just don’t know, Nico. I know that this whole situation is messed up and I’m tired. I’m tired of being used. I’m

tired of not having choices. I'm tired of feeling like I don't matter to anyone."

"You matter to me," I yell, unable to keep my temper in check any longer.

"Well you have a funny way of showing it," she screams back. "Why can't you just let me go?"

"Because you're mine and I'll be damned if I let you leave me," I snarl. I know I need to tone it down, but also knowing she wants to leave me, makes me desperate. To hold onto her as tight as I have to to make sure she can't walk away. Can't leave me after everything I've done to have her here. It makes me a sick son of a bitch, then so be it. But this woman holds every part of me, and if she was gone, I don't know what kind of man I would become.

No that's a lie, I do know exactly what kind of man I'd be. I'd be worse than Pietro and his sons. Hell, I'd be worse than any other don in the world and there are some sick sons of a bitches out there. Because the only person that can keep me human, keep me sane, is my little mouse. If my father was alive, he'd kill her to make sure I became that person, telling me that no woman should ever hold that much power over a man, but my father was an idiot. He barely tolerated my mother, and that is not what I feel for Gia. No, what I feel for her is more than I can put into words.

She's my obsession. She my everything.

"I will not stay here and be your whore, your pet, or anything else, Nico," she says coldly, lowering her voice. There is such a finality in her tone, it takes a second for it to penetrate. But when it does, everything inside me goes still. "Because I am worth more than that," she continues. "I'm worth being able to have everything, and if I need to find a way to leave to do that, I will. And if that is with the Caruso's, then so be it. If it means I get there and I have to escape, I will. Because I'm done being a punching bag. I'm done being told I'm worth nothing more than the ability to bear a child for some asshole who wants more power and connections. I'm done being a pawn in a game that I didn't ask to be a part of. And that includes you if that's all you want me for."

That's what she thinks she is to me? A pawn? A hole to fuck and breed? I'm done with her putting words in my mouth, acting like she knows what's going on in my head.

"You know nothing of what I want from you, Giulia," I hiss at her. "I want everything. I want to own every part of you. I want to possess every emotion. I want to know that every single day you wake up, you know you

belong to me because you spent the night with my cock inside every hole and you can still feel me all fucking day. I want be able to come home knowing that I'm going to find you in the library or wherever the fuck else you are, bend you over the nearest surface, and start all over again."

"So your little fuck toy," she sneers, but I see the pain, the hurt on her face.

"I'm not fucking done," I snap at her. She glares at me, but thankfully she shuts her mouth and I can continue. I'm giving away far too much, letting her know how much control she has over me, but I'm not stopping. No, I can see how important it is, and the desperation I feel is too sharp to control. "You say you want to live, Gia, but we both know that in this life, living is never simple or easy. That doesn't mean I don't want to give it to you. I want to come home and be pissed you spent thousands of dollars on clothes, or shoes, or whatever else you think you fucking want. I want to come home and know you had a fucking miserable day away from me, or because someone pissed you off. I want you on my arm when I have to go to those damn charity events. I want you with me on every fucking trip, business or otherwise, and I want to see your face when you experience all the things your family kept from you. I want all your fucking firsts, Giulia.

"You know why? Because everything you do, everything you feel, everything you want in life, is mine. Mine to give. Mine to take away. Mine to heal. All of it. Did I start out wanting to take you because you intrigued me? Damn right, but you became my obsession. Nothing and no one could get me to look away from you, to get you out of my mind. Do you know how many nights I laid in my bed, jerking off to the thought of you? Knowing you were going to be mine, it was all I cared about. All I still fucking care about half the fucking time. And do you know how much that pisses me the hell off?

"I was perfectly fine before you bumped into me. Before you turned my world upside down. All from the way you looked at me, the way you smelled. The way you wormed your way under my skin so damn deep I was never going to get you out. So I stopped fighting, and I took you. I didn't know that you were a De Luca when I took you. I didn't take you because of your connections and what you could do for me. I took you because I fucking wanted you, and I go after what I want. And that is the exact reason I'm never going to let you go. You can run, you can fight, you can go off with another family in the hopes they protect you, but it won't matter." I let her

see the truth in my eyes as I stared at her shocked face. “I will kill any man who touches you, Giulia De Luca. I will do it with a smile on my face. My obsession hasn’t lessened since I brought you here, it’s only grown stronger. And not one person or thing on this planet will take you away from me. So I would think very carefully before you do something stupid and try to leave with the Caruso’s. Because I won’t hesitate to kill them all. You are mine. You will be by my side, as my wife, as soon as I can get the paperwork together.”

Her mouth is gaping open as she stares at me. I hadn’t been planning on telling her about the marriage part, since I know that I’m going to have to ease her into that, but I don’t give a damn. I’m done playing games, and when it comes to the possibility of her leaving, I want her fully aware of what the consequences will be.

Finally, she closes her mouth, blinks, and manages to get out, “And I don’t have a say in any of this?”

“No.”

Anger flashes over her face. “So you didn’t listen to a thing I said. You’re only talking about what you want, what you plan on doing. Not what I want. Or how I feel. Did you ever think that maybe I don’t want to be a wife? A mother? An anything to any man? That I want to be just by myself?”

“That’s not how this life works. You were born into this life, and so was I. There is no point in crying about it. We can’t change it. You will never be able to walk freely on the streets and marry or not marry whoever you want, Gia. Maybe if people didn’t know who you are, but people in your father’s organization talked, your brother and uncle bartered for you, and now people do. They will know what you look like soon enough. And someone will take you, they will force you to marry someone they choose, and that will be the end.”

I know my words are hard, probably a bit mean, but I won’t hold my punches. I want her to understand just what is going to happen.

“I know that,” she yells, frustration making her voice thick. “But it’s not wrong of me to dream. It’s not wrong for me to want something I’ve never had before. I just want to be able to make my own decisions. I want to know I don’t have to answer to anyone for every little thing I do. I don’t want to be under lock and key the rest of my life. I want to travel, I want friends, I want to have a semblance of a normal life.” The despair, the disappointment, in her eyes has my anger washing away almost completely.

I reach out and haul her into my arms. She doesn't fight me, but she also doesn't look at me. I cup her chin and turn her face to mine. "You will have all those things. Maybe not right away until I figure out what the hell to do about your family, but I will give you everything I possibly can, Gia. I'm not going to lie and say I'm not a selfish prick and that I won't try and control shit, because that's who I am, and I need to know you're safe. But if you want to go shopping, then you'll be able to go. You'll have guards to see to your safety, but we'll figure it out. I want you happy, *topolina*, but I want you safe more. And it's going to take us time to figure it out, but we'll get there. It's going to take time, patience, and some compromise, but we can do it."

"Compromise," she repeats, staring at me. "Do you even know what that word means?"

She lets out a yelp when I let go of her chin and bring my hand to slap her hard on the ass. She glares up at me, rubbing it. "Sass will get you spanked, *topolina*," I warn her. "I will compromise on things that don't involve your safety, or you leaving me. Then that word will vanish from my vocabulary, and there is nothing you can do or say that will change that."

She opens her mouth to argue, but then shuts it, seemingly realizing the futility of that. Instead, she eyes me for a moment, swallows hard, and then says, "You confuse me Nico, and I don't know how to feel about it."

"Well, that makes two of us then," I say drily.

She rolls her eyes. "I'm being serious. I'm pissed at you, but I want to believe you at the same time. It's not like we have a lot of practice just being a normal couple. I'm your prisoner, and I—"

"You're not my prisoner," I interrupt her.

"So you're going to let me leave the house and go into town and go shopping or something like a normal person?" she challenges. I'm silent at that. "Yeah, that's what I thought," she huffs, struggling now against me.

I tighten my hold, stilling her efforts. "And you're asking the impossible right now. Your family is looking for you. Whoever your uncle promised you to is on their way to find you. There are people waiting to grab you the moment you show your face. So no, I'm not going to let you leave and walk out those doors to do mundane tasks. Because I will not allow you to put yourself in danger. Once this is sorted, fine, but until then, you need to stay inside this house, and on the grounds, until it's safe."

I know she wants to argue, but I also know she sees the truth in my words. "I just want to feel like I'm free, Nico. I may not be, but I want to be

able to have choices, and right now, it feels like that will never happen.”

“It will, *topolina*,” I promise her. “It will, and I’ll happily show you. But right now, you are in danger, and I will do whatever I have to to make sure that you are safe. Even if that means you are pissed at me for a while. Hell, even if you hate me. There are far too many things that could go wrong and I will never let anything sway me when it comes to your safety.”

“And when this is all over? What are your plans with me?”

I bite back a sound of impatience. “Apparently, you haven’t been listening, *topolina*. So you best be listening this time because I won’t repeat myself again. You are mine. That means that you will live here for the rest of your life, with me, in my bed, taking care of the children we have, and showing them the love we never got from our parents. We’re going to fight, we’re going to scream and yell at each other, and we’re going to live the life we want. That means, you’re going to have my ring on your finger as fast as I can manage it, and then we’ll figure out the rest as it comes.”

She stares up at me. “So, what, you love me?” she asks carefully.

That gives me pause. Do I love her? It’s not a normal concept for me. After all, my parents didn’t love me, and love isn’t an emotion that I care all that much about. So I’m honest with her. “I don’t know if I love you,” I say after a moment. Hurt and disappointment slice across her face before she can mask them. But I’m not done. “I’ve never been loved, so I don’t know how to recognize that kind of emotion. I know that I want to see you when I wake up and when I go to sleep. I think about you all damn day, and I know that when I bury myself inside you, it feels so fucking perfect I never want to leave. I know that I want to see you smile and laugh, and I want to kill anyone and everything if you start to cry. Is that love? I have no fucking idea, but I’m sure you can teach me soon enough.”

She looks up at me, and I wait for her reaction. I’m not a fucking poet, and I never plan on being one. Who she sees is who she gets, and if she needs flowery words, I don’t know that I’ll be able to give them to her. Actions speak louder than words in our way of life, and I don’t see any reason it doesn’t apply to this as well.

Finally, after a long moment, she smiles at me softly and says, “You know, I always thought I wanted to hear a man say he loved me, but I like your version better. I don’t know if I love you either, but I know when Alessio asked me if I loved you, it made me panic. I think that’s a good sign even if you don’t love someone, you’re on your way. And the fact that when

he offered to help me leave, I didn't jump at the chance. Besides, I think words are cheap. Growing up, there were so many broken promises, and I don't think I could survive it again knowing that you said the words and then took them away."

"Never again, *topolina*," I vow. "I do not do empty promises, especially when it comes to you." And because I can't keep myself from it any longer, I take her mouth with mine.

Maybe it's because of the riot of emotions we've just gone through, but the kiss is explosive the moment she sinks into me. We tear at each other's clothes, and those same words still chant in my head as I expose every inch of her to my hands. *Mine. Mine. Mine.* She's fucking mine, and I'm about to show her exactly what I mean by that.

I grab her underwear and tear them from her body, making her gasp. "Nico," she rasps. She's pushing at my pants and boxers, shoving them down my thighs to get to my cock. She wraps her hand around it, stroking it in a firm grip and making me hiss out a breath at the pleasure that works through me. Damn, it seems my little mouse is a fast learner.

I throw the shredded underwear aside, pull her hand away from my cock, and then drop to my knees, burying my face between her legs. I grip her ass in my hands, holding her in place as I proceed to drive her crazy. "Nico!" she cries, her body shuddering under the onslaught of my mouth. But if she wants me to stop, she's going to be disappointed, because I have no plans on stopping until she's a quivering mess.

I suck on her clit, moving one hand from her ass to push her legs farther apart and then I thrust two fingers inside her, moving them hard and fast. Her cries echo off the walls, and internally, I hope that everyone in the damn house can hear her. Let them know that she's mine. It's my name she's going to scream. Me, she begs and pleads. Me to sate her needs and desires

Thankfully, it doesn't take long before she's clamping down on my fingers and screaming my name as she cums. I yank my mouth from her clit, and my fingers from inside her, sliding my mouth down over her entrance to drink her down. I swear to God there is nothing better than this. Her entire body shudders and shakes, and her knees buckle. I lower her to the floor, and then lift my head to stare at her. Her eyes are closed, her chest heaving, and her skin coated in a thin sheet of sweat. I have never seen her look sexier. And I want to see it all over again.

"One more," I rasp, lowering myself to start all over.

She lets out a low cry, her hands tangle in my hair as her body arches into mine as I set to work. “Nico, Oh God, oh please,” she begs, as she holds me tighter to her, her pussy grinding on my face. My needy little mouse, and I aim to please. “Oh fuck,” she cries when I shove my tongue inside her, and move my thumb to her clit, rubbing it just the way she needs.

I pull my mouth away just long enough to order her, “Come for me, Gia. Now. Give me what’s mine.” Then I waste no time removing my hand, sucking her clit into my mouth, and shoving two fingers deep and hard inside her.

“Nico!” she screams as her body detonates all over again. I yank my mouth away from her, and this time I watch her. Watch the ecstasy on her face, the shudders that rack her body, and listen to her cries as she rides her orgasm out. The image is imprinted on my brain. Her dark hair spread out on the marble floor, the diamond light making her skin glow.

Finally, her body settles, and she stares at me, eyes glassy, as she tries to catch her breath. “Nico,” she breathes as she watches me. It’s then that I see the trust, and an emotion I’m afraid to name. Maybe because I’m feeling it too, and I’m not certain I’m ready for it. But I see it, and I want to see it as I take her. As I imprint myself on her body and soul, so deep that she’ll never get me out.

I move over her, taking her mouth. The kiss isn’t hurried or overly passionate, but my cock is hard and ready to be inside her. She lets out a small moan when my cock bumps against her clit, and I do it again, making her whimper. It’s torture feeling how wet she is sliding along my shaft, but I do it again, building the desire once again, needing her to need me as much as I need her.

Finally, when I can’t stand it any longer, I roll us both, so that my back is on the cool tile and she’s straddling me. She sways slightly, looking down at me in surprise. “What are you doing?” she asks huskily, balancing herself by placing her hands on my chest.

“I want you to ride me,” I tell her. “This time, you can be in charge.” *And I just have to hope that I can survive until she puts me out of her misery.*

CHAPTER 29

Gia



I KNOW exactly what he's trying to do and my heart stutters in my chest. Sure, this is during sex, but this is Nico's way of giving me a choice. A way to control a situation. And something settles deep inside me. Still, right behind that is nerves. "I-I don't know what to do," I manage to get out, staring down at him.

His face is flushed, eyes dark and glittering as he stares up at me. His entire body is strung tight beneath me, and I can feel the pulsing of his cock against my ass, and I can't help but arching into it, making him clench his jaw even more. "I'll instruct you. Put me inside you, Gia. Now, before I lose my mind."

I lift myself up, reach back and grip him in my hand. I take a deep breath and position him at my entrance, and slowly sink down. I look at him sharply when I hear his deep groan, worried I've hurt him or done something wrong. But instead I'm greeted by the sight of him watching where we are connected, and looking absolutely ravenous. Another flood of arousal washes over me to see him so turned on by the sight of us together this way. His eyes lift to mine, and they're full of desire.

"That's it, *topolina*," he rasps, hand coming up to my hip. "Take me all the way in. Let me feel your pussy squeezing my cock." He lets out a small hiss when I clamp down on him in reaction as I bottom out on him. "Fuck, Gia," he grits out, his other hand coming up to grip me. Then he sets to work on teaching me how to make him lose his mind.

At first it's awkward, and I know I'm making a mess out of it, but thankfully he's patient and I manage to find a rhythm that hits all the right

spots. “That’s right, Gia,” he groans. “Fucking perfect.”

I had no idea how powerful I would feel in this position. Hell, this might be my new favorite. Especially since I get to see his face. When I grind my hips, his eyes go molten; when I start to move a little faster, his muscles tighten, and when I squeeze my inner walls around him, he lets out a hiss. It’s heady, and I’m so turned on I should probably be embarrassed, but I can’t muster it. Not when I see how much Nico likes it.

“Fuck, Gia,” he grunts when I grind down on him a little harder, making my clit spark with shots of electricity inside me and up my spine. I arch myself forward, and it changes the angle just enough to have me gasping. Oh God, that felt so good. I do it again, and then I let out a cry when Nico suddenly curls himself up to take one nipple into his mouth, while also simultaneously thrusting his hips up to meet mine in a hard and fast rhythm that is sending me flying toward the edge.

“Oh, God, Nico, yes,” I cry, my hands clenching his head to me, even as we move together in a hard and fast rhythm. “Yes. Yes. Yes.” My orgasm comes barreling up, I don’t even try to stop the scream that bubbles up in my throat when it overtakes me.

I hear a deep snarl as he yanks his mouth from my breast, and then suddenly he’s rolling us over so that I’m once again on the floor, with him throwing my legs over his forearms before he powers hard and fast inside of me. I can’t do anything but hold on as he fucks me. Because this isn’t making love or just sex. No this is fucking. A claiming, and I don’t want to stop it. I want more. I want it all.

I’ll be feeling this for days.

“You’re mine, Giulia,” he grits out between clenched teeth, as sweat drips from his face and body and on to mine. “This pussy is mine, and I’m going to make sure you feel me so deep inside you’ll never be able to get me out. Mine to fuck. Mine to claim. *Mine.*”

I should probably be smart and remind him he can’t own me, but in this moment, he does. He’s the only thing I can focus on. The only thing that matters as his cock moves in and out of me in a bruising pace, pushing me into another orgasm. How the hell is that possible? I scream his name, my hands scrambling to find purchase on the smooth floor as he wrecks my body.

“Fuck, Gia,” he grunts when he finally comes, filling me up, and still pounding inside me, as though he wants to push it deeper, until he finally

slows and stills.

My entire body is buzzing as I look up at him, my eyes heavy, and my body so tired and sated I don't think I could move. Even if I wanted to. He's wrecked me. Utterly wrecked me, and right now, I'm perfectly okay with that.

Slowly, he lowers my legs back to the floor and presses his mouth to mine. The kiss is soft, but quick, and when he pulls his mouth away, he buries his face in my neck. Only, instead of lying there to get his breath back, he nips at the skin of my neck, making my inner muscles tighten on him instinctively as the pained sensations move through me. "Fuck," he hisses, and I feel him jerk inside me. "I'm going to need some time, *topolina*, before you try to kill me again."

"I'm pretty sure you did kill me," I croak out.

He chuckles and presses a kiss to the spot he nipped before he lifts himself up and then slowly pulls out of me. I hiss at the feel of him dragging across sensitive tissues, and then quickly slam my legs together when I realize that he's dripping out of me. Shit. But before I can ask him for something to clean up with, he's pushing my legs back apart and staring down at me. "Fuck, I love seeing my cum spill out of you," he mutters almost to himself.

I fight not to squirm at how he's staring at me. Instead, I say, "Yeah, well, as much as I'm sure you like to look, feeling it leak out of me is not something I'm particularly liking at the moment. So, how about you help me out here, huh?"

He doesn't move at first, but finally, he lets go of my legs and reluctantly grabs his shirt and hands it to me. I stare at it for a moment but decide that it's not worth arguing over. So I try to clean myself up and then look around for my clothes. Unlucky for me, they're spread around the floor out of reach, and I huff out a breath when I look back at Nico expectantly and see him watching me in amusement. "Problem, *topolina*?" he asks, tongue in cheek as he climbs to his feet and reaches out a hand to me.

"I need my clothes," I say with a pointed look at him. "Can you hand them to me please?"

"And deprive myself the pleasure of seeing you walking around with my cum dripping down your legs?"

I blink at him and then narrow my eyes. "Look, that shit might be hot in books, but this is real life and it's messy and as soon as I stand up it's going

to gush out of me like a waterfall. Trust me, it's not as sexy as it sounds." I learned that the last couple times we finished and he left me alone.

He chuckles, but thankfully he doesn't push it and goes to grab my clothes. "I'm afraid the underwear is a write off, but I could offer to carry you to the bedroom so you can shower," he offers smugly. I glare at him as I stand, trying to clean myself up a bit more and then dress, sans underwear. "You're going to want to get used to this, *topolina*," he warns me. "I doubt I'm going to be able to hold myself back where you're concerned."

Yeah, I'm sensing that. And I glare at him in embarrassment when he laughs outright as I try to clean up some of the mess we left on the floor with his shirt. I don't need to hear about it from Sofia or any of the housekeepers. Hell, I'll probably die and never show my face again. "Shut up," I grumble as I ball up the shirt and head for the main door we entered through. Nico follows, sans shirt, and pants zipped but unbuttoned, and looking hot as hell. It's all I can do not to stare at him, but I tell myself that would be a dangerous invitation considering the state of me right now. I don't want to even think about looking in a mirror right now. God, I probably look like a mess. And I don't know who does the laundry around here, but I'm going to be washing these pants before they go in the hamper, that's for sure. And speaking of which...

When we reach the door, I stop and look at Nico. "As much as I'm learning the joys of sex," I say seriously, "that doesn't change the fact that I do not want to get pregnant, so I need you to get in touch with whatever doctor you have on call so I can go on birth control."

Nico's expression turns serious. "I'll call him," he promises. I nod, but before I can open the door, he says my name, making me look at him again. His eyes are intense on me, and his expression is cold and serious. "Do you want children?"

I don't answer right away. I figured it would be expected of me one day, but now, I'm confused. Still, the thought of a little Nico is tempting, and I can picture a little boy with dark hair and eyes and Nico's serious expression. Finally, I reply, "Right now, no I don't want them. Not because I don't like kids, but because I want to live a little first. Experience the things I want to before I devote myself to other people that need my attention."

Nico's expression doesn't change as his gaze searches mine. I worry for a moment that he's pissed at that answer, but he surprises me by leaning down and kissing me softly again before saying simply, "Okay, then that's what

we'll do," before he puts his hand over mine on the knob, turning it together. Then he scoops me up in his arms and carries me out of the room past an amused-looking Davide and Dante, who follow us immediately.

I hide my face in Nico's shoulder, knowing my face is flaming red. God, will that ever go away? I have a feeling it's going to be something I have to get used to. Especially if I stay.

Before too long though, after I've showered, and yes washed my pants, Nico tells me he has to get back to work and prepare for the Caruso's arrival, and leaves me alone in the suite. He leaves the door open, and I see Davide and Dante both following him, leaving me completely alone. A soft smile plays on my lips knowing he's doing that to prove a point.

I'm probably insane for thinking of staying with Nico. Especially considering how I got here in the first place. Still, though, Nico's right. I'll never be free, and there is a chance I could be happy here with him. Well, if he continues to sex me into a coma, then a very good chance. Still, I'm going to be cautious. Who knows what's going to happen in the coming days, and I need to be ready for it. My father will figure out I'm here eventually if he hasn't already, and that means that he'll be coming for me. Nico will protect me, but there are other unknown enemies coming for me too, and that's what worries me.

Nico is smart and strong, but he's not infallible. Especially not when it comes to a war. I've heard my father talking about one when he was a child and how many innocent people died. All because of power and greed. I have to hope it doesn't come to that. I don't know if I could live with it knowing that I was part of the reason.

Still, it's not something I want to worry about right now, and instead, I decide I'm going to take advantage of my new freedom and head out of the bedroom to find Sofia. I want to ask her about the Caruso family, and since she apparently can vouch for them, now's the time to do that when Nico is busy and not listening in.

I find her in the dining room getting things ready for a later dinner, and when she sees me she smiles. "Slipped your guard?"

"Nico didn't put one on me," I say simply, grabbing some of the silverware in the tray and helping her set the table.

She eyes me for a moment. "You know Nico is going to have my ass if he thinks I'm putting you to work, right?" she says drily.

I shrug. "I need to do something. I don't like to be idle, and I've done

plenty of that already. So I wanted to talk to you about what I can do around here to help and also ask you a few questions.”

She arches a brow. “I’ll never turn down help, but I’m hanging your ass out to dry when Nico comes after mine, got it?” she warns me, but her lips quirk, letting me know she’s not the least bit worried about that confrontation. I nod and smirk back at her. “Good, now, you keep on setting and ask your questions. No, wait, are they sex questions?” she asks, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively at me. “Because if so, spare no details.”

I blush and shake my head. “No, it’s nothing to do with sex.”

“Too bad,” she tsks. “Alright, well, if it’s not, then what is your question?”

“How do you know the Caruso’s?” I ask her.

She pauses what she’s doing and turns her head to look at me slowly. She doesn’t answer right away, and just stares at me. “And why would you be asking me about them?” she finally asks carefully.

Oh, right, she doesn’t know that I spoke with them. She’s probably thinking I’m trying to dig for information to have them help me escape or something. “I listened in on Nico’s call and spoke with them when they demanded to talk to me,” I tell her honestly. Her eyes widen at that. “And Alessio told me that you would vouch for them. Not that I really need you to, but I was curious what your connection to them is.”

“You spoke to Alessio,” she repeats, though it’s not a question but more of a statement. “Was it only him or the rest of them?”

“Ah, I spoke with Pietro, Massimo, and Zeno as well.”

Her lips split into a grin. “And what did you think of them? Handsome aren’t they?”

I don’t bother stopping the smile that pulls at my lips. “They are. But that brings me back to how you know them.” I look at her expectantly as I place the last of the silverware.

She hands me the wine glasses, and explains, “My family has worked for their family for generations. My father is one of their most trusted men, and my brothers work under him. I grew up around them, and they treated me like one of the family from the beginning. I always knew my place, but they were never cruel or treated me like the daughter of the help. And when my mother died, I remember Pietro himself coming to our home with a dish he had his chef make. He sat with my father and drank so much bourbon we had to call his men to come to get him back home safely.” She smiles at the memory.

I smile. "It sounds like you love them."

She nods. "I may live in America, but my heart will always be with them in some capacity. Pietro is a hard man when he needs to be, but he's also a very good man. And he's passed that on to his sons. I have never doubted that they are as dangerous as everyone claims, and I've seen it on occasion, but they are also the kind of men you go to when you have a problem." She pauses and glances at the doorway of the dining room before she looks back at me. "I have never told anyone this, so can I trust you to keep this to yourself?" I straighten slightly but nod. "Good. When I was about fifteen, I hit puberty, and almost overnight I went from being a skinny rake to having a figure that caught a lot of attention. Especially boys. Unlucky for most of the ones at school, none of them interested me. They were too pretty and too nice. And I knew my father would never approve of me dating them. Well, dating anyone, so I mostly just ignored them and focused on my studies.

"But then one day there was a transfer student who came in from London, and he took a liking to me. He was a bit more my type, but there was something off about him, and I mostly ignored him or told him to leave me alone. He, however, did not get the hint, and he was starting to get obsessed with me. He'd follow me to and from school, and there were times I was sure he was following me when I was doing the shopping and things for the family, but I could never catch him. It made me nervous. Enough that one night, Alessio noticed I was jumpy after school and insisted on walking me home. He left, and then he came back because he had a bad feeling. He caught the prick trying to rape me." I gasp, and bring a hand to my mouth in horror. She shakes her head at me. "Don't get too upset, darling, my brothers and father taught me well, so by the time Alessio got inside, I had already broken the fucker's dick and was trying to wrench it off his body."

I stare at her a moment before I sputter out a shocked laugh. "Well, I guess that is one way to handle it. I can only imagine what Alessio said when he saw that."

She snickers. "He turned a bit green before he manned up and got me to let him go. Then called his brothers to come and take out the trash. Turns out the asshole was kicked out of a prestigious school in London for attempting to assault a girl at school he had an obsession with. His parents paid off the school and the parents, and sent him to our area to keep him out of the public eye. However, he picked the wrong girl to stalk because he paid for it with his dick, and then his life." She turns serious. "But the point of telling you

this, is that after it was handled, I was called into Pietro's office, and I have to tell you I was scared to death he was going to be so pissed at me and take it out on my family. But he didn't. Instead, he pulled me into his lap like when I was a kid and soothed me as I cried on his lap. I hadn't cried up until then, still in shock. But he was safe, and he soothed me. Then he scolded me for not telling him or his sons about the bastard in the first place. And then my father showed up and he did the same, upset that I hadn't gone to him either.

"And from there, they made sure I was okay. Pietro hired the best assault counselor in our area. And both my brothers and the Caruso brothers took turns walking me to and from school for a long time until I felt strong enough to do it myself. I probably should have been pissed at them doing it, but I took comfort in the fact that they had my back. And when I decided that I want to explore the world a bit, they tried to talk me out of it." She laughs then. "Massimo even offered to marry me, if it meant I was safe." I gape at that. She waves her hand. "He didn't love me, and I didn't love him. Hell, they are all more like brothers to me than anything, but he wanted me to have an option to stay somewhere and be safe. And between you and me, I think our fathers were hoping I would say yes. But when I insisted on coming here, my father got Pietro's permission, and they all promised they are only a call away if I need them."

"They sound like a really nice family," I say with a smile, and a large twinge of envy. I wonder what my life would have been like if my family was as good as that one.

"Oh, they are," she agrees, grabbing the last of the glasses to put in place. "But they're also hard-headed, stubborn, and general pains in the ass. So if you're thinking you want to spend any time with them, keep that in mind. They could give Nico a run for their money."

"Doubtful," I chuckle. "But I'll find out when they get here, I suppose."

She stops what she's doing and stares at me. "When they get here?" she repeats.

I falter. Wait, am I not supposed to say something about that? "Uhhh," I stammer out, unsure of what to do.

She steps forward. "When are they going to arrive?" she asks excitedly. Clearly she's happy about the news.

I bite my lip, unsure. "I don't know if I'm supposed to say."

She waves that away. "First rule, darling, is you tell the housekeeper if you're going to have guests."

She has a point. Oh well, if Nico gets upset that I told her, I'll handle it. "They said they'll be here in two days."

She stares at me and then snorts. "Yeah, right. They're probably on a plane already and on their way here. Which means we only have a few hours before they arrive, and if we're not ready for them, they'll hold it over Nico's head forever. I wonder if my father and brothers will be with them." She sounds so hopeful that I really do hope they are too. She straightens and says, "Alright, darling, if you want something to do, I have plenty to prepare. Because we're about to get busy."

I smile, excited at the prospect of being able to help and not stuck trying to fill my time. "I can handle that. And then I want you to tell me all about your family and what I can expect."

She laughs. "Oh, darling girl, you have no idea the stories I can give you. Just remember that when you want ammunition to keep their asses in line if I'm not with you," she adds with a wink. "You and I, Gia, we're going to be the best of friends before this is all done. And between the two us, we're going to keep all these men in line."

We hurry out of the dining room, and it occurs to me that this might indeed end with me having my first real friend, and I can't be happier. Especially if it gives me tools to keep a certain someone on his toes.

CHAPTER 30

Nico



THE CARUSO'S arrive like a fucking tornado, and all I can do is stand back and watch as they swirl in and cause chaos. Of course they arrive a whole day earlier than they said they would, and they've brought every damn person they can think of with them. Thankfully, Sofia knew this was going to happen and made sure everything was ready. With the help of Gia, who I found helping her strip beds and scrubbing bathrooms.

Yeah, I hadn't been pleased, but Gia insisted she offered and was having a good time, so I didn't protest too much. She was smiling and laughing with Sofia, and seeing it eased something inside of me. I should probably be worried about her growing friendship with my crazy housekeeper, but there are more important things to stress over, so I let them be. When I finally went to collect her to go to bed, Gia was happier than ever, even as exhausted as she and Sofia both looked.

Today, however, I want to hide Gia far away from it all. And in fact, I haven't told her our guests have arrived. She's still asleep upstairs. Dante woke me to let me know their plane arrived and he was on his way back with them. Sofia, of course, is up and waiting with me, practically buzzing with excitement.

"Why have you never taken a vacation to go home?" I ask her bluntly while we wait.

She surprises me when she says, "Because I didn't want to leave you in the lurch. If I go home, I'm going to want to go for a few weeks at minimum, and this place will probably fall apart."

I stared down at her, and then I order her, "You will be taking a vacation,

Sofia. I won't have your father thinking I work you to the bone. Find and train someone to handle shit while you're gone."

That is the moment they arrive, so I dismiss the conversation, but I'm sure she's going to bring it up again. I focus my attention on the men in front of me. "Signore Caruso," I greet, stepping forward to shake his hand when he sees me.

He smirks at me, and I know he's expecting me to say I wasn't expecting him, but I don't. "We figured why waste time in getting here," he says when he pulls his hand away.

"We already have rooms made up for you," I tell him, and I note the slightly disappointed glint in his eyes that he can't bust my balls.

"Nice place you got here," Alessio says as he looks around. "A bit over the top, but I suppose you have to compensate somehow." His jab is accompanied with a smug smile.

I don't get the chance to reply when Sofia steps forward and says, "He's packing more than you, *cazzo*." Of course, that statement earns a whole lot of scowls and glares my way. "Don't worry, I don't know that up close and personal, but I've gotten a good eyeful when he's walking around in those gray sweats of his." Then she starts hugging them all, kissing their cheeks, and them doing the same to her.

I can hear Dante grinding his molars as he holds back whatever he wants to say. Yeah, I'm definitely rethinking Gia spending any more time with her.

Before anyone can say anything, I hear a voice boom, "What the fuck are you all doing standing in the damn doorway? Get the hell out of the way." The Caruso men all snicker, and then in walk ten men, whom I figure are their soldiers. But then I notice the four that step forward first, and I instantly know that this is Sofia's family. And damn, she comes from giant-ass motherfuckers.

Unlike the Caruso men, who are a normal heights, these men are six-five to six-seven and built like fucking bricks. Muscles on muscles, with thick heads of dark hair, and nearly busting out of the suits they're wearing. I have some big men that work for me, and they would still be dwarfed by them. I glance at Dante, who's looking at them in surprise but quickly hides it when he catches me looking. Yeah, I can all but see him figuring out how he's going to take them down if they find out he's been sleeping with Sofia.

"Where is my *Principessa*?" the oldest of the men demands loudly. His hair is starting to get some of the salt and pepper look, but he can't be more

than his late fifties.

Sofia rushes for him, laughing when he lifts her up and spins her around. “Papa, put me down,” she scolds.

He does as she orders, but she’s immediately snatched up by one of her brothers and then tossed between them all. “She’s too fucking skinny,” one of them remarks.

“You’d think she’d be less ugly, but America hasn’t helped her any,” another snickers.

“Spoiled, lounging around on her ass all day,” the final one taunts. He dodges her elbow that should have landed in his nose, before setting her down and grinning at her.

“Fuck off, all of you,” she growls at them. “And guests of Nico or not, I’ll still put you on your ass.”

“Before you ask, yes, this is what it always is like,” Massimo tells me with a chuckle, drawing my attention. “And I hope you hid away anything old or valuable because shit is going to get broken before we leave.”

I shrug. “Nothing here that can’t be replaced.” I look at Pietro and say, “I’ll have Sofia show you to your rooms once she’s finished putting her family in their places.”

Pietro chuckles. “That will be a while, son, so how about we get to work? I’m not here to waste time, and we have some information you will find interesting.”

I nod. “We’ll head to my office then,” I say, nodding at Dante, who steps forward. Then I look past him and call out to Sofia. “You’ll show the men to their rooms?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she says with a large grin. “Though I don’t promise they’ll make it there in one piece if they piss me off.”

I don’t bother trying to say anything because I have a feeling it will fall on deaf ears. So, instead, I turn away and lead the way to my office. When we reach it, I take my seat behind my desk. Some might see it as a power move, but I see it as this is my space, and I have a feeling I need to be comfortable for this discussion. Pietro takes Dante’s desk, while his sons spread around the room, with Dante and one of their men on either side of the door, and I’m sure more men outside it.

“Where is Ms. De Luca?” Pietro asks me curiously, arching a brow at me expectantly.

“Sleeping,” I say calmly. “It is the middle of the night, Signore Caruso.

And she and Sofia were up late making sure everything was ready for your stay.”

“You have them running around doing that?” Alessio asks, though the expression on his face says he’s not happy at that little tidbit.

“Sofia is my housekeeper, and she takes her job seriously. There is no stopping her when she gets her mind on something, as you well know. And it turns out Gia is of the same mindset and told me to leave them be, despite me telling her it’s not her job.”

Zeno chuckles. “Yeah, that sounds like Sofia, and it seems she’s already exerting her influence on your guest.”

“Don’t remind me,” I mutter darkly.

“Well, since she’s sleeping and I’ll have to meet her later, let’s get down to business,” Pietro says briskly, turning the topic of conversation abruptly. The room immediately goes sober as I look at him expectantly. “Once Aurelio comes down, he’ll have more information for us, but for now, we’ll tell you what we do know,” Pietro replies.

I don’t know which one Aurelio is, but I’m sure it’s one of Sofia’s family. I turn and look at Alessio when he says, “Our contacts say it’s the Parisi family that are on their way here right now. Mean bastards, and they have a good hold on their territory, but they’re hot heads and don’t always think before they jump. The eldest son, Rafaele, just took over for his father, who’s sick with terminal cancer. And he’s looking to make a name for himself by trying to expand his territory and also make connections on this side of the pond.”

“Do you think he reached out or was contacted?”

“Intel suggests that Giovanni De Luca reached out as soon as he heard of the takeover,” Massimo answers. “And seeing as Rafaele isn’t married, it stands to reason he’s the one that Giovanni promised Giulia to.” He scowls. “The fucker is a cruel bastard, and has a taste for whipping and beating the women he’s with. He’s a sadist, and he also tortures his own men that way when they displease him.”

My blood burns angrily at the mention of that. Knowing what Gia has been through, I will ensure this fucker never gets within a mile of her. “And he’s on his way here?”

“So it would seem,” Alessio responds, his face grim. “But last reports show he made a stop in London then is heading this way. Some kind of new deal with some contacts there, but he should arrive in the next day or two.

And knowing how he is, he's not going to stop until Giulia is delivered to him as promised. And he won't care if he starts a war here to do it."

"I remember he was a selfish prick as a boy and was spoiled rotten," Pietro chimes in. "His mother indulged him with everything he wanted since he was the heir. There are two younger brothers and two sisters, but the sisters were married off as soon as they were of age to further grow alliances. The brothers work for the family, but you don't hear much about them now."

"There are some rumors that Rafaele killed them to make sure they couldn't try and take the title from him," Zeno says darkly.

"And does he know that she's missing?" I ask curiously.

They glance at each other. "They know she's missing," Alessio sighs. "And that's what makes this even more dangerous. Rafaele is coming to get her back, and that means he's coming armed for war."

"Makes me wonder if Leonardo knows or if Giovanni will be the one trying to do damage control," I say thoughtfully, glancing at Dante. Dante gives a subtle nod and pulls out his phone to send a message. No doubt to one of our many spies.

"Got men on the inside do you?" Alessio says with a smirk.

I smirk back at him. "I'm sure you have your own in the Parisi family." Alessio doesn't confirm but the look in his eyes is all the confirmation I need. "If Giovanni is going to try and use the Parisi family to get Leonardo and his sons out of the way, then I can't imagine he wants them to know about it. So he'll probably stash them at his house or one that Leonardo doesn't know about."

"He has his vacation home close to the border of our territory," Dante reminds me.

"A perfect spot if he's hoping to take over your territory as well," Massimo adds. "And if they want to come and get Giulia back..." He leaves that sentence hanging, though I don't miss his point.

"At this point, the question is what is the likelihood of them figuring out you have her?" Alessio points out.

"Seems Marco, the eldest son has," I say gravely. "And considering he sent his youngest brother here to find her and bring her back, they'll be back as soon as they gather their men."

"Oh, and we'll be making our displeasure known for that double cross," Pietro vows with a sharp smile. And I can see why Pietro is feared, because if I were anyone else, I would not want to be on the receiving end of it. "But

until then, we need to make some plans, and quickly.”

“Personally, I’m all for a good fight,” Massimo says with an excited grin. “And I have crossed paths with Rafaele before and I’ve always wanted to take a shot at that prick.” His brothers chuckled.

“You know, perhaps we can save on the violence this time,” Dante chimes in thoughtfully.

Everyone pauses and stares at him. I bite back a smirk. Dante has never been one to be quiet, even in meetings such as this, and I suppose now is as good a time as any to make my guests aware of that. “And what would that be, son?” Pietro asks him curiously. “Sorry, didn’t catch your name.”

“Dante Esposito,” he supplies.

Before he can continue, however, Pietro straightens and demands, “You’re related to Gregorio Esposito?”

Dante doesn’t give away anything, but with how long I’ve known him, I can make out the subtle stiffening of his shoulders. “He’s my father. Not that he claims that title,” he replies calmly.

Pietro narrows his eyes. “Then you’ll have no qualms with me killing him then?” he asks darkly. Dante quirks a brow, but shakes his head. It’s well known he’s never been a fan of his father. Still, I figure Pietro isn’t about to get to the man first. Dante has been planning on killing him for years, and is waiting for the right moment, to make sure that it won’t come back on me or him. “Good. Now, continue, what is your idea.”

“It seems to me that everyone is coming here to take Gia as a bride,” Dante says, his eyes moving to me and staring at me directly. “So why not make sure that when they get here, they have no way of taking her?”

I know exactly what he’s suggesting, and it’s one option I’ve already been considering heavily. The problem is getting Gia to agree. Something tells me that despite our moment last night, she’s not going to be on board with that idea. She’ll see it as denying her freedom.

“Wait, so you’re saying someone should marry her to make sure they can make no claims on her?” Zeno clarifies.

“Not someone. Nico,” Dante replies.

Everyone turns to look at me. I don’t say anything, just hold their stares and keep my expression neutral. Finally Massimo huffs out an annoyed groan. “Damn it, the only reason I came was because I thought I was going to get to fight. Otherwise this is just a pleasure trip and vacation,” he whines.

His brothers scoff and roll their eyes. “You act like you didn’t take those

bastards out a few days ago for trying to steal our shipment,” Zeno gripes. “And you didn’t even let the rest of us get a shot either.”

“That was nothing,” Massimo huffs. “Child’s play, and you’d have been bored out of your mind considering they didn’t put up much of a fight. So this was my shot, and it looks like it’ll be a bust too.” He pouts, and I can only stare at him. Seriously? A grown ass mafia underboss that pouts like a child? Now I’ve seen everything.

“Oh, I don’t think this is going to go down as smoothly as you’re thinking,” Dante interrupts. “Giovanni and Leonardo have been battling it out quietly and subtly behind the scenes for years. If Giovanni is ready to make a move, things are going to get messy. And it will no doubt spill over this way, and add in another Sicilian family here, the chances for some fights are high on the list of possibilities.”

“Oh, yeah, you have a point,” Massimo says cheerfully. “Alright, well, there’s hope for this trip after all then.” The pout is gone and I barely resist shaking my head in disbelief. Why do I have a feeling I’m going to have a giant headache before these bastards leave?

A knock on the door pauses any further conversation, and Dante turns and opens the door, admitting Sofia’s father, who has an annoyed scowl on his face. “That girl is more stubborn than her mother,” he gripes as he steps further into the room and Dante shuts the door behind him, a flash of amusement on his face before it’s gone. Gonna be interesting to see what happens when her father finds out that his daughter is sleeping with him.

The Caruso’s all chuckle. “Aurelio, we both know you’d be pissed if she was any different,” Pietro points out good-naturedly. Ah, so this Aurelio is Sofia’s father. I’ll have to find out the names of his sons as well so I can keep everyone straight. “But she’ll have to wait while we discuss the information you said you found. We didn’t have time to go over it before we landed, so you might as well just tell us all at once.”

“Ah, yes,” Aurelio says with a nod, turning to look at me. “It took a lot of digging, and my contact is one of the best, but the information is credible.” His expression is serious and I lean forward, my gut telling me based on the look on his face, whatever he’s about to tell me is going to be important. Even the Caruso men look intrigued. “It seems, your woman isn’t the only female De Luca,” he announces. “My contact found two to four other possible women that have been hidden away.”

I don’t react to that as I try to let his words penetrate. There are more De

Luca women? How the hell is that possible? And if so, why was Gia the only one that was kept? “How are they related to Gia?” I ask him. And how the hell did he find out this information when my own men couldn’t? I don’t even have to look at Dante to know he’s thinking the same thing.

“My informant says at least one of them is a full sister, and he thinks the others are either half sisters or cousins,” Aurelio says.

“So, I need someone to fill me in on why the hell being a woman and a De Luca is so important,” Alessio interrupts.

“The De Lucas pride themselves on only producing boys, and up until a few weeks ago, no one knew Gia existed,” I tell him absently, my mind whirling. “And there is no way any of the boys know about those girls because if they did, they would have found every single girl and married them off as quickly as possible. How reliable is your informant?”

“Very,” Aurelio said confidently. “He’s the type that can find out anything he wants. Hell, if I wanted, I’d know every moment you took a shit in your life. You have a skeleton you want hidden, it’s not hidden from him. Fuckers are like a damn dog with a bone when it comes to getting information.”

“So, if the De Lucas hid these other women, how did he find out about them?” Pietro asks him, leaning forward, a calculating look in his eye.

“He doesn’t share with me his process,” Aurelio says with a shake of his head. “But I do know he was able to piece together that their mothers hid their pregnancies, or told their husbands that they were stillborn when they weren’t there. Staff smuggled the babies out of the house and into the arms of someone who took them away and hid them. He knows for sure of two, but the other two are a bit uncertain, though it sounds like much the same circumstances.”

“So, their fathers don’t know they exist?” Zeno asks doubtfully. “And they haven’t said anything in all these years? Women talk, so I don’t think that’s possible. And staff talk too. There would have been rumors.”

I shake my head. “Not when all the women died not long after each other. Leonardo’s first wife died a few years into the marriage. Told everyone that it was cancer, but no one ever verified if that was true. They never had any children, and I do remember hearing my father say he wouldn’t be surprised if she was killed because she couldn’t produce an heir.”

Alessio shakes his head in disgust. “That’s seriously a reason people kill their wives over here? Fucking hell.”

I nod, in agreement with him completely. “It was from back in the early

part of the twentieth century, and while most other families have moved past that, these ones aren't letting it go," I explain grimly. "It was Leonardo's second wife, Luisa, that gave him all the children he has now. Five boys, and then I suppose Gia. Rumor is that he killed her, and he married his current wife, Carmen not long after. They don't have any children of their own, and I don't think that bothers Leonardo much considering he has five sons to carry on his legacy."

"So, that would mean one of the girls was born before Gia and hidden away," Alessio says slowly, and I can all but see the wheels turning in his head. "Which would mean that the first wife did possibly have a baby girl and got her out before she died."

"Or maybe the second wife, Gia's mother, couldn't get Gia out before Leonardo saw her," Massimo guesses. "At that point, there was no hiding her or claiming she was dead."

"It took some digging, but Giulia's birth was registered as a home birth," Aurelio interjects. "Whoever they have on their team to hide that kind of information is very good at what they do, considering how deep my guy had to look, but it is there. The other girls are not. They are registered with their adoptive parents as they were listed as abandoned. Clean and no one would probably look at it twice."

"And you said some of them are possibly cousins?" I ask him. He nods. "I only know of Giovanni having one wife, and she gave him all sons. No mention of a girl. She died just shortly after the youngest son turned two. Rumors were that she fell down some stairs and broke her neck, but nothing confirmed."

"You think he found out about the girl baby and killed her to keep her quiet?" Massimo asks.

"I wouldn't put it past him, but if he knew about a daughter, he'd have killed her, or he would have kept her hidden away like Leonardo did to Gia and used her to advance his attempt for his brother's seat."

"I think it makes more sense these women knew what would happen if the girls were found, so they worked together to get them out," Pietro remarks. He looks at Aurelio. "Do you have a name and location for Gia's sister?"

"He told me her name is Sienna, but he didn't give me a last name," Aurelio replies. "Said he needs to get more information for me before he tells me more. I know that she's here in the United States, but where exactly is a

mystery for now.”

“Did he tell you how old she is?” Dante asks him curiously.

“She’s twenty-six,” he answers.

“Which means she was born between Dario and Matteo,” Dante informs me. He looks back at Aurelio. “My question though, is that now that your guy has found her, how long will it take the De Lucas or others to find her as well?” He holds up his hand when irritation crosses Aurelio’s face. “I’m not saying your guy doesn’t hide his tracks well, but eventually, things always come to light, and if he found them, there is probably someone else like him working for the enemy side that can find them too.”

Aurelio sobers and reluctantly nods. “Which is why we need to find them first.”

On that we can agree. “I don’t think we want more people searching, because that is sure to tip someone off,” I say, looking at Aurelio, and then back to Pietro. “I propose we let your man find her and the others and then decide what to do. Once we know where they are, we’re going to need to move quickly and carefully or things are going to go to shit fast.”

Pietro nods his agreement. “Aurelio, keep Signore Armani and I both appraised of the progress on finding them.”

“I think we’re at the point that you can call me Nico,” I tell him drily.

Pietro smiles. “I suppose so. So while that is being worked on, we need to figure out our next steps to handle the De Luca and the Parisi bastards. What else can you tell us about the De Lucas that will be helpful?”

I tell him what I know, with Dante chiming in occasionally. I also make a split second decision and share that Marco is possibly aligning with Seamus Gallo or at least his daughter. “I wouldn’t put it past him to think he can double cross Seamus to get access to his suppliers and routes,” I finish grimly. “Especially if he’s seducing one of the daughters to get at it.”

“And you think that’s what he’s up to?” Alessio asks curiously.

“I think he’s up to something, but one of my contacts didn’t know the daughter has an apartment in De Luca territory. So there is a chance that the name was put there to throw people off, but we haven’t had time to dive into it with everything that’s happened.”

Alessio nods, then he snorts. “Fuck, America sounds like a right mess. Can’t say that I want to ever stay here longer than I have to with all this bullshit.”

“My men are getting back to work on that now,” I tell them all, ignoring

Alessio. Dante gives me a subtle nod to let me know he's on it.

"We still need to decide how we're going to handle things with Gia," Massimo points out. "Until we find the other women, and find out what the hell is going on with the De Luca asswipe, we focus on what to do with Gia." He grins at me wickedly. "And it sounds to me the only thing that is going to work is you marrying her."

Before I can reply to that, Alessio speaks up and says, "Technically, she was promised to me, so if anyone should marry her, it should be me."

I glare at him when he holds my stare. "The only one who will be marrying her will be me," I growl at him. "And as it is, I've told her that's what I want. But I won't force her. She's had every choice taken away from her, and if she's going to marry me, I want it to be her choice. And if she says no, then that's the end of it and we figure out another way."

"And if she doesn't choose you?" Alessio asks bluntly.

"She'll choose me," I say confidently. I'll pull out every trick in the book to make sure that she does.

"I don't know if I want to laugh or tell you you're a cocky son of a bitch," Alessio remarks. "But you're right, it should be her choice, so we'll see what she says." Then he grins. "And that means she's going to have to meet me, and I'm sure she's going to find me much more appealing than you."

Jealousy burns in my gut, and I despise it. It's a weakness I won't allow. Not with this asshole. Gia is mine, she agreed she's mine, and I have nothing to worry about. But at the same time, that same doubt burns in my gut and I have to hold myself back from storming out of the room to find her and remind her.

But then the door swings open and the very woman in question walks through with a smirking Sofia behind her. Along with the rest of her family. And from the look on Gia's face, she heard some of what was said, and I can't quite tell if she's pissed or not. Guess I'm about to find out.

CHAPTER 31

Gia



I MIGHT STILL BE HALF asleep, and shocked at the amount of people that have arrived, but I'm awake enough to clearly know what I heard come out of Nico's mouth. All the noise fell away when I heard him tell the other men in the room that he would give me the choice if I want to marry him. It's a bit funny though, considering not even twelve hours ago he was telling me I belong to him and he plans on putting a ring on my finger anyway. So, it begs the question, does he mean it or is it just lip service to appease the Caruso men?

I guess time will tell, but I'm not about to be kept out of the loop. And when Sofia told me Nico was meeting with them, I didn't waste any time making my way down here. Thank God I had the presence of mind to put on some pajama pants and a hoodie that I found in Nico's closet. It's far too big for me, but it smells of him, and it calms me. Still, even as they all turn to stare at me, I only focus on Nico. His expression is tense, but his eyes burn hotter as he takes me in.

"*Topolina*, I thought you were sleeping," he says calmly, holding his hand out to me.

I'm fully aware of how important that gesture is to me. If I don't walk toward him, or take his hand willingly, the other men in this room are going to think he's still forcing me. I'm still not sure how this is going to turn out, but I step forward and take his hand, letting him pull me into him. "Ah, well, I heard a lot of commotion and woke up," I tell him with a shy smile, flicking a quick glance around the room toward where the Cattaneo family are now huddled together near the back wall and near the door.

“I’ve already reamed them out for it too,” Sofia informs Nico, when I see him scowl at the men. “Bastards have never been quiet a day in their lives.”

“Says the one who used to scream the house down from the time she was born,” one of the brothers sneers at her. I still need to learn their names, but I’m pretty sure he is her eldest brother.

“I’m fine,” I say quickly to avoid the argument I can already see brewing.

“They’ll be mindful in future of the noise,” Sofia promises firmly and with a pointed look at her brothers. “Now, what did we miss?”

“I don’t remember you being invited into this discussion, brat,” Alessio tells her mildly. I look at him sharply, but I see the amusement on his face, and it’s clear he has a great deal of affection for the woman.

“And you’re still an asshole, but neither of those things are going to change,” she tossed back at him.

“Children,” Pietro chids before those two can start to argue, and the long suffering tone in his voice makes me smile. Much like a doting father or grandfather. I look over at him, and see him watching me with a kind smile. “Good evening, Signora De Luca.” He rises from his seat at Dante’s desk and walks around and toward me. “Nico, release the girl and let me greet her,” he orders when Nico doesn’t let me go when I go to pull away.

Reluctantly, Nico releases me, but I don’t miss the way he watches Pietro carefully. I turn toward Pietro and step forward to shake his hand. “It’s lovely to meet you, Signore Caruso,” I tell him in Italian. “And please call me Gia.”

He beams at me, and I fight back a blush. “I see why Nico is smitten with you,” he replies back, also in Italian. “You are beautiful, my dear. I look forward to us getting to know each other while I’m here. Let me introduce you to my sons and Sofia’s family. Should you ever need a helping hand or a listening ear, we will all be at your disposal day or night.”

“Thank you,” I say gratefully, ignoring the sound of annoyance Nico makes behind me. I don’t even look his way, but Pietro winks at me, so I imagine that last part was definitely to annoy him.

First he introduces me to Alessio, who kisses the back of my hand charmingly. “Lovely to meet you, *dolcezza*,” he says, still holding my hand in his. I blush, because wow, the genes in the Caruso family are indeed strong, and when he smiles at me, it’s startling. “I look forward to getting to know you as well while I’m here.”

“I, ah, okay, thank you,” I stammer out, which only makes his eyes glitter with amusement. I step back and turn to his other brothers, who do much of

the same, and leave me blushing mess. God, how does Sofia view these men as her brothers, because damn, they are hot. I can't even look at Nico because I can feel his eyes boring into me.

"And this is Aurelio, Sofia's father, and my head of security," Pietro tells me as we turn back toward the Cattaneo family and introduces me to Sofia's family.

"Pleasure to meet you, *cara*," Aurelio says with a wide smile as he shakes my hand. He's so large he towers over me, but his handshake is gentle. "Sofia will give you my number, and I expect you to use it if you ever need it. I'll make sure you're taken care of. And I hope that you're helping to keep my little girl in line," he adds with a wink.

I chuckle, and see Sofia roll her eyes out of the corner of my eyes. "I think it's more the other way around, but I'll try my best," I assure him.

One of her brothers snorts at that, then winks at me. He looks the most like his father, but he has a scar along his temple that none of the others have. He's got a kind smile, much like his father, but there is no mistaking the danger that lies underneath. "No need to spare our feelings, *bella*." He shakes my hand gently and adds, "I am Lazaro, the eldest of this band of idiots. So if you want strong and handsome, you come to me."

There is a round of scoffs. "As if," another one of the brothers says. I look at him as he steps forward and gives me a charming smile. He has almost a boyish looking charm, and I can't help but smile back at him. "I'm Alonzo, and if you really want to make sure you're talking to someone with brains, you come and find me."

"But if you want actual brains, you come and find me. It's my job," the final brother, Urso, tells me with a wink, also shaking my hand and introducing himself.

"Nice to meet you all," I say warmly.

"Gia," Nico says, and the warning in his voice, has me finally looking at him, and I can't stop the grin that pulls across my lips at the clear annoyance on his face; not to mention the jealousy in his eyes. Though it softens when he sees my grin. "Come here, *topolina*," he instructs, crooking his fingers at me. "We have some things to discuss."

Ah, yes, nothing more sobering than the mention of marriage. I lose my grin but walk toward him. But before I can reach him, Pietro stops me by saying, "Myself and Alessio will speak to her alone, Nico." There is a hardness in his voice, and I look back at him in surprise. Though his gaze

isn't on me, but on Nico, who is now looking positively thunderous.

"No," he grits out between clenched teeth.

"It's not a request," Pietro informs him, and the look on his face makes me nervous. He's full don right now, and despite Nico being one also, we all know he outranks him. And I don't miss the smirks on the other mens' faces, because they know it too.

Nico's eyes fire with anger at that statement and from my vantage point, I can see him clenching his fists on his thighs. Before he can explode, though, I say quickly, "I'm fine, Nico. I don't mind speaking with him."

"I am not leaving you alone," Nico tells me, his gaze moving to mine.

"If Alessio stays, then Dante can stay as well, it's only right that one of your men do too, right?" I look at Pietro and give him a slightly pleading look. The last thing I need is Nico going all caveman and this whole thing turning into a bloody mess.

Pietro eyes me for a moment and then confirms, "He can stay."

I look back at Nico and see him watching me with eyes so dark and stormy my heart starts to pound. I give him a reassuring smile, hoping that will help, but instead, it only makes his gaze on me more intense. It takes a long moment, before he finally looks at Dante and nods, before coming around the desk. I expect him to walk right out, but instead, he hauls me up and takes my mouth in a bruising kiss. There is no denying it for exactly what it is, and it both thrills and scares me how quickly and easily I respond to him before he pulls away and murmurs, "I'll be right outside, *topolina*. If you need me, you only need to say so and I'll be right back in." I nod mutely because I don't think I'm capable of speaking. Then he does something he's never done. He kisses my forehead, sets me down, and walks to the door. But he stops and pins Pietro with a hard glare. "If you upset her, guest and don or not, you will answer to me." Then he throws open the door and stalks out, the others following behind him, though I see their grins and smirks.

Finally, the door closes, and it's only myself, Pietro, Alessio, and Dante left in the room. Dante positions himself behind me, leaning against the wall.

Pietro and Alessio share a look, but then both look back at me and Pietro says, "Do not worry, *cara mia*, we mean you no harm." He gives me a reassuring smile. "But Nico has informed us he brought you here under not-so-very-normal circumstances."

"That's putting it mildly," Alessio chuckles. He gives me a reassuring smile. "And we want to make sure that you're alright and you actually want

to stay here.” He gives Dante a cold, lethal smile. “Because if you want to leave, say the word and this guy won’t be a problem anymore, and we’ll get you out so fast your head will spin.”

“Good luck with that,” Dante drawls, completely unfazed.

“Ah, no, no, you don’t need to do anything,” I rush to interject. I look at Alessio and give him a sad smile. “I hope my brother didn’t promise you anything else that will cause you any problems.”

He gives me a reassuring smile. “*Dolcezza*, you don’t need to worry about any of that. My concern right now is you are here because you want to be, not because you are forced. Though, by that little display, I think you’ve already answered that question.” I blush furiously and try not to squirm.

“Do not embarrass the girl, Alessio,” Pietro scolds, but he turns a smile back to me. “We are just concerned you are doing this because you feel you have to stay, *cara mia*. I want you to know you have choices. I’m now seeing you haven’t had a lot of those until now. Including coming here,” he adds pointedly, with a look toward Dante. “We want you to know that you have the choice to come with us when we leave.”

“And you’ll let her live without marrying your son?” Dante asks lightly.

Neither man look at him and only focus on me. “There will be no one forcing you to marry anyone,” Pietro assures me. “Though, I would be happy to welcome you into the family should that happen, but I already know that is not where your heart lies.”

“But is marriage going to be the only way to make sure people don’t try to kidnap me?” I ask.

None of them speak, but I see the sideways glance they give each other. “You are in an...interesting position, *cara mia*,” Pietro says carefully. “You are the only daughter of a family that wants to use you for their own gain. You have been promised twice already that we know of, by both your uncle and brother. Perhaps your other brothers, or father, or even cousins, have also promised you to other families. When you only have one woman and many options, people will do things that they feel will benefit them the most with no care for your wellbeing.” Alessio nods his head in agreement.

I don’t reply to that, but I feel like there is more to that statement. I hear Dante give an annoyed sigh and I look at him in surprise. “What they are also not saying,” he tells me bluntly, “is that no matter who you marry, you will also have a target on your back because of who you become.” I can feel my eyes widen. Wait, what? “If you marry Nico, you are going to have other

families that see you as a way to get the power or positions they want from Nico. If you marry Alessio, you will be in the same position, but with families overseas seeing you as a way to take down the mighty Caruso family. If somehow you were forced to marry into another family, then you will be in the same position with them, because more than likely, they have picked people with many enemies, and there is a good chance that they will let you die before they would think about rescuing you. There are millions of women in the world, and you are expendable,” he tells me, not harshly, but the words are like a blow.

Alessio curses. “Why are you purposely scaring her?” he demands, following with a quick rapid fire of Italian curses.

“I’m not scaring her, but I refuse to let anyone sugarcoat this shit,” Dante replies firmly. “Gia, you need to make an informed decision, and leaving shit out leaves you at a disadvantage. Especially one that could result in you making one that will take you far from here, and put you in another possibly dangerous situation, when you think you’re going somewhere to live a free and clear life.”

And that is exactly what I was thinking. I swallow hard at the disappointment that brims. “Oh,” I whisper.

Dante gives me an understanding look. “I’m going to level with you, Gia,” he continues. “I know Nico has told you this, but he’s not here, and I’m going to be as straight with you as I can. You and I, we were both born into worlds we didn’t ask to be, and we really didn’t want to be. Now, I’m in a different position than you, but even if I want to get out of this life, I never can. All because my father is a fucking bastard and raped my mother, someone who worked for him and his family. The problem is that while my father never acknowledges me as his son, he wanted more soldiers.

“I tried to run away multiple times growing up, tired of the beatings and pain, until I finally understood I was never going to get out. I had two choices. I could die and leave my mother alone, to pay for my sins, or I could accept it and make sure I was so damn good at what I did that I would have my choice of where to go. I love my mother and will never abandon her, so I accepted my fate and did what I had to. I became so damn good at my job that people took notice, and then Nico offered me a job with him. I was able to use my skills and information to get out from under my father and do what I wanted. But that was my choice. He never claimed me as his son or part of the family, and that meant when I requested to be relieved, he had very little

recourse. Especially considering who Nico is and how much he wanted that tie to him.

“So I’m here, years later, and this is where I’ll stay. I’m going to be forever in this world, but I get to choose my place in it. And you now have that same choice. You will always be a De Luca. No matter how much you try to change your appearance or your name. If you leave, someone will eventually find you and connect the dots, and then that freedom you’ve craved will be gone. Women in this world don’t have a lot of power, so until that changes, you are at the mercy of the men around you. You can marry Nico, Alessio, or another man of your choosing, or you can risk everything, possibly your life, by running. If, after you weigh all of that and figure out what you want, I’ll do everything I can to help you, if I need to. And that includes handling Nico who may lose his shit depending on your choice. But I will say that Nico is damn gone for you, and has been since he laid eyes on you, so he’s going to do whatever he can to keep you with him.”

This is probably the most Dante has ever spoken to me, but I’m listening carefully. I suppose in some ways he’s right, our situations are similar. It still angers me deeply I’ll never get to be truly free, but at the same time, that’s a foolish, childish dream. The mafia will always exist, and even if it’s not Italian, there will be other factions, and I have no idea what I would be up against. I still can’t resist saying to him, “I have spent my entire life wanting freedom and to be normal, Dante. Maybe I can have that if I go with Alessio.”

He glances at Pietro and Alessio before he looks back at me. “And what makes you think that you can’t have that here?”

“I want to be able to go out and enjoy my life without having to report to someone,” I say in exasperation. “Maybe free isn’t the right word, but I want to have choices.”

“And you think it will be different with them? You are still going to need guards there. You’ll need to let them know where you’re going. Especially since you’ll be in a country where you will know no one else,” he finishes.

“But I am not an ogre, and I will not demand to know who you are with and what you are doing, Gia,” Alessio butts in to try and reassure me. “You will be able to have friends and shop. To do all the things women love to do. And I won’t ask much of you other than to be by my side when I need you and to eventually have children with me when you’re ready.”

“And if I never want to have children?” I can’t help but ask.

Alessio pauses, which tells me he wasn't expecting that answer at all. "I suppose that is a discussion we would need to have at some point then," he finally replies carefully, though we both know how it would go. He's the heir for his father's position, which means he needs to produce a few for when he's gone, and that decision will happen no matter what I want. I doubt he would ever force me, but when it comes to heirs, mafia men don't play around.

So now the question is, which devil do I choose? The one I've just met and is promising me the things I want to hear and some of the freedom and choices I've always wanted? Or the one that wants to keep me under lock and key, but also is showing me things I never realized I wanted? It should be an easy decision, but I have a feeling it's going to be far from it.

"I think I need to think about this," I tell them all. "It's...It's a lot to process."

"Of course, *cara mia*," Pietro says immediately. "But I will offer one piece of advice." He takes my hand in his and pats it. "A woman's husband is for life, and you must be happy in your decision. Sometimes love and devotion are not enough to make a marriage happy. Things change, people change, and then you are left in a union that leaves you unhappy and feeling defeated." There are shadows in his eyes, and it makes me wonder what Pietro himself has gone through. But then they clear, and he smiles again. "But it can also be what makes a marriage and a lifetime commitment fun and exciting for you both. Especially when you are heading for the same goals. So do not make a choice on what you want now. Make a choice on what you want in the future, and who is the one who will help you get there? Who will do whatever it takes to make you happy and to be there when times are hard? Because this life is for the strong, not those who cannot make decisions and stick to them. Our world will eat you up and spit you out, as they say. So be sure, *cara mia*, when you are making your choice because it will not be one you can take back later."

I know he's right, and I nod, my mind whirling with all kinds of thoughts and possibilities. Is Nico that person? Is Alessio? Is someone else the person I can see myself beside. My instant reaction is Nico, but is that only because I haven't given any other man a chance? Perhaps it would be worth it to spend time with Alessio to see if we'd make a good match. I eye the other man and then turn to Pietro and Dante and say, "I'd like to speak to Alessio alone, please?"

“No,” Dante says instantly, while Alessio and Pietro look surprised at my request.

“I will not make a decision until I can,” I tell Dante stubbornly. “So I can either do it now when you’ll be right outside the door, or I can do it when you and Nico are too busy to care where I am.” It’s a surefire way to get my point across.

Dante levels a hard look at me. “Nico is going to kick my ass if I leave you in here alone with him.”

“We both know you’re not afraid of him, so I don’t know why you’re using that excuse. And we also both know that Alessio isn’t going to harm me.”

Dante doesn’t reply to that. Instead, he stares at me for a long, tense moment before he turns to Alessio and warns, “You may be a Caruso, but I will kill you and smile while doing it if you do anything to her.”

Alessio’s gaze goes hard. “I’m going to choose to overlook that insult this time, but do it again, and I will kill you where you stand,” he warns. Dante isn’t the least bit fazed and, instead, gives Alessio a lethal smile.

“No one is going to be killing anyone,” I say quickly, giving them both an annoyed glare. I look at Pietro and ask, “Is it always going to be like this?”

Pietro chuckles. “*Cara mia*, you have no idea. This is a normal day. Now, Dante and I will leave you be, but you will sing out if you need anything. I’ll have my men hold back our host as well, since I’m sure he’s not going to be too pleased with the situation.” Then he walks for the door with a jerk of his head to Dante.

Dante is a bit slower going, but he looks at me and says, “I’ll be right outside the door. And if Nico kills me, I’ll be back to haunt you.” Then he follows Pietro out, leaving me alone with Alessio.

I wince when I hear Nico’s angry voice coming muffled through the door, but then I put it out of my mind as I look at Alessio. And I decide in that moment I’m done beating around the bush. If I’m going to be making such an important decision, then I want honesty. “Do you actually want to marry me, Alessio?” I ask him bluntly.

Alessio doesn’t react to my question, but I see something flash in his eyes. Amusement? Shock? I’m not sure, but it’s enough to know he’s not unaffected either way by that question. But I’ll give him credit that he doesn’t try to skirt around my question and replies, “I don’t know. I don’t know much about you, but I think you’re beautiful, and from what I can see, we

would probably be compatible.” Then he gives me a knowing smile. “But I also know you’re not really interested in me anyway. You have your eyes on someone else, but you’re doubting yourself because now you’re thinking you’re crazy for wanting to stay with the man who’s kidnapped you.”

I blink at him. Alright, so we’ll add astute to Alessio’s list of qualities. “And am I crazy?”

He shrugs. “To the outside world maybe, but not in this one. Hell, people are kidnapped every day in our line of work, and sometimes this is what happens. I have a friend back home that decided to try and cut another family down a few pegs, so he kidnapped the eldest daughter. Now, they’re married, with their second child on the way, and as far as I can tell, they’re stupidly happy. And the little devil keeps him on his toes, that’s for sure.” He grins and winks at me. “And I have a feeling once you start to come into your own, you’ll do the same to Nico.”

“I’m not that wild,” I assure him.

He snorts. “*Dolcezza*, every woman has a wild streak in her, and you’ve been repressing yours for a long while. Once you start to let it go, Nico won’t know what hit him.”

I doubt that, but I let the subject drop. “So you think I should marry Nico?”

He cocks his head slightly. “I think if you want to be free you need to have protection,” he says after a moment. “You need to have someone at your back that will protect you when shit hits the fan, because it is going to. Your family is crossing people that won’t take too kindly to being double-crossed, and that means war is coming. You will undoubtedly be caught in the crossfire. But I looked into Nico, and there is a reason he’s so respected, as well as feared by many. He’s young, he’s smart, and he has the numbers and backing of people that will result in you being far safer than if you were out there on your own. At the same time though, if you have even one shred of doubt, do not marry him. Do not let him talk you into something you don’t want. And if that means you come and stay with us for a while and under our protection, without marriage being part of the equation, then so be it.”

“Why are you being so nice to me? Someone you just met?” I ask curiously. “I mean, I’m the woman who was promised to you, and at the same time, you know I won’t be marrying you. You’d technically be in your right to be furious or to force it.”

Alessio shook his head. “I may be a lot of things, but I will never force a

woman. And I've seen firsthand what happens when people are forced into something they don't want to be. No one is happy, and people leave. Or, they do something stupid like try to get revenge and go to the enemy. Seeing you with Nico, even yesterday through the computer, you were tired, and I could see your mind whirling, but you weren't trying to talk to us or sign to me secretly so you could tell me that you needed rescuing. You put your head on his shoulder, closed your eyes, and stayed tight to him. That was the moment I knew you were going to stay here with him. But I wanted to make sure you understood your options."

I lean back against Nico's desk and sigh. "I'm so worried I'm going to make a mistake."

He moves to lean against the desk beside me, not touching me. "And what does your gut tell you?"

"That I need to really think about this before I say yes or no," I answer immediately.

"Then I think you have your answer. And considering how early in the morning it is, I don't think it's bad to take a few more hours before you give an answer."

I nod. "Thanks, Alessio." I give him a small smile. "I hope that even after all of this we can be friends at least."

"Don't worry, *dolcezza*," he replies with a charming grin. "I have a feeling we'll be seeing a lot more of each other, so friends is going to be a definite. And, well, if you ever decide you want to get out of here and keep your man on his toes, I'm your guy."

I smile. Maybe this will be okay, but I think he's right. I need to think about everything. I tell him that, and head for the door. Time to face the man who is probably pissed as hell at me, but maybe Alessio is right and now's the time to stop being so careful.

CHAPTER 32

Nico



I'M on her the moment the door opens. I ignore all the smirks from the men around me, and focus on the woman who looks tired, and confused, but also has a smile on her face. I don't waste time picking her up into my arms and growling to everyone, "We'll talk later." Then I walk away, uncaring if it's rude or might look badly on the somewhat fragile new alliance I'm building. The only thing that matters to me is the woman in my arms.

I hear some chuckles, and Sofia telling the Caruso family she'll show them to their rooms, but then I tune them out. I stalk down the hall to the stairs, then take them two at a time. I start to head in the direction of my room, but then change my mind and head toward her room. No, her former room. I already had the staff move all her things out of her bedroom and into mine while she and Sofia were getting ready for our guests. And this way, there is less chance of us being disturbed.

When Gia realizes where we're going, she gives me a confused look, and then one full of disappointment. I'm sure she thinks I'm going to lock her away in here, but that's far from the truth. Instead, when we reach it, I set her down, open the door, pull her inside, and lock us both inside. I flip on the light, before I turn to her and level her with a hard look. Her eyes widen slightly when she realizes just how pissed I am. "What the hell did you think you were doing?" I demand through clenched teeth. "Do you realize the danger you put yourself in?"

She gives me a stubborn glare, holding her ground when I start to advance toward her. "I was perfectly safe," she argues. "Alessio—"

"Alessio is the son of one of the most feared don's in Europe," I snap at

her. I'm so pissed it's taking all my willpower to keep from yelling at her. "If he wanted, all he had to do was pull out a gun and shoot you, and this whole fucking thing would be done. Or, if he didn't want to kill you, he could have just put a gun to your head and gotten you out of here with no issue, and you would have been gone."

"He wouldn't have done that," she snaps back.

"You don't fucking know that. Do you think that a quick two-minute conversation through a computer and then in person tonight tells you everything you need to know about someone? Don't be so naive, Giulia. That kind of mistake gets you killed."

"Well, excuse me for not knowing how this shit works, considering my family kept me isolated for most of my life," she yells at me, her own temper flaring. "And you wouldn't have let him come here if you didn't think it was safe, so don't you dare try to turn this around on me."

"I brought his whole family here to keep from getting involved in a war on all fronts because of your fucking family," I roar at her. Fury, desperation, and a small dose of fear are making everything inside me boil hot and bright. I need her to understand. I want her to realize how dangerous this whole situation is. Because if I lose her...

No, I don't want to even think about that. It will never happen. She's mine, and before we're done with this conversation, she'll be very clear on that.

"That's not my fault," she yells back at me. "And don't act like you didn't know they were going to try and talk to me without you. They tried to do it on the call yesterday. You're letting jealousy cloud your judgment because you don't want to admit that I have options."

Fury at her words, and yes, jealousy right along with it, bubble up inside me. I know she's pushing me, but I don't fucking care at the moment. "There is no other option," I snarl at her, stepping closer to her so that we're only inches apart. She doesn't retreat and only stares up at me with that stubborn look on her face. "If you think for one moment that you will be with anyone but me—"

"You'll what?" she interrupts, goading me. "You'll lock me away in this room again? You'll tie me to the bed to make sure that I can't slip away? You've done all of that, and you haven't broken me yet. And you never will. Because we both know that—"

I don't let her finish that sentence. Instead, I grab her by the upper arms,

hoisting her up with little effort, and then turn her so that her back is pressed against the wall by the door. Her eyes widen, but there's no fear in her eyes. If there was, I'd stop immediately, but no, this time there's a flash of something else. Excitement? Triumph? Desire? I'm not sure, and honestly at this moment, I can't bring myself to care. The only thing that matters is making sure she knows just what is about to happen. And who she belongs to.

"I think you've forgotten who I am, Giulia," I tell her in a low, dangerous voice. She stills. Ah, yes, I have her attention now. "I am a don of New York City, and one the largest in this city. I have reach far outside of it and through some of the biggest parts of this country. I am feared because of what I can and will do to make sure that I come out on top. And that includes going up against some of the most feared people on this continent and any others who try to challenge me for what's mine. And I will win. So do not think I won't do the same when it comes to you. Because you, Giulia De Luca are mine. The only one you will marry is me. The only one who gets to hear the sounds you make when you come, is me. The only one who gets to put a fucking ring on your finger is me. And if that means I lock your ass in this room, tie you to that goddamn bed, and spend the next fifty years convincing you, I will. Because. You. Are Mine."

"I thought you said I had a choice on who I married," she says quietly, staring at me.

I narrow my eyes at her. "I lied. You have a choice on rejecting the Caruso bastard and anyone else that is stupid enough to think they have a shot with you, but with me there is no choice." I gently grip her chin to keep her head straight and focused on me when she goes to look away. "Because I can never let you go, Gia. You're my obsession, and you soothe something inside me I didn't know I needed. I want you in my bed every damn night for the rest of our lives, and I want you by my side when I finally take everything away from your good-for-nothing family that dared to hurt you. None of that is possible if you aren't here with me. So, no, you don't have a choice. Because the only one who is going to make you happy is me, and I'll spend the rest of my life making sure of it."

"Is that your twisted way of telling me you love me?" she whispers, her lips trembling slightly.

She brought this up after our confrontation last night, and it's been moving around in my mind ever since. Is that what this feeling I have for her

is? Love? I've never once considered that emotion as being something I'd have to face. But this woman isn't anything I expected to have in my life. Still, love doesn't seem like the right word.

"No," I tell her calmly. Disappointment and hurt flash over her face before she quickly masks them and her face goes blank. "Love is too pale a word for what I feel for you, *topolina*. And it's often tossed around as a throw away that people sometimes mean, and will use against you. Or people write poems and all that shit, but it's nothing more than lip-service. No, what I feel for you, Giulia De Luca, has no description other than obsession and the need to know that everything about you is mine. I want your anger, your sadness, your laughter, and your desire. I want it all. And then when you're missing one of those, I want to make sure you get it back. I want to be the one to fix whatever has made you angry, to cheer you up, to cry with you, to make you laugh, and then make you scream my name when I'm so deep inside you that you'll feel me for days afterwards. That is what I want from you, and that is what I feel for you."

She stares at me, eyes wet, but not a single tear falls. My heart is pounding faster in my chest, but I don't look away. I just watch her. "I think that's far better than saying I love you," she whispers finally, and something settles inside me. Something I didn't know was out of place. "Because I want all of those things, Nico. I want them all and I want to give them back to you. I'm probably crazy considering how this all started and I've been fighting you on it, but I don't really care. I don't know how else to tell you, so I'm going to say I love you too, but you're right, it's probably not a strong enough word."

I let go of her chin, and move down to cup her jaw before I take her mouth. The kiss is passionate, desperate, and full of emotion. Fuck, it's a heady feeling, and I need to be inside her. Right the fuck now. She doesn't fight me when I tell her that, tearing her pants down her body and pushing my boxers and pants down to my hips. I lift her legs over my arms, holding her in place as I push inside of her. She lets out a loud gasp, followed by a low moan.

I don't take things slow. No, this isn't the time for that. I fuck her like man possessed. Like a man who is claiming his woman. Finally.

"Nico," she cries, her nails digging into my shoulders as she meets me thrust for thrust, her inner walls tightening around me as I push her closer and closer to the edge.

“That’s it, *topolina*,” I rasp. “Let me hear you scream. I want everyone in this goddamn house to know you’re mine.” My words make her tighten around me, and it’s my turn to groan. Fuck, she feels so fucking good.

When she finally detonates, all I can do is stare at her, primal satisfaction rushing through me as I allow myself to follow her. She screams my name, and there is no doubt that people can hear her. Let those bastards downstairs hear her. She’s mine. She’s not going anywhere, and they’ll have to deal with it.

I take her mouth again. Needing the connection. When I finally pull my mouth away, I rasp, “Marry me.”

Her lips quirk. “I was going to say yes to you anyway,” she replies huskily. “Alessio, said he already knew you were my choice too.”

I pull away and look at her and then narrow my eyes at her. They’re bright with satisfaction and contentment, but also that mischievous glint that tells me she knows exactly what she’s doing right now. I slap her ass hard, making her yelp, and I growl, “I never want to hear another man’s name leave your lips when I’m inside you, *topolina*.” I thrust hard inside her, making her gasp again, to emphasize my point.

“Okay,” she breathes, her lashes fluttering as her body tightens around me once more.

Satisfied she’s gotten my point, I brace her tighter against the wall, pulling up my pants enough so that I can walk, and then I carry her to the ensuite, making sure I’m still inside her. I’m not ready to lose the connection yet. When we get there, I reluctantly pull out of her and set her on her feet, before turning on the shower. “Out of those clothes, *topolina*,” I order her briskly, quickly doing the same. She does as ordered and then I pull her into the shower. But I don’t settle us under the main spray just yet. Instead, I sit on the stone bench seat and have her straddle my lap. I don’t care that we have a mess between the two of us. I want her paying attention. She gives me a soft smile as I lift her left hand to my mouth. “I’m not waiting to marry you,” I inform her. “I’ll have Dante bring someone in to marry us as soon as possible. If you want a big fancy wedding—”

“I don’t,” she interjects quickly. “I mean, who would be there anyway? My family certainly isn’t going to be okay with the whole thing. And I don’t have any friends, so a simple wedding is fine with me.”

Thank. Fucking. God. I’d give it to her if she insisted, but I wouldn’t have been happy about it. “Then we’ll get married here.” I look at her hand and

then back at her. “I’ll get you a ring, *topolina*, unless you’d like to pick it out yourself.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t need to do that. There are all kinds of rings and other jewelry in the closet in there. I can easily grab something from there.”

“No. Those are my mother’s, and while I don’t give a damn about them, I won’t have her memory tainting this. Not after what she did. I’ve been meaning to throw all that shit away, but never thought of it.”

She gapes at me. “You want to throw away millions of dollars in jewelry?”

“You sound like you’re surprised at that, *topolina*,” I say with a chuckle. “You think I’m so poor I can’t buy you more?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Yes, yes, I know you’re rolling in money, but that doesn’t mean you can be wasteful. Think of the people who would kill for those. Or the money it could be sold for to benefit people that need it.”

“Then sell them,” I tell her carelessly. “They are yours to do with as you please, Gia. Sell them and donate the money, or keep it for yourself.”

She gives me a dubious look. “Just like that?”

“You are going to be my wife, Gia, and that means everything I have is yours. If you don’t like something, change it. If you want a different house, then we’ll demo this one and build a new one, or I’ll buy you another one.”

She shakes her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you said that, but no, I like the house. I’m probably going to want to lighten it up a bit, but other than that I don’t want to change much.” Then her expression morphs to hopeful. “And does that mean that I can start to go out and do normal things?”

I pause. I know what she wants, and I know I’m going to have to disappoint her a bit. Still, it can’t be helped. “Until we are married and your family knows they can no longer bargain you off, then you’re going to have to hold off on those plans, Gia,” I tell her as gently as I can. Her shoulders sag, and disappointment covers her face. “But once that is done, then yes, Gia, you will be free to come and go however you like. Though you will have a guard with you.” When she opens her mouth to argue I give her a hard look, making her shut it. “It’s non-negotiable, Gia. Just because you are going to be my wife doesn’t mean that people will still not try to hurt you or take you from me. You will have guards at all times, but they will not stop you or get

in the way of you going about your business. But you are to listen to them if they say you need to leave. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she pouts, clearly not happy with my decree.

I can't resist leaning forward and pulling her lip between my teeth, and nipping it playfully. She gasps, and I sooth the sting with my tongue. "I'm going to do that every time you pout." She rolls her eyes at me, but I can see the smile she's trying to hide. I give her another quick kiss, unable to resist the taste of her mouth, and stand, lifting us both. "Now, we need to shower and get some sleep because tomorrow is going to be a very busy day."

"Don't you mean today," she laughs as she steps under the spray, turning her face up to it.

I watch her for a moment, a deep satisfaction sliding into my gut at seeing her here, like this, and knowing that she's mine.

"Yes, I suppose," I finally say as I step up behind her, unable to stay away from her for too long. She gives me a knowing look over her shoulder, before setting to work on washing up. I follow suit, though by the time we're done, I'm fucking hard as stone again. And my sweet little mouse knows it from the coy looks she keeps sending my way. But as much as I want to take her again, I know I need sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day.

So I climb out of the shower and dry off, and then pull on the pants I discarded seeing as I don't have any spare clothes in here. I patiently wait while Gia pulls on some pajamas that she finds left behind in the nearly empty closet, before I move to the back wall and open up the other passageway entrance that was installed in here. She stares at the opening, and then turns her glare to me. I can't help the sly grin on my face. "Am I going to have to start looking at every damn wall in this place?" she asks me in exasperation. "How many of those are hiding around here?"

I make a mental note to give her access to the doors throughout the house, save a few that I don't want her near. "Enough," I reply as I pull her inside, letting the door shut silently behind us. "I'll show you where they are at some point, but after our guests leave." I definitely don't want any of those nosy bastards finding their way in here.

"Uh huh," is the only reply I get. Clearly she doesn't believe me, but I don't care right now. Once we reach my bedroom, I shut the door quietly behind me before we head into the bathroom. "I need to dry my hair," she says. "Or it really will be a rat's nest come morning."

"I'll leave you be," I say with a smile as I kiss the top of her head. She

moves towards the vanity and I add, "I'm going to meet with Dante. I'll be back shortly." She nods and then I head to the closet to change and message Dante to bring the car around.

When I make my way down to the side exit, I find Dante and Alessio both standing there. I don't bother to hide my displeasure at the sight of Alessio, and by the knowing grin on his face, he's perfectly aware. "Felt like I should tag along," Alessio says lightly as I walk past him without a word. Guest and ally or not, I have half a mind to throat punch him for trying to tell Gia she could leave me, but I manage to keep myself from doing anything too stupid.

I hear steps fall in behind me and when I look over my shoulder my scowl deepens when I see Lazaro following us. He gives me an easy smile and says, "Wherever he goes I go," with a nod toward Alessio. "So, guess it's going to be a full car."

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, giving Dante a look that lets him know how I feel about these additions. His lips quirk slightly before he hides it, and leads us to the waiting SUV.

Alessio climbs in the back with me, while Lazaro climbs in front with Dante. "So where are we going exactly?" Lazaro asks conversationally.

No one answers him. Instead, Alessio glances at me sideways and says, "So you convinced her to marry you, huh? I'm man enough to know when I'm beaten, so I'll congratulate you while also having the satisfaction of knowing it wouldn't be happening without a little push from me in your direction."

This motherfucker is seriously testing my patience. I hear Lazaro snort in the front, and I see Dante studiously avoiding me. The bastard is probably laughing and will make some stupid comment about it later. "I'm starting to rethink this alliance," I say coldly, giving Alessio a dark look.

Alessio isn't the least perturbed by my rude statement. "Ah, but we both know you'll love having us around once you get to know us better. Besides, something tells me you're going to need all the help you can get with that one, and with Sofia's influence, you're going to be pulling your hair out within a month once those two put their heads together."

"She is a terrible influence," Lazaro agrees with a chuckle. "The things she used to get up to almost made our father gray before his time."

"I probably have a few from her too," Alessio says drily. He looks at me slyly. "So I hope you're not attached to those dark locks of yours, because

they'll be changing color soon enough."

"Like I give a fuck," I say drily. God, do these assholes ever shut up?

"Eh, it's fine. I've decided we need to be friends," Alessio continues, clearly uncaring that I don't want to talk to him. Though that last statement makes me look at him like he's lost his damn mind, because clearly he has. Friends? I don't have friends, and I don't need them. Especially not the man who tried to take Gia away from me. Alessio grins and then laughs. "What? You too good for friends?" he taunts.

"You Sicilian lot are fucking nuts," I reply calmly. "And I don't need fucking friends. I need allies."

Alessio waves that away. "Of course, and now you got it. But you seem tense, so you and I are going to have to work on that. The brothers all offered to help with that too, so I'm sure before you leave, we'll have you eased up in no time."

"Jesus fuck," I sigh, rubbing my eyes. "I'm too fucking tired to deal with your stupid ass right now. Seeing as you arrived in the middle of the fucking night."

"Jet lag," he says with a shrug.

"Maybe I should put your asses up in a hotel."

"Waste of money, and we both know you'll want us close when shit goes down. So sounds to me like you're going to have to get used to us." He grins wickedly. "And this will give me a chance to spend some time with Sofia and get to know your lovely soon to be bride a little more."

At the mention of Gia I snarl at him, "Touch her, and I will lock you in the dungeon for the rest of your stay and make sure you return home missing a few limbs."

"Damn, is he always this touchy?" Lazaro asks Dante drily. "You need to let him out of the house more. Shake off some of the doom and gloom."

"Don't worry, Nico, I'm not going to try and take your woman, you're safe," Alessio says with a taunting smile. "Lucky for you, she's completely taken with you, and I'm not one to poach. So you can tone down the jealous boyfriend routine. And you wouldn't be taking me down without a fight, and I have more people on my side." He finishes that with a lethal smile, probably thinking that he can intimidate me, but instead I ignore him.

Dante pulls up in front of our destination, and we all climb out without a word. As we walk into the jewelry store, I ignore the knowing grins on Alessio and Lazaro's faces. I'm done listening to their shit.

“Ah, Mr. Armani,” the owner of the store says warmly as I walk up to him. Considering he probably only opened up for me, but still looks dressed and ready for the day, means that he realizes the importance of me being here. “Welcome. I understand we are looking for some pieces?”

“Yes,” I say briskly. “I want to see your rings first.” I’m not wasting any time.

“Of course, sir,” he replies, leading me over to a large display case, full of rings of every design and color. “Does the lady that you are proposing to have a specific style she prefers? Or perhaps a favorite stone?”

“No,” I say, though really I don’t know. Alessio comes to have a look while Dante and Lazaro stand back by the door, making sure no one pops in when they shouldn’t be. I give Alessio a hard glare, but he ignores me.

“What about that one, dear?” he suggests brightly, pointing to a completely ridiculous ring that looks gaudy and tacky. “You said that I could have any one that I wanted, right?” he pouts, looking at me. His eyes are dancing with mirth as I stare at him. Alessio for his part doesn’t break character, and the jeweler doesn’t even lose his smile. “I’d love to see a few. Need to make sure that they go with my eyes. Since that’s the favorite part of me you love, right? Well, that and my co—”

“Finish that sentence and I’m going to shoot you right here.”

Alessio feigns shock. “But Boo Bear, I thought you said we didn’t have to hide anymore?” he continues dramatically. I hear laughter by the door but I don’t look at them, and instead of replying, I reach back and pull my gun on him, holding it steady as I aim it at his dick. Instead of getting upset, he starts to laugh and holds up his hands in surrender. “Fine, fine. We really need to work on your sense of humor.”

I put the gun away, and then I turn back to the jeweler, who still looks calm as a cucumber. Though I don’t have to worry about him opening his mouth. I’ve dealt with him over the years, and the man is a vault. Not to mention each family keeps him in business with the amount of things bought over the years. I look at the case again, focusing on the rings in front of me, but my eyes go back to one ring and I point to it. “That one.”

The jeweler grabs it and brings it out for me to examine. “An excellent choice, sir. I only put it out before closing earlier, so no one has seen it yet,” he tells me with a soft smile.

The ring is stunning, with a crystal clear diamond, set in a cathedral style band with smaller diamonds along the inside and outside of the ring. It’s

unique, and while beautiful, isn't ostentatious in appearance. Exactly like my sweet little mouse. "I want this one. What do you have for wedding bands to match?" I ask him briskly, handing him back the ring. He quickly reaches back in the case and pulls out a matching band of diamonds that fits snugly against the other ring. I nod. "Wrap them up."

"And will you need something for yourself, sir?" he asks me.

I pause. I hadn't thought that far, but I suppose it will ensure that everyone knows I belong to her as well. "Fine," I say briskly, following him over to another display. I quickly pick out a simple black tungsten ring with a white gold band through the middle to match Gia's.

"What, no diamonds?" Alessio jokes. "Damn, bestie, you and I need to work on your style."

I don't even bother looking at him. Why encourage the fucker anymore than he already is?

"Dante, pay him," I order as I take the rings from him and put them in my pocket.

"Hold on, I need to find a few things," Alessio corrects, walking around the store. I narrow my eyes at him, which he ignores. "Dante, what ring are you going to get?"

Now that gives me pause. What the hell is he talking about? I glance over at my Underboss, who looks calm, while the giant of a man beside him goes still and I quickly realize what Alessio has implied. "What the hell is he talking about?" Lazaro asks carefully. "Because I hope to hell it isn't what I think it is?"

Seems the big guy has some brains after all. Though I have to give Dante credit for not buckling under pressure. Instead, he looks at me and says, "Shall I get the car and we can leave them here for the night, Boss?"

"Fine, fine, I'll be quick," Alessio grumbles. "I'll take the string of pearls and matching bracelet. Then the ruby bracelet."

"No," Dante says tightly.

Alessio pauses and looks back at him. "No?" he repeats slowly. "Any particular reason, Mr. Esposito?"

Dante holds his stare, and merely replies, "You heard me. The answer is no."

Lazaro's eyes go dark and cold. "Motherfucker, I'm going to kill you," he seethes.

"No, you won't," Dante replies, looking up at him with the same

expression. “Because your sister doesn’t need you interfering in her business. Any of you.” He looks back at Alessio. “And don’t think I don’t realize what you just did, and while I don’t particularly care what you say or do to me, I do care how it will affect Sofia. She’s a grown woman and can take care of herself.”

“And if any of you upset her while you’re here, he’ll have carte blanche to do whatever the hell he wants,” I add in coldly, pinning Lazaro and Alessio with a hard glare. Lazaro is seething, but says nothing.

Alessio merely holds my stare, and turns back to the jeweler. “Box it all up. The bracelet will be a gift to a much loved family member, and if someone wants to get pissy about it, then he can man up and buy her something on his own.” I can hear Dante grinding his teeth, but he wisely keeps his mouth shut.

The drive back to the house is tense, but I ignore it. Dante can handle himself, and I have something more important to see to.

When we reach the house, we walk in and I see Sofia waiting there, dressed in some pajamas and looking tired, but happy. When she sees us, she smiles, but then loses that smile when her brother glares at her and stomps off. Alessio kisses her temple and heads up toward bed, but there’s a self-satisfied smirk on his face, and I have a feeling that the shit disturber is going to cause far more drama while he’s here than not.

Fucking hell.

“Problem?” Sofia asks carefully, arching a brow at Dante expectantly.

“No problem,” Dante replies calmly. He looks at me. “I’m going to catch some sleep.” Then he grabs Sofia’s hand and pulls her out of the room.

The fucker is taking his life in his own hands with her family under the same roof, but again, he can handle himself. I head up to the bedroom, slipping inside and finding the room dark and Gia already asleep in the bed, hugging my pillow to her.

I don’t stop the smug smile that pulls at my face and I quickly strip down, climb into bed. But not before I grab the box from my pocket and pull out the ring. I gently pull the pillow from her, and then take her hand, slipping the ring on her finger. She immediately stirs and opens her eyes, smiling sleepily at me. It takes a few minutes for her brain to wake up enough to realize the ring is on her finger, but when she does, she looks at it in shock. Then she looks back at me. “It’s beautiful,” she whispers. “And if I wasn’t so tired, I’d show you how much.”

I chuckle softly, pulling her into me and throwing a leg over hers. “Sleep, *topolina*,” I murmur. “Tomorrow will be soon enough.”

“I love you,” she says sleepily as she burrows into me, her breathing already starting to even out.

And even though I only said a couple hours ago that I felt far more, the words easily slip from my mouth. “I love you too, my sweet little mouse. Now sleep because we have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”

I close my eyes, and let sleep claim me.

CHAPTER 33

Gia



IT'S pure chaos when I finally make it downstairs. It's after noon, and while I should be embarrassed I slept so late, but considering how late it was when I finally fell asleep, I suppose it's to be expected. Still, from the yelling and loud laughter I can only imagine what I've missed. I make my way toward the dining room since that is where I assume most of the commotion is coming from.

I glance down at my ring for the millionth time since I woke up. It still seems surreal that Nico already got me a ring. Though I guess that explains why he disappeared last night.

I've never been much of a jewelry person, but this, this is something else. If I was picking a perfect ring for me, this would be it. It's beautiful, not too big, and also at the same time makes enough of a statement that everyone will know I'm taken. Which was probably Nico's main objective. A smile pulls at my lips as I look at it once again. I still have some reservations that he's never going to give me the freedom I need, but I'll cross that bridge when we get there.

For now, I want to get to know our guests a little more. It's the first time I've been around so many people and I'm terrified of mucking things up, but I also refuse to hide myself away while they're here out of fear. I did enough of that growing up I refuse to do it any longer.

When I finally reach the dining room, I stop in my tracks when I see what is going on. Nico is at the head of the table looking harassed and like he would rather be anywhere else. Sofia is seated in between her father and eldest brother, though the other two brothers are on either side of them, and

she looks furious. Aurelio and Lazaro both look smug and far too proud of themselves. On the other side are the Caruso boys, and they look a mixture between smug and pissed off as they switch off glaring at both Sofia and Dante. Pietro is sitting on Nico's left, and looking intrigued more than anything. And Dante, well, he's standing calm and collected slightly behind Nico, clearly unphased by anything.

The interesting thing right now is there are guns on the table, knives sticking out of walls and one even is standing straight up in the middle of the floor near me. I look at them all in shock, and that's when they notice me and all eyes turn my way. "Anyone want to tell me why there are weapons everywhere?" I ask carefully, reaching down to work the knife out of the floor. I frown at the obvious damage to the wood. I'll have to ask Nico about getting that repaired. When I look back up, I see Lazaro shrugging.

"Bastard dodged," is all he says, before turning to glare at Dante. Dante just holds his gaze.

"Why are you throwing knives at Dante?" I ask, confused as I make my way further into the room.

"Because they're idiots," Sofia hisses. "All of them."

"Come here, *topolina*," Nico says with a sigh, holding out his hand to me. I walk toward him, handing the knife to Dante. When I reach him, he pulls me into his lap, and mutters, "I'm going to lock them all in the fucking dungeon. I swear to God."

I chuckle softly. "That's not very hospitable," I whisper back.

"Don't give a flying fuck," is all he replies before he kisses my temple and turns his attention back to everyone.

I do too, and ask, "Anyone care to tell me what's going on?"

Now, Alessio starts to laugh, while everyone else glares at him. Sofia looks practically murderous as she looks at him, and I have a feeling whatever the hell is going on is somehow his fault. "That one," Sofia hisses, "decided to be an asshole and not mind his own fucking business."

"And rightfully so," Aurelio says angrily. "You don't think it's important to tell us that you're sleeping with your boss's Underboss? And that you've never once told us about him."

My eyes go wide at that news, and I look back at Dante to gauge his reaction to that. His face is expressionless, but his eyes are directly on Sofia, and that's all I need to know that he's not happy with this whole situation, and it's not himself he's worried about. I know for sure now, Sofia is

mistaken if she thinks this is only a fling.

“I don’t have to fucking tell you anything,” Sofia seethes. “I’m a grown ass woman and if I decide to sleep with every damn man in this house, I will. You didn’t have any say in the men I slept with back home, and you definitely aren’t going to here. And you’re acting like children, throwing knives and pointing weapons at each other.”

“But you have so many options,” Alonzo reminds her stubbornly. “And you want to spend your time with a man who will never marry you?”

“I never said I wanted to get married in the first place, idiot,” Sofia reminds him darkly. “And would you care to explain why it’s okay for you all to go out and fuck whoever you want, but I’m not allowed to do the same? Hell, I’ve walked in on Urso, with two women at the same time, and Alonzo, you had those triplets that were all over you that time you were supposed to be watching me when I was fifteen. And don’t even get me started on your lot,” she adds with an icy glare at the Caruso brothers. “The things you’ve done would have a nun running for the holy water.”

The men don’t look embarrassed, but they do squirm uncomfortably when their fathers look at them and are clearly displeased with this information. It seems doing those kinds of things around their young sister and friend was not okay.

“I don’t understand why it matters to anyone if Sofia and Dante are in a... relationship, situation-ship, or whatever they want to call it,” I say carefully, drawing everyone’s attention. “If she’s happy, that’s what matters right? And I mean, Dante is a good guy, and it’s not like she’s gone out to someone off the street and is spilling secrets. So I think you all are taking this far too personally when it has nothing to do with what you want or if it affects you.”

“Technically, that’s not true,” Alessio says with a slow grin.

“What?” myself and Sofia both ask instantly.

Pietro huffs out a sigh, and Aurelio looks uncomfortable. Uh oh. “Son, we really need to work on you opening your big mouth,” Pietro says, his annoyance clear. Alessio shrugs, clearly uncaring. He looks at Sofia and says, “When you were born, your father and I technically entered into a marriage agreement that you would marry either Alessio or Massimo when you came of age.” Sofia stares at him, mouth dropping open in shock. “Now,” he quickly continues, “it became clear as you started heading toward your adult years you thought of my sons as more like brothers and it was never going to happen, so we never went through with it. Though it still is technically a legal

contract between your father and I.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Sofia says tightly. “You’re telling me that when I was barely out of my mother’s womb, the two of you were planning on who you would marry me off to, like some sort of cattle?”

“That is the way things were done back then, *Pincipessa*,” Aurelio tries to explain gently. “It was to ensure you were always going to be protected, and also to make sure that our family was always tied to the Carusos.”

“If I had any daughters, then we would have discussed one of them being promised to one of your brothers as well,” Pietro adds. “It was not just because of you. However, with time and age comes wisdom, and we both agreed before you turned eighteen we would not enforce the contract. We agreed you should be able to live your life and marry who you want. If it turned out to be Alessio or Massimo, all the better. But it would have still been your choice.” He glances over at me. “Something I’m realizing is very important when it comes to women in our world.”

Sofia doesn’t answer him. She looks at each man around the table, stands, and then stalks out, slamming the door behind her. I glance at Dante, who is expressionless and hasn’t moved, but I can sense the tension as he fights the urge to go after her. Yeah, he is definitely not unaffected by Sofia and her obvious upset. I look back at the men at the table, and the majority of them still don’t look happy. And it irritates me, but I keep my thoughts to myself.

Nico, who’s been silent the entire time, surprises me however, when he says, “All of you are idiots. You took a trip that could have been a reunion with her and fucked it all up because you couldn’t keep your damn mouths shut. So you’re going to fix it because I don’t have the patience to deal with a pissed off housekeeper who will no sooner stab you in your sleep and smile while doing it for pissing her off. She may be your daughter, sister, and friend or whatever, but she’s currently under my protection as my employee, and that means I’ll make you pay if that is what she decides.” His tone is calm, even, but there is a steel under it that lets me know he’s not kidding. As much as he gets pissed off at Sofia and the way they go back and forth, he understands her worth and he’ll ensure it’s known, even to her family.

The men all start to realize what’s happened, and now the guilt is settling in. I give Nico’s hand a squeeze with mine in thanks. He looks at me quickly and then looks back at our guests.

“You know, I think I’m going to change my opinion on you, Nico,” Pietro says with a slight smirk on his lips, easing the tension in the room.

“The love of a good woman clearly has softened some of those hard edges of yours.” Nico pins him with a deadly glare, which makes the men around the table start to laugh.

“Speaking of love, when is the wedding?” Massimo asks curiously, arching a brow at Nico.

“At four,” Nico replies carelessly, as if go still.

No. I can’t have heard him right. I round on him. “Did you just say four?” I repeat slowly.

Nico looks at me. “Yes.” He sounds like he’s discussing the weather, and not like he’s talking about changing our lives in just a couple of hours.

“As in today?” I ask stupidly. “Like, in a couple of hours from now?”

“Yes,” he says patiently. “It was the soonest I could get the judge here to officiate.”

“You stupid bastard,” Alonzo laughs, earning a glare from Nico.

Panic and shock intertwine as I try to process what he’s said. I’m getting married. Today. “But I...I don’t have anything to wear,” I blurt out.

“The owner of one of the bridal salons is here and setting up in your suite,” Nico says calmly. “You can pick out whatever you want.”

“And when were you going to tell me about this?” I demand. “You can’t just spring this on me, Nico! I thought we’d get married in like a couple of weeks, or a month. Not in less than twenty-four hours.”

“I told you I’m not wasting time,” Nico replies firmly. “You’re going to be my wife before the day is out, Gia.”

“Doesn’t want to give her a chance to change her mind,” Urso jokes, then lets out a hiss when his father slaps him upside the head.

“You really want to marry me that soon?” I ask Nico softly, not even looking Urso’s way.

Nico’s eyes are direct on mine as he replies, “I would have married you last night, but I was told not giving you enough time to get ready would be a bad idea. So yes, Gia, I really want to marry you that soon. Today. And my mind will not be changed.”

It may not be the most romantic gesture, but I can’t help but smile at him. When it comes to Nico, he’s far from the norm, and I suppose I shouldn’t be expecting him to say the normal things. “Okay,” I say softly.

Nico nods, leans forward to take my mouth in a quick hard kiss, and then turns his head to Dante and orders, “Go get Sofia. She can spend the rest of the day with Gia helping her get ready.”

“I’ll get her,” Alonzo offers, starting to stand.

“No,” Dante says firmly. Then he turns and walks out. Alonzo looks like he wants to argue and follow anyway, but Aurelio shakes his head at his son and Alonzo settles back into his seat, disgruntled.

“So what exactly are we going to be doing while we wait for your lovely bride to be ready?” Alessio asks curiously.

Nico doesn’t answer him, but at that exact moment, Sofia walks back in with Dante, face blank, until she looks at me. She gives me a warm smile. “Alright, darling, let’s go and get you ready to be married.” She doesn’t even look at the rest of the men as she takes my hand and pulls me off Nico’s lap and then we head for the door. And she ignores them when a few of them call out to her.

When we’re out of the room and heading for my suite, I glance over at her and ask, “Are you okay?”

Sofia gives me a smile, but it doesn’t quite touch her eyes. “I’m fine, darling. When you grow up in a family of nothing but men, you learn pretty quickly they’re not rational when it comes to women. I’ll be pissed for a bit, and then I’ll let it go. They’re only here for a short time, and I don’t want to spend it all fighting with them. Especially since I don’t know the next time I’ll see them after this.”

“You don’t think Nico will let you go and visit them?” I ask in surprise as we head up the steps toward the East wing.

“Oh, he will, but as I’m sure you’ve already seen, sometimes I can only take them in short doses. And when I go I like to stay for at least a month.”

I nod. I let the subject drop, because I know she’s not in the mood to discuss it, but I’m hoping she will trust me soon enough. When we walk into my old room, I stop just inside the door and gape at the sight in front of me. There are racks and racks of dresses of every style, color, and fabric, along with multiple veils, jewelry, headpieces and tiaras. It’s like a giant wedding factory. And where the chairs and couches once were, is now a pedestal and three large mirrors that show all angles. Two women stand near the mirrors, though they instantly stop talking as soon as I walk in.

The older woman gives me a warm smile, and she looks like a typical grandmother, with a fuller figure, a short style of curls on the top of her head, and little to no make-up. I can’t help but smile back at her. The younger woman, however, may look all smiles and excitement but in her eyes is pure jealousy. I have to assume she’s an admirer of Nico’s, but surprisingly, I

don't find myself all worried. I mean, the man put a ring on my finger, so what do I have to be worried about? She's got bleached blonde hair, bright blue eyes artfully done up to give her a smoky look, and bright red lipstick that matches the low cut red dress she's wearing. I guess she was hoping she would be working with Nico today.

"Hello, dear," the older woman says brightly as she steps forward, and I instantly turn my attention to her. "I'm Nora Bardot. It's lovely to meet you."

"Gia." I shake her hand. "Thank you for taking such a huge amount of time out of your day to come here for this. And for bringing such a large selection. It's all so beautiful."

"It's no problem at all, dear," Nora beams. "Nico has always been a good man to us and we are thrilled to help." She turns and waves the younger woman forward. "And this is my granddaughter, Anna. She'll be helping out today as well."

"Nice to meet you," Anna says with a quick handshake, and while her words are polite, I don't miss the slight derision underneath them.

"Likewise," I return politely.

Thankfully there is no lingering awkwardness as Nora says briskly, "We don't have a lot of time and I want to make sure I have enough time to alter and hem things as needed. Though from looking at you, I brought just the right sizes, so I think you'll be fine. Now, is there a particular style that you prefer, dear? Or even something that you've seen before you've dreamt of?"

I never thought I would be getting married other than out of force, and even then, I wouldn't be allowed to pick anything I wanted, so all I can say is, "No, I actually haven't ever thought about it. But I'm not that tall, so maybe something not too big or poofy?"

Nora nods decisively. "Yes, I agree. Alright, so no ball gowns or A-lines. Are you looking for something more sexy or maybe something a bit more modest with the right amount of sex appeal?"

I fight to blush and glare at Sofia when she snorts out a laugh. "Her man would think she was sexy in a paper bag," she tells Nora with a conspiratorial smile.

Nora chuckles and gives me a knowing look. "Well, then, how about we go through things and you pick out the ones you want to try on. Gives us a place to start."

For the next hour, I climb in and out of dresses, finding myself feeling overwhelmed by all the options, but also not loving any of them. They're

either too tight, too revealing, or look either too old or sexy so that I feel uncomfortable. “How the hell am I going to find anything if I can’t pick anything I like out of all those dresses?” I ask Sofia tiredly as she helps me out of the latest rejection.

“We’ll find you something,” Sofia promises me. “And I don’t care if we have to delay the wedding until tomorrow, I’m not letting anyone bully you out of this experience. As it is, we’re probably going to be late. Want to bet Nico comes storming up here to try and hurry us along?”

“Serves him right that he only gave me two hours to get ready,” I sniff.

Sofia grins and then gets a thoughtful look on her face. “I saw another dress I think you might like, but that little bitch Anna hid it before you could see it, so I imagine she’s wanting it for herself. How about I go grab it and we give it a try?”

“Okay.” I wait in the bathroom in only a white thong, a white strapless bra, and my white heels that Nora pulled out from somewhere. I try not to fidget or worry as I wait, but my nerves are starting to build. God, this is happening so fast, and I hope to God I’m not making a mistake.

Sofia comes walking back into the bathroom with another gown in her arms, and she grins at me when I smile at her. “I think this is the one,” she predicts. “Let’s hurry up and get you into it.”

At first I’m not sure as I pull it on and Sofia helps me get it buttoned up. Once it’s on, I turn to look at the mirror across the bathroom, and I realize that this is my dress. It’s absolutely beautiful, and I can’t stop staring as I take it all in.

It’s a trumpet style gown, and it hugs my curves nicely, but is still modest and tasteful, without showing too much skin. It has a high-neckline, and long sleeves with beautiful appliques ending at my wrist. The front of it is simple, but along the sides of the dress are the same lace appliques from the sleeves, giving it an elegant look, while also showing just small hints of skin. It falls straight down to my feet, with it flowing back and around to a beautiful train that slides out softly behind me. I turn around to look at the back and smile. The back plunges down to mid-back, with small, delicate pearl buttons going from the base of the plunge, over my butt, and stopping just before the train flows out.

“You look stunning, darling,” Sofia beams excitedly. “Nico is going to love the sight of you.”

“I feel like a bride in this one,” I tell her, turning back to her.

“As you should. Now, let’s get out there and make sure that there isn’t anything we need to do to make it extra perfect.” She picks up the train and we exit the bathroom. Instantly, I see Anna’s eyes land on me and jealousy and anger burn on her face before she can hide it. I purposely ignore it, and head for the pedestal. “I think we’ve found it,” Sofia tells Nora.

Nora smiles widely. “It is stunning on you, dear,” she tells me, moving around me and looking at the dress carefully. “And I don’t see any adjustments that need to be made other than it needs to be hemmed a bit in the front, but that won’t take me but a moment to get done. Let me pin it, and then we can get started on the accessories.”

“Are you thinking hair up or down?” Sofia asks me, pursing her lips as she looks at me.

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“Perhaps we see what we find for a veil,” Nora suggests. “Anna, go and pick out a few that you think will pair nicely with this one.” And it’s then I see the warning look she flashes her granddaughter. Ah, it seems grandma isn’t oblivious to what her granddaughter is up to. I hide my smile, but Anna nods stiffly and does what she’s told. She comes back with a few different options, and I instantly don’t like any of them.

“No,” Sofia tells her, thankfully saving me from having to tell her such. “Those are all far too gaudy and will overshadow the dress.” She strolls past an angry looking Anna, and looks through the rack. After a few moments, she comes back with a veil, a hair piece, and some pearl earrings. “I think your hair will show off the dress more, and let you have a beautiful veil and show off that face of yours,” Sofia tells me. “You have lovely hair, but we don’t want you to hide behind it either.”

“Okay, I think that sounds good,” I tell her with a smile. “I don’t have an eye for this kind of thing, so this works great.”

“Alright, dear, then you get out of this dress, and we’ll get you all dolled up.” She glances at her watch and then winks at me. “And you should only be a bit fashionably late. At least enough to have Nico on his toes.”

“What about you?” I ask Sofia curiously. She looks at me in question. “I want you to stand up with me, so you need a dress too.”

Sofia looks shocked at that. “Darling, that’s not—”

“Yes it is,” I say firmly. “You’re the closest thing I’ve had to a friend, and I really want to have someone stand up with me. And I want that to be you.” I look at Nora, and I see the approval in her eyes. “Do you have any

suggestions for her?”

“I did bring a few in case you wanted something not so traditional.” She looks at Sofia. “So you my dear go and pick out what you like. Anna, you can help her.” Anna looks like she wants to argue, but nods and follows Sofia back to the dresses.

It takes a few minutes before Sofia finds a dress that she loves. It’s a dark burgundy, halter dress with a keyhole cut-out in the front as well as an open back, a nipped waist, and a long straight skirt, with a slit along the side that gives a nice hint of leg when she walks.

Thankfully Sofia is good with make-up and hair, because we’re only a bit late when she finishes mine and gets to work on her own. I stare at myself in the mirror, shocked at myself. “Wow,” I breathe.

Sofia stops and looks at me. “Is that a good wow, or a bad one?” she asks carefully.

I give her an emotional smile. “A good one. I never thought I could look so pretty.” She has done my eyes up with black liner, winging it out and smoky eye shadow, and also adding some false eyelashes to give them a bit of length, but not too thick that it looks out of place. My lips are a soft neutral, and just a small touch of blush to my skin to give it a bit of color. She pulled my hair back into a low bun, placing a diamond hair piece over the top of the bun so that it could easily attach to the veil.

“You’re beautiful, Gia,” she tells me with a warm smile. “Your family are idiots for not seeing it. But their loss is our gain,” she adds with a wink as she finishes pinning up her hair in a simple updo and then puts on a fresh coat of dark lipstick and touches up her mascara. She looks exotic and sultry, but not over the top. “Now, let’s hurry up and get you dressed so we don’t keep your man waiting too long.”

Sofia is dressed in her gown, and then she and Nora are helping me into mine. I have to lose the bra, but thankfully Nora has put some cups into the dress with some support to keep me from embarrassing myself. I crouch a bit as she and Sofia fiddle with the veil, and then I finally get a good look at myself in the full length of the mirror, and I can’t help but gasp at the sight.

The veil Sofia chose is longer, and flows down past the end of my train, but not too much. There are matching lace appliques along the edge that compliment my dress, but also don’t hide or overshadow it. In my ears are simple pearl earrings that match the ones on the back of the dress. Tears burn my eyes and I blink them furiously back. God, I never thought this was

possible, and here I am only moments away from walking down to marry Nico.

And for some reason, I instantly think of my mother. She's not the one here with me for this moment. She's dead, and she never wanted me anyway. I was an annoyance to her, so I can't even think she'd be here for this if it was another life and I was marrying someone else. Hell, they'd probably have brought me up some hideous dress, and left me to figure it all out on my own.

Nora steps forward and fixes my veil and train. "You look beautiful, dear. And don't let anything bring you terrible thoughts. This is a happy day, and I'm going to share some advice that my mother told me when I married my husband. When you love someone, you don't let anything else interfere with that. Especially on the day that signifies the start of a new chapter. Let go of all the anger, hurt or pain you're holding in your heart, and focus on the new life you're going to build. Nico is much like my husband. He's the kind that may not know how to say the right words, but when it comes to making you happy, he'll move heaven and earth to do it. So smile, and remember that and don't worry about anything else today. Marry the man you love, and enjoy your moment."

And that is exactly what I'm going to do. I thank her, hugging her and telling her how much I appreciate her helping me find this beautiful dress, and then I take the bouquet of burgundy and white silk flowers that she pulls out of nowhere, and head for the door.

Sofia follows behind me, but I stop when I walk out and see Pietro and Alessio both standing there, with Davide standing with them not far away. Both Caruso men look at me and beam as they take me in. I blush and try not to squirm. Davide gives me a nod of approval, before turning away and saying something quietly into whatever mic he has on him. "You look beautiful, *cara mia*," Pietro says softly, taking my hand and raising it to his lips. "I don't want to be presumptuous, but I would greatly appreciate the chance to walk you down the aisle," he tells me. I look at him in surprise. "I know I'm not your father, but I feel strongly that a woman should be walked down the aisle by someone who has her best interests at heart, and someone who wants her to be happy."

"I...Yes, thank you," I manage to get out past the lump in my throat. "I figured I'd just have to walk down by myself."

"I'm just here as a bodyguard," Alessio tells me as he steps forward to

lightly kiss my cheek. He gives me a warm smile and reaches into his pocket. “And to give you this as a wedding present.” He shows me a jewelry box and opens it to reveal a beautiful pearl necklace and bracelet. “Consider it your something new.”

“Wow, thank you, Alessio,” I say softly, as Sofia takes both and puts them on me. “They’re beautiful.” I reach out and hug him quickly, feeling so many different emotions that I have to blink back more tears. God, I’m never this emotional.

Alessio smiles at me and turns to Sofia. “Sofia, I know you’re pissed at me, but I hope you’ll forgive me,” he says sincerely. “I was an overprotective ass, and I ran my mouth once again.” He pulls out another box and opens it to reveal a beautiful ruby bracelet. “I know you’re not swayed with pretty things,” he continues when she just stares at him, “but I promise I won’t get involved in your love life again unless I feel you are in danger.”

She stares at him and then huffs out a sigh. “Fine,” she agrees. “But none of you are off the hook, and I’m going to make your lives hell the first chance I get.” She holds out her arm for him to put the bracelet on her wrist.

“Of course,” Alessio chuckles. “Oh, and just so we’re clear, I bought this before all of this. But your man isn’t going to be happy seeing it. I think he’s jealous,” he adds with a wicked smile.

Sofia rolls her eyes. “I don’t have time to get into that, but I’m going to kick your ass later. Now, we have a wedding to get to, or Nico is going to come storming up here and it’s going to mess up our plans for a big reveal.”

“Yes, he was chomping at the bit,” Pietro agrees with a chuckle. He holds out his arm. “Shall we, *cara mia*?”

I loop my arm through his, and take a deep breath. It’s time to get married.

CHAPTER 34

Nico



Two Hours Earlier

“I THINK THIS COULD WORK,” Alessio says seriously, his gaze thoughtful when they land on me. “Though, there are a lot of variables that we need to consider. Especially since we don’t know when the Parisi bastards are going to show up.”

“I say we send some of our men to find them and keep an eye on them,” Dante suggests. “Make sure we know where they are, and there are no surprises.”

“I think as soon as your invitation reaches the De Luca family, they’ll all be mobilizing,” Aurelio comments. “And that means Giovanni isn’t going to want to let you get the upper hand, which could force him to move sooner than he plans. Especially so he doesn’t piss off Rafaele.”

“Rafaele will definitely be pissed once he realizes he no longer can have Gia,” Pietro says grimly. “And that makes him unpredictable.” He looks at me. “I will add some of our men with yours, but we’ll need to have the majority of them here to ensure that if bullets start flying we can protect your bride.”

“What about Marco and Leonardo?” Dante asks me. “Marco will probably lose his shit once he realizes who is here with us.”

“I’m counting on that,” I say with a cool smile. “It will also tell me what Leonardo knows. If he’s surprised, then we know Marco was doing this all without his father’s knowledge. If not, then he’s fully aware of his son’s dealings.”

“Speaking of which, I got a message from our informant,” Dante tells me, pulling out his phone.

I look at the message and curse under my breath at the message from Eion.

Eion: Looks like you were right that it's one of Seamus's daughters in the apartment, but not the youngest who's name it's under. It's the second daughter, Sinead. Sinead and Marco have been having an affair for the last four months, and they only spend time there when they're both not on the radar of their parents. Seamus is suspicious of her and has started putting surveillance on her, so shit is probably going to hit the fan soon. I'll let you know if I find out more.

“Looks like Marco has been colluding with the enemy,” I tell the others. “We have an informant from the Irish that oversees territory in the Bronx. Seems Marco has been having an affair with the don's second eldest daughter.”

“And do you think that's on purpose to get secrets out of her, or because he wants an alliance with them?” Alessio asks, sitting forward and bracing his elbows on his knees.

I make the split decision to tell them what we know. Because if tonight is going to go the way I think, the more they know the better. “I think he's trying to merge and take over both territories. His father and the Irish. A merger through marriage to Seamus's daughter will give him an in, and then I'm sure he'll outright kill him and take over. Marco is power hungry, and he got his ambition from seeing his father and uncle and their idiotic squabbles.”

“And you think he'll come for your territory,” Pietro summarizes.

“He can try,” I say with a cool smile.

“But there is another family he could go after first,” Aurelio points out. “Those Russian fuckers.”

I nod. “The Russians are in the smallest of the areas of New York, but they have the best docks, which means they have a lot of routes in and out of the city. So it would make more sense for anyone to go after them first. The Irish have the best hideouts for their businesses, but they have more options for women when it comes to marriages and the like.”

“And you and De Luca have the bigger territories and routes to the rest of the inner states,” Alessio says thoughtfully. “So it really depends on what his end goal is. If he's looking to take over the city, and if he's actually got a brain in his head, he'll go after the smaller territories first before he comes for

yours.”

“Not looking good,” Massimo says grimly.

Pietro narrows his eyes at me and I can see his mind working. “But if I recall in the information I reviewed before coming here, the Irish and Russians are already fighting.”

I’m careful to keep my expression exactly the same. “There have been skirmishes,” I acknowledge. “But they usually spring up every few years. The Irish have fiery tempers, and the Russians rarely think before they do anything.”

Pietro nods, but I know he’s trying to work out how I fit into that equation. He may be a new ally, but there is something to be said for not showing all your cards at once.

“Well I for one am excited,” Lazaro announces with a grin. “A good fight to liven up the place and get the adrenaline pumping is one good way to end a day.”

“Well then I suggest we get ready to split up into teams,” Aurelio says briskly. “Let’s get ourselves ready for any possibility, and if we’re lucky, we’ll avoid any bloodshed tonight.”

One can hope, but at the same time, I hope not, because if it’s up to me, I’ll put the De Lucas down like the dogs they are for the way they’ve treated Gia. But I’ll be patient. I look at Dante and give him a quick nod. It’s time to get this plan in motion, and I for one am ready to ensure that a statement is made tonight.

Because the moment Gia is my wife, nothing will stop me from ensuring her safety.

CHAPTER 35

Nico



I'M GROWING MORE impatient with each passing minute and I check my watch for the millionth time. Not that anyone else seems to care. Nor do I miss the knowing looks that the Caruso brothers share, and those of my men. The majority of the staff have come to witness the nuptials, now that the ballroom is set up. I glance around the room.

The lights are dimmed, and the curtains drawn so no outside light filters through. There are flowers spread out throughout the room in different arrangements and vases, with glowing gold of the lights from the lit candelabras on the round tables also set up. The ballroom is large enough that there are food stations set up in the back corner, along with a small dance floor. A dark red aisle runner comes from the closed double doors and down to the center of the room where I'm standing with the judge and Dante, and there are a few rows of chairs on either side of the runner.

I don't think Sofia got the memo that asked for simple, but too little too late now. I just hope that Gia is happy with it, or I'll be very displeased. Though I'm already displeased they're taking so damn long. We don't have a long window of time, and with each minute, the chances of the plan going awry increase.

And you're worried that she's changed her mind.

I ignore it, because there is no way that will happen. I don't care if I have to go up there and grab Gia and drag her down here. She will be my wife. Nothing else is acceptable.

"Just got word from Urso," Dante says quietly into my ear, pulling me from my annoyance. "There is movement at Giovanni's vacation homes. It

seems the Parisi's are on their way.”

“Any news on the De Lucas?” I murmur.

“Movement at both homes. Informants have said that they are gearing up, so I imagine they're going to come in hot.”

As expected. “Ensure they are able to get past the gates, but you know what to do after that,” I order. Dante nods and steps back. Then he stops and listens and turns back to me with a smirk. “It seems they're finally on their way down.”

Fucking finally. I turn to nod to the judge, who gets himself in position, and the room goes quiet. Impatience beats through me as I have to wait, but I remind myself a few more minutes won't hurt.

When Alessio finally slips into the room, shutting the doors behind him and giving me a stupid grin, I scowl at him. If he thinks he's going to waste time, I'll shoot him myself. I won't kill him, but a wound that puts him out of commission for a while and out of my hair would be a damn relief.

Music starts to play and I ignore Alessio as he makes his way down the aisle and to his seat in the front row. The doors open, and in walks Sofia, wearing a dark dress, carrying some flowers, and a smile on her face. She walks down the aisle and doesn't even look at her family, though her eyes do cut to Dante. I don't look at him, considering I don't give a damn, but I'm sure there's something there considering his relationship with Sofia. No, the only woman I want to see is Gia.

Thankfully I don't have long to wait. I'm not prepared for her when she walks through the doors. As soon as she comes around the corner and walks through them, I'm sure I've forgotten how to breathe.

She is breathtaking. The dress fits her perfectly, and moves sensuously with each step. And I'm sure that I will never see a more beautiful sight than this as long as I live. Possessiveness burns through me, and I have to hold myself back from striding down the aisle and taking her away from Pietro, who is smiling like a proud father. But when my eyes catch Gia's everything else fades away.

I see the nerves in her eyes, but also a deep look of that makes my heart pound and my cock twitch. Love, desire, and most of all, trust. I vaguely hear someone whispering but I don't take my eyes off Gia. This moment is the only thing that matters to me. Knowing that she's going to be mine. Forever.

When they reach the end of the aisle and stop in front of me, Pietro kisses Gia's cheek and murmurs something quietly to her. I fight back the urge to

snarl at him to let him go, but it's close. And judging from the knowing smirks from those in the front row out of the corner of my eye, I know they see it and are getting a great kick out of it. Fuckers.

Pietro finally steps back, and I reach out my hand to Gia, who takes it and grips it tightly. "You look beautiful," I murmur to her, earning me a warm smile. And even though I know the judge is waiting, I don't bother waiting until after the vows I kiss her softly, but deeply, and then pull away after a moment. I hear chuckles but pay them no mind. Gia's face is red, but she gives me a knowing smile. I turn back to the amused judge, who has been on my payroll for some time, and order, "Let's get this done."

Perhaps not the most romantic thing to say, but I hear Gia chuckle, so she can't be too unhappy.

The rest of the ceremony is a bit of a blur, though I take great pleasure in sliding her wedding band on her finger. It's at that moment that I know she's mine. And from the smile on her face, and the knowing look in her eyes, she can tell exactly what I'm thinking. She slides my ring on, and though it feels foreign it also feels right.

"And though you jumped the gun a bit earlier," the judge jokes lightly, drawing my attention. "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride. Again."

I don't need to be told twice. I yank Gia forward, making her laugh, and I kiss her mouth, uncaring about the cheers and cat-calls from the room. The only thing that matters in this moment is knowing that Gia De Luca is now Gia Armani.

When I finally manage to pull away, Gia looks up at me dazedly, but then smiles. "You can't escape me now, *topolina*," I murmur, kissing her again quickly.

There's a light of challenge in her eyes, but she just keeps smiling and says, "It's a good thing I picked you then isn't it?"

"As if you had a choice." I pull away and then we move to where the judge has a small set up for us to sign the marriage license. We waste no time signing it, with Dante and Sofia as our witnesses. Once we're finished, I take her hand in mine and turn us around.

Though, I suppose it's comedic timing, I honestly couldn't have planned this next chain of events to happen at such a perfect time. Suddenly, a large commotion fills the halls, and as my men stationed throughout the room jerk to attention, in files some very pissed off De Lucas. "You will not be

marrying my daughter, you fucking bastard!” Leonardo yells furiously as he storms into the ballroom, followed closely by Giovanni, all of their sons, and Carmen bringing up the rear. I don’t miss the way she sneers as she looks around the room either, and when her eyes land on Gia, there is absolute fury and hatred in their cold, dark depths.

Gia’s hand is trembling in mine, and I hold it tighter as I stare down her father who is storming up the aisle. He hasn’t even noticed the other people in the room now standing, but Giovanni and Marco do, and both falter as they catch sight of the Caruso men. Giovanni is good at hiding his emotions and gives nothing away as he focuses on his niece once again, while Marco’s shows fury and then concern before he can mask it. “You fucking whore!” he screams at Gia. He still has a bruised and cut temple from where I hit him with the gun, and doesn’t look all that steady on his feet.

“You will not speak to my wife that way,” I tell Marco with a dark menace to my voice. “And after what you’ve done to her, I’ll gladly put a bullet in your fucking head.”

“She’s not your fucking wife,” Leonardo snarls, completely ignoring my other statement, and already storming toward Gia, who is trying to pull away from me, but I hold her firm. I won’t let her cower to this man or any of the rest of them again.

“I have a marriage certificate that says otherwise,” I inform Leonardo, who stops in his tracks, his face red with fury. “Giulia De Luca is now Giulia Armani, and if you’d like to leave here without a war starting, then you’ll congratulate us and leave quietly.” There is steel in my voice.

“You have already started a war by kidnapping my daughter and then forcing her to marry you,” Leonardo rages. “She is promised to someone else.”

“Ah yes, that,” I say carelessly. I motion to Pietro, who steps forward, and this time, Leonardo realizes who is standing there. A range of emotion flies across his face. Shock, anger, confusion, and then a hint of trepidation. “Leonardo, I’m sure you know Pietro Caruso. Just one of the men that your daughter was promised to.”

Leonardo looks back at me sharply. “She was not promised to a Caruso,” he informs me tightly. “She was promised to Gideon Esposito as an infant, and was to be married to him the day she turned twenty-five.”

“Well she was promised to my son by your son, so I believe we have a slight problem here, Signore De Luca,” Pietro says coldly.

Leonardo looks at him with narrowed eyes. “Excuse me?” he says slowly.

“It seems your boys have been busy, De Luca,” I remark with a chuckle. I look back at where Marco’s face is hard and drawn, and I also look at Giovanni, who looks furious. Apparently he was unaware of anything else going on. God, this family is a mess. “I do believe your brother has also been busy trying to secure an alliance with another certain family. Isn’t that right, Giovanni?” I say casually, looking at the man in question.

Leonardo rounds on his brother. “What other family?” Normally, Leonardo is a cool one, but this time, this seems to have sent him over the edge and he’s reacting instead of thinking. Which is exactly the kind of advantage I need to ensure this goes my way.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about,” Giovanni replies stiffly. “And you’re purposely letting him distract you instead of focusing.” He looks at Gia with menace filled eyes. “It seems your daughter has been whoring herself out to him long enough that she’s convinced him to marry her. An annulment will be easy enough to get.”

“Oh, come now Giovanni,” I chide. “I mean it’s definitely not out of the realm of possibility she’s been promised to others. After all, when we met the other night, didn’t you promise her to me as well? The joke was on you because she was already mine and I was going to marry her anyway, but it was interesting to see you try to fuck me and your brother over at once.” Giovanni’s eyes are blazing as he stares at me. “Or, isn’t that why you have Rafaele Parisi here to try and take over your brother’s territory? All because you promised Gia to him so you could forge a big enough alliance to take your brother and nephews down before moving on to me and the other families.”

That little bomb gets a few reactions. Giovanni’s sons immediately fan out and pull their guns. Marco and his brothers do the same, and Marco yells, “You son of a bitch. I’ll kill you!” Giovanni’s face turns to stone, and Leonardo’s goes molten. Carmen, the bitch that she is, inches forward, trying to figure out a way to get close to Gia, but Sofia and Zeno both counter her, preventing her from getting close.

More guns are drawn, more stances taken, and I release Gia’s hand to stand fully in front of her, protecting her. Dante quickly moves into position at my side, but slightly behind to protect Gia and my left flank. Lazaro moves into position on my right, creating a wall so that no one can get to her. I can hear Gia’s breathing picking up, but I don’t look at her. My gaze never leaves

the men currently yelling at each other in the aisle.

“You’re a fucking snake,” Marco yells at his uncle. “I told Father you weren’t to be trusted.”

“Oh, and you are?” I laugh, interrupting them. “You tried to sell your sister out to the Carusos so you had backing before you took on your father. Or is that not why you’ve been forging alliances with the enemy?”

“Son?” Leonardo says tightly, staring at his eldest son.

Marco is starting to sweat now, and I brace. He’s the one with the temper and the one to look out for, because he’s the one that will start shooting first. And if that’s the case, things are going to go downhill fast. “I was only trying to ensure strong alliances,” Marco grits out, and that’s when I see a couple things. It seems that even his own brothers are divided, as are his cousins. Sebastian and Mateo stand side to side with their brother, while Dario and Antonio look unsure of where to position themselves. Giovanni’s two eldest sons, Lorenzo and Orlando, flank their father, while the youngest two, Emilio and Marcello both remain in place.

A family divided will fall as my father used to say, and in this moment the old bastard is right. Because lines are being drawn.

“So you went to another family and tried to trick them into marriage with your sister, when you knew full-well she was promised and sold to another?” Leonardo hissed. “You stupid boy.” He moves forward but stops when Marco swings his gun at him. I hear Gia gasp softly behind me, but again, I don’t look at her.

“No, what I am, is smart,” Marco says, some of the anger dissipating, and in its place is smug arrogance. “Fuck, you didn’t even see what was right under your nose the entire time. Your time is done, old man, and it’s time for me to step into the shoes that you should have given me a long time ago. You spend so much time fighting with your own brother for control you don’t see the possibilities in front of you. Starting with that whore of a sister of mine. Married to the Carusos, I’d be unstoppable. I had no idea they were already aligned with fucking Armani, but it’s no harm, no foul. I have other options and once I get Gia out of here, I’m going to ensure I find the ones that will make us bigger and stronger than any of you were capable of.”

“And what the hell do you think is going to happen when Gregorio Esposito finds out our deal is void?” Leonardo demands furiously. “Do you think he’s going to let this stand?”

Marco shrugs carelessly. “I don’t give a fuck. If he causes problems, I’ll

deal with him and I'll take over his business too."

"You Americans are a foolish lot," Pietro comments, drawing their attention. "You promise and trade your women like cattle, like they mean nothing. You have no honor behind your word." He gives Marco a look that has the man looking wary. "You came to me to promise your sister, with the supposed blessing of your father. And yet, come to find out, he knows nothing. And what did you think was going to happen when I found out about your double-cross, boy? Did you think I was going to let it go? Just let it slide?"

"Women are worth nothing," Giovanni scoffs, apparently unable to keep his thoughts to himself. "They're a hole to fuck and bear children, but they're a worthless pile of bones other than that. And you're a fool to put more stock in them than that."

"On that we will disagree," Pietro returns, before looking back at me. "It seems you've married into a family full of problems, Nico. I hope you know what you're doing."

I give him a cool smile. "I don't give a flying fuck about them. Gia is an Armani now, and the De Lucas can fight amongst themselves to find out who is going to emerge victorious."

"I will not stand for this!" Leonardo fumes.

It's then that the sound of shouts fill the halls outside, along with shots. And all hell breaks loose. Screams fill the room from the staff, and I'm moving quickly, scooping up my new bride while Dante covers my back as I run to get her to safety. Bullets whiz through the room, and I rush for the back corner where I know there is a secret door that Gia and Sofia can slip in to to keep them safe. I slap my hand on the wall, and the door pops open. "Get in," I order Gia. "I will get you once we deal with this."

"Nico, be careful," she cries, clearly frightened.

"I'll be back for you, *topolina*," I tell her, ushering inside.

"Don't let her get away!" I hear Giovanni scream as he runs forward, and right behind him are his sons and a man I don't recognize. From the wild look on his face, I'd have to say this is either Rafaele Parisi or someone very close to him. They all raise their guns, but I quickly shove Sofia inside with Gia and slam the door. I can't worry about them right now.

I quickly pull my gun and fire, while Dante does the same. I manage to clip Orlando in the shoulder, making him cry out and stagger back before falling on his ass. "We need to get out of this position," I tell Dante tightly.

“They’ve got us cornered.”

“On it,” Dante replies, before starting to maneuver us toward the terrace doors. I hear noise outside as well.

“I’ll kill you, you fucking bastard,” the man with Giovanni snarls, firing shots at me, but missing me from the wild swing of his hand. “She was fucking mine and you took her. And when I kill you, I’m going to fuck her in your blood. Make her watch your lifeless eyes as I break her.”

I fight down the cold rage I feel at his words. “Your mistake was siding with the losing side, Parisi,” I tell him darkly as I dive out of the way of his next bullet, rolling along the floor to keep from being a target. I hear Dante curse, but I don’t look his way. Instead, I quickly get to my feet just in time to see Alessio, Alonzo, and Davide all converging on the men.

Distracted by fending off the newcomers, I look around and see that Leonardo’s men have surrounded him, while Marco and his brothers are fighting off his other brothers and cousins. “Kill him then!” I hear Leonardo ordering. “They are no family of mine.”

It’s chaos in the room, with so many people fighting, but it’s then that I see Pietro and Aurelio holding off some of the Parisi men. I run across the room, quickly firing off shots and watching them drop to the floor. “Much appreciated, son,” Pietro says calmly as he shoves another clip into his gun.

Unfortunately for the Parisi and De Luca men, mine are larger, faster, smarter, and stronger, and adding in the Carusos, we manage to subdue them all quickly enough. Well, mostly. Giovanni is screaming his head off, though Aurelio has him down on the ground, a boot on his neck to keep him down. Rafaele puts up more of a fight, but Lazaro solves that with a punch to the temple, making him drop to his knees with a pained groan. Leonardo’s men still surround him, but I merely walk up to them with my men and order, “Get on your knees or you die.” The cowards decide to save their own lives, and go to their knees. Leonardo’s face is full of fury at that, but he says nothing.

They’re going to die anyway, though I have a feeling it won’t be as quick or painless as if they had kept their ground.

Dante steps up to him, gun trained on him and giving him a cold look. Leonardo doesn’t move, and I turn around to see if Marco has been subdued and frown when I see he, Sebastian, and Mateo are nowhere to be seen. “Find them,” I order my men, who instantly run out. Then I turn my attention back to Leonardo. “It seems we have a problem, Leonardo,” I tell him as I stare him down. “Not only have you come and interrupted my wedding, your

family has brought war to my front door because you don't have the balls to keep them under control."

His eyes flash with wrath. "Says the man who kidnapped my daughter and forced her to marry him. If anyone is to blame, it is you, Nico."

I barely resist the urge to keep from rolling my eyes. Even now this spineless bastard is trying to keep the blame from myself. "Did I kidnap her, yes. However, I didn't know who she was at the time. I saw her, and I wanted her, so I took her. Imagine my surprise, though, Leonardo, when I realized I had the hidden De Luca daughter right in my grasp. So, while I did kidnap her, it was by pure coincidence I took the one person you were relying on to strengthen your allies. I'm sure you had grand plans yourself. Perhaps to overtake me and then the other controlling families in the city, hmm?" He doesn't reply, but I see the truth in his eyes. "Unlucky for you, you were so focused on that, you didn't see the mess right under your nose. I mean, your son, and your brother vying to take the throne, as it were? It seems you're getting lazy in your old age."

"I will enjoy killing you, Armani," he hisses at me furiously.

"And how are you going to do that?" I taunt, indicating with my arm the state of the room and the men currently restrained and under guard. "Your house is in shambles, De Luca. Your men are divided in three different ways. You have nothing."

"Esposito will—"

"No, he won't," Dante says coldly. "Because that contract was refused three years ago and any alliance you thought you had with it."

Leonardo sneers at him. "And how would you know that?" he demands.

Dante gives him a smug smile. "Because you're looking at Gideon Dante Esposito, and I rejected the contract when I left the family. Which makes it null and void considering the only other eligible man in my family is fifteen right now, so you'll have a long fucking time before you can have that contract fulfilled. And even if my father tried to enforce it, he knows it will never happen. He's been stringing you along for years, and you've been following his lead like a good little puppet."

Leonardo's face is stone cold as that sinks in.

"So, you see, Leonardo, it seems that any plans you had have been foiled," I say smugly. "But seeing as it's my wedding day, and I'm feeling generous, I'm going to give you a choice on what happens to your brother." I step back to indicate the man still on the floor. His struggles increase, but

Aurelio keeps him in place with a bit more pressure.

Leonardo doesn't say a word for a moment, looking at his brother and then his men. Quick as a snake, he pulls a gun and shoots each of his guards in the back of the head, letting them fall like stones and then aims it at me.

And once again, chaos ensues, and I'm diving out of the way of a bullet. The distraction is all that's needed though for Rafaele to make his move and drive his elbow back into Lazaro's groin, making him groan and fall back. Rafaele follows it up with a swift kick to Aurelio's knee, which has him crying out and stumbling back, which frees Giovanni.

"Go, go go!" Giovanni screams, grabbing Rafaele and running for the terrace door, dodging the men and bullets flying his way until he turns wrong as he crashes through the door and gets a bullet to his shoulder, sending him flying.

"Get them!" I yell at my men, but Leonardo takes that moment to run the opposite way, dividing us.

I hear more screams as I chase down Rafaele and Giovanni, ducking and dodging the bullets Rafaele fires. I curse when I realize most of my men have moved to help secure the men they've captured, giving the two of them a direct path out to the waiting car. Even as I push myself harder and faster, Rafaele manages to shove and topple things into our way, slowing me down. They dive inside the waiting SUV, and even as I shoot at it, trying to get the tires, it screams as it peels out down the driveway and to the open gate.

I curse angrily, and that's when I see that Leonardo's vehicle is giving chase, which means he's probably gotten out too. I fire at his vehicle to no avail, and I curse angrily.

Fucking hell.

When I make my way back inside, I find the Carusos, the Cattaneos, and my men all standing in the now destroyed ballroom looking furious. "Fuck," I hiss.

"Not exactly how we were hoping this would go," Pietro sighs, scrubbing his hand with his face.

"Did you find Marco and his brothers?" I ask Dante.

"No, it looks like they escaped," Dante says grimly. "I have the men checking the cameras. We'll see where they went."

Suddenly, a thought occurs to me and I turn quickly to scan the room. "Where's Carmen?" I bark.

Dante freezes, and then his eyes widen slightly as he realizes what the

hell I'm getting at. "Who is Carmen?" Alessio demands.

"Leonardo's wife. Spread out and find her," I order. Davide immediately turns and runs out of the room. "Dante, check the cameras." I look around at the other men. "Did anyone see if she was in the car that Leonardo left in?"

"There was only him and one driver," Massimo says grimly. "No one else was in that car."

Fuck. Dread settles in my stomach. None of us took into account his wife, and that was a very big mistake. "We need to find Gia and Sofia," I say as I rush for the door in the corner of the room.

But no sooner do I get the door open, do we hear a scream coming through the passageway, and then the sound of a shot and a feminine cry of agony. I run as quickly as I possibly can toward the sound, not even hearing the pounding footsteps behind me.

I'm coming, topolina. I'm coming.

CHAPTER 36

Gia



Moments Earlier

“**WE NEED** to get to the bedroom,” Sofia says grimly as we go through the tunnels. “Nico will have stashed weapons in each room, so we need to figure out where they are when we get there.”

“Maybe we should stay here,” I suggest worriedly, but I follow her anyway.

“These tunnels aren’t fool proof, and if we get stuck in here with no weapons, we’re as good as dead,” Sofia tells me grimly. “Dante told me about them and how to get out of them. I have special permissions so I can get us out of certain doors. We just have to make sure we’re at the right ones.”

“We should head for Nico’s room then,” I suggest. “He’ll definitely have weapons in there.”

“No, that’s where they’ll expect us to go,” Sofia says, suddenly stopping and kicking off her shoes. “Fucking things.” I quickly do the same, gripping the skirt of my dress and hiking it up so I can run faster behind her. “We’re going to go to your room. There are guns stashed in with the jewelry underneath some of the drawers.”

“Wait, how do you know that?” I demand as we run down another pathway. I hope to God she knows where we’re going because I have no clue and we might be getting ourselves terribly lost.

“Because Dante showed me,” she says briskly as we finally come to the end of the hallway. “He wanted me to know where everything was in case of

any problems.”

“Did he know there were going to be problems?”

“There are always problems at mafia weddings,” she says as she reaches out to touch the door. “Now, we need to be quiet, because we have no idea what we’re going to expect. So be quick, quiet, and follow my lead.” I nod. I’m not about to play hero, that’s for sure.

She pushes open the door soundlessly, and peaks her head out. Then she creeps forward and waves for me to follow. We move slowly, listening, but hearing nothing, we pull out the drawers of the island where the jewelry is stored and Sofia pulls out a tray of diamonds, showing two handguns laying neatly inside. “Do you know how to shoot?” she asks me softly as she grabs one and quickly shoves the magazine inside. I shake my head. “Fine, I’ll have the guns then. Now, let’s get back in the tunnel before they—”

“I don’t think so, cunt,” Carmen’s voice says stonily, we look up and see her standing just inside the door of the walk-in closet, gun pointed at us both. “You’re not going anywhere but with us, and then we’re going to fix this epic fuck-up that you’ve created.”

I stare at her. The woman who’s always hated me and I suspect would love nothing more than to kill me and leave my body to rot. “Carmen,” I say carefully, not looking at Sofia. We’re still behind the island and close to the door. If we’re careful, maybe we can make it inside and shut the door.

“They’re in here,” Carmen calls over her shoulder, her eyes never leaving mine. “I hope you’ve had fun being a whore, because now, you’re going to know the real meaning of the word.”

“I think if she wants to know the meaning of the word, all she has to do is look at you,” Sofia says, lifting the gun, face calm, and hand steady. This is a woman who’s accustomed to holding a gun, and I’m glad as hell she’s on my side. She’s not afraid to shoot, and I doubt she’ll miss.

Carmen sneers at her. “Says the housekeeper whoring herself out to the Underboss. You think you’re untouchable, but we’ll make an example out of you too. I’m sure your father will love seeing his only baby girl coming back to him in pieces.”

Footsteps sound behind her, and I’m not prepared for the sight I see. Instead of my father, three of my brothers come up behind her, Marco leading the charge. He gives me a cold, cruel smile as he says, “Well hello, little sister. Surprised to see me? Don’t worry, we’re going to be getting closely acquainted again.” He looks at Sebastian and Mateo and orders, “Take

them both.”

“I don’t fucking think so,” Sofia snarls, firing off a shot and catching Mateo in the throat. Mateo falls to his knees, gargling and clutching at his throat, the sounds coming out of him are inhumane. Sebastian and Marco roar their fury, shoving at Carmen to try and get to us. “Get to the passage,” Sofia yells at me as she fires off more shots. She manages to graze Marco’s head, making him stumble and clutch at it.

I do as she says, backing up quickly, but the train on this dress is too long and I immediately get caught in the fabric, falling to my back with a cry. I roll, but suddenly Carmen comes flying out of nowhere and launches herself at me. I scream as I fight her, knocking the gun in her hand away as we wrestle. I hear fabric rip and my face stings when her acrylic nails manage to catch my cheek, slicing through my skin. Adrenaline pushes me through the pain, and I manage to buck her off and send her flying. She screams as she crashes into one of the shelves, sending shoes and bags down on top of her. I scramble to my feet, only to be met by the sight of Sebastian fighting to get the gun away from Sofia, who looks like a wild cat as she fights him.

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye, and I manage to duck when Marco’s fist swings wildly toward my face. “You fucking bitch,” Marco screams at me as I race away from him and further toward Sofia. I need to get her, but I need to keep Marco away. Fuck, where is that gun?

I look wildly around trying to spot it, but nothing. It must have fallen under a shelf or something. I scream when I feel Marco’s hand grip the train of my dress, pulling me backward and making me stumble before I can stop the momentum. But just as I’m about to crash into him, Sofia kicks Sebastian away from her, and he stumbles into Marco, sending them both crashing to the floor. Unfortunately for me, that means I’m falling right into them.

I scream, kick, and thrash as they fight both each other and me. Of course, Sofia wades in, slamming the gun down on the back of Sebastian’s head, making him groan and instantly slump down on the floor, out cold. “Get the hell up,” she orders Marco as she places the gun against the back of his head. “Or I’ll put a bullet in your brain.”

Marco slowly releases me and I scurry to my feet, stepping back to stand with her. I glance back and see Carmen out cold in the back of the closet, blood dripping on the shelf behind her. She must have hit her head. I turn my gaze back to Sofia and Marco, who is now getting to his feet. “You won’t shoot me,” Marco tells her tightly.

“Tell that to your dead brother,” she says cruelly. Marco whirls around, probably hoping to surprise her, but clearly Sofia is ready, because she merely brings the gun down on the side of his jaw, sending him staggering to the floor. She looks at me with a grin. “And the men think we need protecting,” she laughs, eyes bright and feral. She’s clearly loving this whole thing, while I’m still trying to process it. Then her eyes go wide for a moment, and she shoves me violently to the floor, bringing the gun up and firing, just as another shot fills the space. I hear an agonized scream and terror squeezes my heart.

Oh God, Sofia!

I hear a roar fill the room, and I immediately know it’s Nico, and even as I roll trying to see what’s wrong, I let out a cry of pain when I feel Marco’s hand grip my arm so tightly I’m surprised he’s not crushing bone. “I’ll be back for you, sister,” he hisses in my ear. “And when I do, I’ll kill you slowly and make him watch.” Then he releases me and I hear him scramble back and out of the room. I vaguely hear footsteps chasing after him but Nico is there, and he’s reaching for me.

“I got you, *topolina*,” he rasps, pulling me into his chest. “I got you.”

I let myself sink into him, relief overwhelming, but right on its heels is panic. “Sofia!” I scream, fighting to get away from Nico to see her. To make sure she’s okay.

“I’m fine, darling,” Sofia rasps, and I turn my head to see her standing there, gun in hand at her side, even as Dante grabs her and pulls her into him. I look over to see Carmen now certainly dead, a bullet right in the middle of her forehead. Aurelio emerges into the room, and makes his way to his daughter, panic clear on his face, though it melts into relief when he sees she’s fine, though he wastes no time in pulling her away from Dante and into his own big arms.

“Oh thank God,” I breathe, putting my head on Nico’s shoulder. I shiver in Nico’s arms as I grip him tight.

“Fuck, Gia,” he breathes into my ear. “I heard the shot and the scream and I thought the worst.”

“Sofia saved me,” I tell him. “She shoved me to the floor and fired.”

“I’ll never argue with her again,” he vows, before taking my mouth in a desperate kiss. I can taste his fear, his desperation, and his relief. When he finally pulls away, he buries his face in my hair and just holds me tight.

“I think that’s more major raise territory, Boss,” Sofia jokes lightly,

making Nico lift his head and look at her.

“I’ll give you whatever you want,” he says seriously. “Name it and it’s yours.”

Sofia looks surprised at that. “I think I might take you up on that vacation,” she jokes.

“Done,” Nico says instantly.

“No, that’s not necessary,” she assures him, clearly shocked that he’s agreed.

“Dante,” Nico barks.

Dante gives him an amused smile. “I’ll handle it, Boss,” he replies, giving Sofia a pointed look.

I hear more footsteps and in comes Pietro and Alessio through the passageway, and when they look at the carnage in the closet, Alessio pouts. “Damn, I missed all the fun. You couldn’t have saved one for me?” he whines to Nico.

“I killed them, idiot,” Sofia growls at him, clearly affronted that he thought the men had done it.

Alessio looks at her and then arches a brow before looking at the two dead bodies. “Huh, looks like you finally worked on that flaw of yours where you couldn’t hit the broadside of a...what do you Americans call it?”

“Barn,” Dante supplies helpfully, smirking when Sofia glares at him.

“Fuck you, Alessio,” Sofia sniffs.

“Before you start your childish squabbling,” Pietro says impatiently, “perhaps we should get out of this room and see to handling the remaining guests downstairs?” He looks at Nico and I, and his eyes soften and fill with relief when he sees that I’m unharmed. “Massimo is going after the brother, but we need to deal with them. Nico, see to your bride. Sofia—”

“I’m fine and I need to get started on cleaning this shit up and getting the crew in here,” she tells him briskly.

“Sofia,” Dante says warningly, clearly not happy with that suggestion. Sofia pins him with a cold glare, and an expression clearly daring him to argue with her.

“We’ll sort it out,” Pietro says to Nico. “See to your bride, and then we’ll meet later.”

Nico nods, stands, and then carries me to the passageway, walking briskly to his own room. He shuts the door firmly behind him, and then walks right out of the closet and into the bathroom, where he sets me on my feet. I sway

slightly, knowing that I'm heading toward the crash now that the adrenaline is starting to wane. "Fuck, Gia," he whispers again as he holds me steady and stares down into my face with a dark expression on his face. "I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm fine, I promise," I reassure him, reaching up to cup his face in my hand. "You and Sofia saved me." I give him a wry smile. "But I think I need to get you to show me how to handle a gun, because I was helpless, and I don't want to ever feel that way again."

"Alright, *topolina*," he soothes. "But right now, I want to get you cleaned up and then we'll go meet everyone."

I nod. "You're going to have to help me out of this. I can't get all those buttons myself." He doesn't say anything and I look over my shoulder at him. He's staring at the dress and where the train is torn away from the back from both me and Marco stepping on it. "Nico?" I question.

He finally lifts his eyes to mine and the expression in them makes my breath hitch, much like it did when I saw him at the end of the aisle. "I didn't get to tell you what I thought when I saw you in this dress," he says gravelly, gaze holding mine. "I have never seen anything more beautiful in my life than you walking toward me, Gia, and knowing you were about to be mine in every sense. You looked angelic, and I wanted to rip this dress off you and show you just how much I loved it and how it showcased everything you are. Class, elegance, simplicity, and a grace that few can claim to have. I never thought I'd marry anyone, or if I did, it would be calculated and a transaction at the most. But now, here you are, and I want to do it all over again."

Tears burn in my eyes, and one slips out before I can stop it. "And when I saw you, you were so handsome, and any doubts I had went away," I tell him honestly. "I knew I made the right choice. Maybe it's not the most conventional route, but we're here, and surprisingly, I wouldn't change it for the world. Because when I see you, I see the strength that I need to keep going, and the man who's going to fight for me, no matter what. And I love you so much that it scares the shit out of me."

"Me too," he sighs, leaning his head down to press his forehead against mine for a moment. "I'm sorry the wedding was ruined, Gia, and we can do it all over again once this whole thing is sorted, I promise."

I shake my head. "No, thanks, once was enough. Besides, I saw you looking so handsome in this tux, and you got to see me in this dress, and I don't think anything else will ever compare. Not to mention, the whole point

of this was to be married, and a wedding is nothing more than a fancy party anyway.”

He chuckles. “On that we can agree, *topolina*,” he says, giving me a quick kiss before he pulls away. “Now, I know you love this dress, but I do not think that I’m going to be able to get you out of it easily.”

A moment of sadness fills me for the beauty of this dress being shredded, but practicality reminds me that it’s only fabric and not nearly as important as everything else going on. “It’s fine,” I assure him.

He nods and I let out a gasp when he grips it and pulls, tearing the fabric and sending buttons flying. Once it’s open enough to fall away from my body, I push it down and step out of it. When I turn, I see Nico watching me with burning eyes. I smile coyly as I step away from him and toward the shower. I feel his stare on my exposed cheeks as I lean in to turn on the water, before stepping back and turning to finish getting undressed, but I’m stopped when Nico shoves my hand away and then drops to his knees in front of me. “You’re not going to deny me the opportunity of unwrapping my wife, *topolina*,” he scolds me gently as he pushes me back against the glass wall of the shower. I gasp at the feel of the cool glass on my back, and then moan when he thrusts my legs further apart and presses his nose to my center, breathing me in. “Better hold on tight, wife,” he rasps, the rumbling vibrations of his voice against me making my stomach and thighs clench.

I barely have time to brace myself before he moves the front of my thong aside, spreads my lips, and puts his mouth on my clit. I cry out, and then a second cry follows right behind it when he suddenly thrusts two fingers inside me. My hands come up to clench in his hair desperately needing them to anchor myself. God, I love the things this man can do with his mouth.

He licks and sucks at me, sending me spiraling to the edge. And then he sends me right over when he curls his fingers and hits that spot inside me that has me screaming his name and coming all over his fingers and face. As soon as the orgasm hits me, he moves his mouth from my clit to my entrance and thrusts his tongue inside me as well as his fingers, drinking me down like a starving man.

I’m a quivering mess when he finally pulls away, and climbs to his feet. “Fuck, Gia, I want nothing more than to be gentle with you, but not this time,” he grits out as he stares down at me with feral eyes.

“I don’t want gentle,” I rasp. “We have the rest of our lives for that. Right now, I want you to fuck me, Nico.” I’m not sure where this bravery has come

from, but I can't take it back, and with the way his eyes flare, he's perfectly fine with it.

"Get out of that thong, Gia," he orders as he roughly starts to strip out of his tux. "And then get in that shower, climb up on the bench on all fours, and I want your ass facing me. Do you understand?" I nod hurried and quickly comply with what he's asking.

I feel vulnerable as I get on all fours on the wide bench, ass pointed out wantonly, but at the same time, excitement makes my arousal spike. My clit throbs again, and out of desperation to get it to stop, I reach between my thighs, rubbing it. I moan at the sensation, and move my fingers faster.

"Naughty, little mouse," Nico scolds as he steps into the shower. My hand stills, and my breath catches. "Touching what's mine without permission?"

"I—" I let out a cry of pain and surprise when his hand comes down hard on my ass. "Nico," I gasp out, looking over my shoulder at him. He looks practically feral, and my heart pounds wildly in my chest. A small trickle of trepidation slides into my gut, but also excitement.

His hand comes up to cup my pussy, and I cry out when his finger finds my clit and starts to rub it fast and hard. "This pretty little clit is mine, Gia," he tells me silkily. "You don't get to touch it unless I give you permission. Do you understand me, wife?" He punctuates that with a hard pinch to my clit, making me scream. The pain of it is swiftly followed by need, and I can feel the wetness dripping down my thighs. When I don't answer him, he slaps the other cheek and orders, "Answer me, Gia. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Nico," I choke out.

"Good girl," he praises. "And just like this pretty clit, this hole is mine too," he continues, moving his hand down to my entrance. He thrusts two fingers inside me, jolting me forward slightly before I can catch myself. "Mine to fuck, mine to tease, and mine to fill with whatever toy I feel you deserve," he continues as he moves his fingers in and out of me with agonizingly slow strokes. Like he's enjoying drawing out this torture. "Isn't that right, *topolina*?" he purrs, using his thumb to rub at my aching clit.

"Yes, husband," I reply cheekily, but I moan loudly when he rubs my clit a little harder and faster in response, making my orgasm rise swiftly again.

"Mmmmm, I love those words leaving those pretty lips. Say it again, Gia, and maybe I'll let you come." He moves his fingers harder and faster in time with his thumb, and it's all I can do to not lose my mind.

“Yes...husband,” I croak out, desperately thrusting my hips back against his hand, trying to grab the orgasm that’s just out of reach.

“Good girl, wife,” he praises. “Now come, *topolina*. I want to feel it soaking my hand.” He stops rubbing my clit and instead pounds his fingers in and out of me, pausing only long enough to add a third finger, making me scream at the stretch and pressure. But it feels oh so good. “Fuck, Gia, you’re so pretty when you’re about to lose control,” he tells me. I’m wild as I move my, spreading my legs even wider so I can take him deeper. “That’s it, *amore mio*,” he coaxes. “Fuck that pussy on my fingers. Take what you need.”

I’m too far gone to really comprehend his words. I can only focus on the feel of his fingers, and the orgasm I’m racing toward. The noises coming out of my throat almost sound in-human, but I don’t care. I’m too far gone to care. Until finally, finally, my orgasm hits me and the wave of ecstasy washes over me. I scream his name, the sound bouncing off the walls of the shower, my fingers clawing at the bench.

“That’s it, Gia,” he praises gutturally as he continues to work my body with each thrust of his fingers. “Fuck, you’re beautiful when you come. Give it all to me, *topolina*. I have you.” I’m not sure how long the orgasm goes on for, but for me, time slows until finally, I’m spent and I let hang my head and try to catch my breath as it finally ebbs. Nico pulls his fingers out of me, and I moan. When I feel the head of his cock against my swollen entrance, I still and look at him over my shoulder. His face flush as he stares at the way my body parts to let him inside. Desire thrums again inside me, and another gush of arousal has him slipping inside of me easily. “Fuck, you’re so wet and perfect,” Nico groans between clenched teeth. He grips my hips. “Are you steady, *topolina*?” he asks me.

“Yes,” I breathe out. I brace my arms, and knees with the strength I have left. Anticipation thrums through me.

“Then hold on tight, *amore mio*, because I’m done waiting.”

A smile pulls at my lips as I stare at him. “Fuck me, husband,” I tell him. It seems to be all the permission he needs, because he wastes no time in starting a pounding rhythm.

My head turns and falls forward again as he fucks me. I can’t do anything but take it, and it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever felt. I’m completely at his mercy. He’s taking his pleasure, but at the same time, mine is rising with it. God, I can’t come again, can I?

Apparently I can, because it doesn’t take long before I’m coming again,

and my cries and screams fill the shower. “Fuck yes, Gia,” he grunts as he lets go of my hips, puts his hands on either side of mine on the bench, puts one knee outside of mine, and pounds into my body like he’s trying to break me in half.

When he finally has his own orgasm, he snarls my name, and all I can do is hold still and try to catch my breath. Neither of us move for a long time, until finally he kisses my shoulder and tells me, “You’re going to be the death of me, wife.”

I give a husky laugh. “I think it’s the other way around, husband. I’m pretty sure I’m going to be walking funny for a few days.”

He chuckles, the sound masculine and smug. He pulls out of me slowly and gently, and then helps me stand on wobbly legs and pulls me in give me a kiss. “I plan on doing that as often as you’ll let me, Gia,” he tells me when he pulls away. Then he pulls me under the shower, making me laugh.

It’s a little while longer before we finally emerge from our suite, with me feeling content and happy. Though the events of not long ago hit me in full force when we step into the dining room and see everyone there waiting for us. I fight back a blush when I see the knowing smirks. Though I suppose with our hair still being damp, it’s not hard to figure out what we’ve been up to.

“And there’s the happy couple,” Alessio announces. He checks his watch, tsks and shakes his head sadly at Nico. “I’m disappointed, my friend. I thought for sure we had at least another hour before you’d show your faces. Gotta work on your staying power.” His brothers start laughing, and Nico pins him with a hard glare. Alessio just grins at him, and then winces when Nico slaps him upside the head when we walk by. Though that grin is back pretty quickly when he catches my eye and winks at me.

“Ignore him, Nico,” Pietro says with a long suffering sigh as Nico takes his seat and pulls me into his lap. “We’ll put him back in his cage when we get home.” Alessio grins and flips off his father, making Pietro smirk. If anyone said or did that to my father, they’d be dead. And speaking of my father...

I look at Nico and ask, “Did my father get away?”

The mood goes from being jovial to serious instantly. Nico’s expression darkens as he nods. “He and your uncle both did.” He looks at Massimo expectantly.

Massimo shakes his head grimly. “That bastard Marco got away too.

Took out two of your men on the way out.”

Worry seizes me. “Does this mean they’re all going to try again?”

“Probably,” Nico says honestly. “They all want power, and you’re part of that battle. The issue is now that you’re my wife, that means I’m in this battle by extension.”

“You won’t be alone,” Pietro jumps in. “We’ll have your back. Though, perhaps you should take your new wife on a honeymoon and let us see what happens as they try to gather themselves,” he suggests. Nico doesn’t reply, and when I look up at him, his expression is thoughtful. Excitement builds in the pit of my stomach at the thought. “Leave your best men, and we’ll leave some of ours to cover your home while you’re gone,” Pietro continues.

Nico looks at Dante. “Do we have enough men?”

Dante nods. “Consider it done.”

Nico looks at me. “Do I need to even ask you what you want to do, *topolina*?” he asks me, amusement clear. I shake my head. “Then I think we should figure out where you would like to go. Pietro is right, stepping out will show we aren’t concerned about them. It will also give us time and space to figure out what their next move is going to be.”

“I’ve contacted another contact of mine who is going to see what he can find,” Aurelio interjects. “Once he finds out anything, he’ll let us know.”

“Good,” Pietro says with a nod. “We will head home, and then once you are finished with your honeymoon, we’ll reconvene to find out what we know and make our plans. It’s been a while since we’ve been involved in a war, and a good fight might be just what’s needed,” he adds with a grin.

“Speaking of vacations,” Sofia says then. “If you’re going to head out on a honeymoon, I think I’d like to take you up on your offer to go for a vacation.” She smiles at her father and brothers. “It’s time for me to go home and relax for a little bit.”

Nico nods. “Done,” he agrees. I glance at Dante and see his face is impassive, even from where he sits next to her. The man is smitten with her, but he’s fighting it. Perhaps this is the push he needs.

“Then we will leave in the morning,” Pietro announces. “It’s never good to be away from home for too long. Sofia, will you be ready to join us?” She nods. “Good.” He reaches forward and grabs his wine glass, lifting it in a toast. “Then shall I propose a toast. I hope the both of you have a long and happy marriage. That you lean on each other when times are hard, being each other’s strength.” I grab the wine glass that Nico hands me and we all lift our

glasses in reply to his toast.

“And to new friends,” Alessio says with a wink our way. “Though I’m still pissed you didn’t buy me that ring, Boo Bear.” He cackles when Nico growls at him, and I look at him in question. Now that’s a story I want to hear, and so do the others from the looks of it, but unfortunately, Aurelio takes that moment to add the toast, cutting that off.

“And to family,” Aurelio says with a smile at his sons and daughter. “Those that God has given us, and to those that choose us.” He looks at Pietro and his sons, who smile at him. “And to those that are new and will learn that we’re as fucked up as the rest, but we’re the only ones you know will have your back no matter what.” He directs that to Nico, Dante and I. We clink glasses and drink.

“Alright, that’s enough sappiness for me,” Sofia says briskly, making me laugh. She winks at me. “Chef has been slaving away all day making a wedding feast, and if we don’t eat now, he’s going to be a damn bear and I don’t want to deal with it. So I say we forget about everything else and we get eating.” There’s a round of raucous agreement, and Sofia hurries into the kitchen.

“Where would you like to go for a honeymoon, *topolina*?” Nico asks me quietly as everyone around us talks.

“I’m not sure,” I tell him truthfully. “There are so many places I’d like to go.”

“Well, we have a few days before we can go, so you think and then we’ll make it happen,” he says.

Though an idea is already forming in my mind, and while it’s going to piss Nico off, I think he’ll get over it. But first, I need to figure out how to make it work.

CHAPTER 37

Nico



I WAKE and instantly I know something's wrong. I bolt upright and look around, realizing that Gia's side of the bed is cold and empty. I scowl. She and I are going to be having a talk about her leaving the bed without me. And I don't care if that makes me sound like a bastard. I want my wife in bed with me, not off doing whatever the hell she's up to now. I climb out of bed and head for the bathroom, irritated, but determined to find my wife and drag her right back to bed.

It was a late night last night, and it was amusing to see my wife getting tipsy with each glass of wine. She was having a great time laughing, joking around, and listening to them all telling stories that had most everyone rolling with laughter. There was one particularly amusing one that involved Alessio being chased out of a house by an angry husband when he caught Alessio in bed with his wife. A woman that never told him she was married. Alessio ended up running out buck ass naked and having to call his brothers to come get him, while also trying to keep his junk from getting torn up to hell from the bushes he was hiding in. Not that Alessio had been the least bit embarrassed. Instead, he just smirked and shrugged his shoulders, uncaring.

By the time I carried her to bed, Gia was out like a light before we even made it upstairs, and hadn't even stirred when I pulled her clothes off and tucked her into bed. But apparently she's right as rain this morning considering she's already out of bed. I huff out an aggravated sigh as I head for my closet and pull on a suit. It's time for me to get back to work, especially if Gia and I are going to be leaving on a honeymoon.

I walk out of the closet, but stop when I see a piece of paper taped to the

mirror. Instantly suspicious, I grab it, and then I still when I read it.

Dear Husband,

I hope you slept well. I know I did. I've decided on a honeymoon location and I thought you'd like to know what it is...But then I thought again, and realized how I can't waste an opportunity as good as this one. After all, wasn't it you who said that life is a game? Well, I think in this one, I'm going to win. So, now it's up to you, dear husband, to figure out where I'm going and how quickly you can catch me. So run, little mouse. Run as fast as you can, because when I catch you...

*Love,
Your Wife.*

I hurriedly call Dante, barking at him to meet me in my office. I rush down, and boot up the cameras on my computer, growing impatient at every second that it delays. Panic and shock war inside me. Why the fuck would she put herself in danger that way? To risk herself all for a stupid game? I'm going to put her over my knee and tan her ass when I catch her.

Because I will catch her. There is nowhere on this planet she can hide from me.

Dante hurries into the room. "What's wrong?" he demands. I hand him the note wordlessly, clicking the mouse hard as I go to the cameras in the hallways about the time I think Gia must have gotten up. And just like I thought, there she is. Dante lets out a choked laugh, and I pin him with a glare. "Sorry, but you have to admit it's funny," he says with a shrug. "She won't have gone far."

"Where are the Carusos?" I demand. "They can start looking for her."

“They left early this morning. As in like three in the morning. Sofia was with them too.” There’s a slight edge to his voice at that.

I look through the footage of every camera we have in all rooms and corridors of the house. “Where the hell is she?” I hiss, frustration building with each image of her not where she’s supposed to be.

Dante hums thoughtfully. “Check the passageway,” Dante suggests.

I curse and do as he suggests, and yep, there is my devious wife, letting herself into the passageway. Then I watch as she makes her way through, but when she reaches the apex where she has to make a decision of what direction she has to go, Sofia emerges from another hall, grinning wickedly and showing her a suitcase already packed. And then they make their way down through the tunnels and out to the main hall near the kitchen. We watch as they sneak their way out of the kitchen, and down the side path to the gate. Sofia walks ahead of her, careful to block the view of Gia with her body. Then reaches into some bushes and hands Gia a hat and uniform much like one of my guards. Gia quickly tucks up her hair and pulls on the uniform and follows Sofia to the waiting SUVs.

No one spares Gia a glance as she lifts the bag easily into the back of the SUV for Sofia, who climbs in front with her brothers. The Caruso family is in another SUV, none of them even looking her way. Gia makes a production of stepping back once the bags are in the car, but as soon as the door starts to close, she jumps in and curls up in the back, no one the wiser.

Dante starts to laugh. “Damn, she’s smart, you have to give her that,” he says. “And you know she’s safe and in good hands.”

It also tells me exactly where she’s heading. “And none of the Carusos called to let you know she was with them?” I ask carefully.

Dante frowns. “Nope, none.”

“Get me access to the hanger feed.” In seconds, I’m watching as the vehicles pull up to the waiting private jet, and they start to pile out. Gia slips from her hiding place quickly and easily, and then quickly strips out of the uniform she was wearing by hiding behind the car while everyone is talking and not paying the least bit of attention. Then she slips in with the crowd of people making their way onto the plane, none of them noticing her.

And then I watch as the stairs go up and the door closes and the plane pulls out, taking her with them. I glance at the clock. It’s nine in the morning, which means they’re almost six hours into their ten and a half hour flight.

I look at Dante. “Get the plane ready, we leave in an hour,” I tell him

darkly. “Oh, and I’m probably going to fire your woman just on principle.”

Dante smirks. “You won’t, but I’ll make sure she pays for it if you like,” he tells me as he puts the phone to his ear.

Yeah, I don’t need that visual. Instead, I relish the thought of what will happen when I finally catch up with my clever little mouse. Because I’m going to catch her, and this time, I won’t be gentle or easy.

CHAPTER 38

Gia



Hours Earlier

“**HE’S GOING** to kill us, you know,” Alessio says with a wicked grin as he hands me a glass of champagne. “Personally, it’s worth it just to see his face when he finds your note. Points for ingenuity, by the way,” he adds as he clinks his glass to mine.

We’re all sitting on the roomy plane, but I can’t enjoy the new experience because I’m too jittery with excitement. The entire way here I was sure someone was going to foil my plans. But thankfully, everyone was far too embroiled in what they were doing to notice me until I walked on the plane.

It took some convincing to Pietro, but he thankfully finally agreed to go along with my plan. And now, I’m sitting here and I can hardly believe I’m flying to Sicily. A place—well, one of many—that I never thought I’d see. It’s surreal, and this freedom isn’t lost on me.

“I thought so,” I say happily as I curl my feet up under me and sip my champagne.

“Your ass is going to be the one that pays the price,” Sofia chimes in wickedly as she sits next to me. I blush, and she cackles.

“And just what do you think he’s going to do when he finds out you helped her, little sister?” Lazaro asks drily.

Sofia waves that away. “He needs me, and I have the whole saving his wife card I can play if that reminder doesn’t work.” She looks back at me. “The question now is what do you want to do first when we get there?”

“I need a nap,” I laugh tiredly. “It’s been a crazy few days. I feel like I

could sleep for a week.”

“We can do that.”

“We have a wonderful guest house, *cara mia*, that will be all yours when we get there,” Pietro says with a warm smile. “But if you would like to sleep now, go and lie down in the bed in the back and no one will disturb you. We can wake you when we get there.”

“I’m okay for now,” I assure him. “It’s my first time on a plane, and I don’t want to miss the experience.”

“Well then,” Alessio says with a wicked grin. “If that’s the case, I’m sure you’ve never learned to play poker either?” There’s some groans, but I shake my head. “Oh, this is going to be fun,” he croons as he stands. “Anyone else want to join in?”

“Like hell are you teaching her,” Sofia sniffs. “You are a terrible cheat.”

I grin and sink back into my seat. Yes, this was a good decision. Now I just hope that Nico sees the humor in it.

The Next Day

The sun feels wonderful on my skin as I lay by the pool, soaking it all in. Pietro and the others are milling around somewhere, but I want a little bit of time alone. I woke up earlier feeling jet lagged, and this was as far as I managed to drag myself, figuring the sun will help wake me up.

I give a soft sigh and close my eyes, rolling over on to my stomach, burying my face in the soft cushion. I could get used to this. I let myself drift, content to just lie here.

Until the moment I hear, “Hello, wife.” I’m instantly awake and alert, and I slowly lift my head to see my husband standing next to my chair, dressed in a casual set of khaki pants, a white polo shirt, and a pair of dark sunglasses. His face is calm, cool, and a shiver of apprehension fills me.

Uh-oh.

Still, that small little rebellious streak inside me rears its head and I can’t stop the smug smile that pulls on my lips. “Hello, husband,” I return. “Nice of you to finally join me. A bit slow in catching me. I suppose you get a C for effort.”

I let out a shriek as he launches himself at me, scooping me up over his

shoulder before I can scamper away. His hand comes down hard on my ass, and I yelp. “It seems you need a reminder of what happens to a naughty little mouse that thinks she can run from her husband,” he says.

“I wasn’t running from you,” I huff, trying to brace my hands on his lower back to steady myself. “I was merely giving you a taste of the little game you started.”

“Sass will only prolong your punishment, *topolina*,” he tells me as he heads for the guest house. “And I for one have been looking forward to it ever since I found your little note.”

Oh shit. I squirm a bit, but he merely tightens his grip. I think about calling for help, but then dismiss it. Nico won’t hurt me. I look around, and I can’t help but grin when I see Dante pressing Sofia up against the wall of the house, kissing the shit out of her. I have a feeling things are about to change for those two, even if Sofia isn’t convinced. Especially since she said as much last night when we were talking on the plane.

I also see a laughing Alessio inside one of the windows, who is clearly amused by my predicament. Bastard.

When I feel the cool air conditioning, I force myself to focus on the problem at hand. I let out a cry when Nico lifts me from his shoulder and sends me flying onto the bed. I bounce once and stare up at him as he turns, shuts, and locks the door with a snick. When he turns back, he pushes his sunglasses up and I can finally see his full expression. His eyes are burning with desire and primal hunger, and an answering thrum builds in my gut.

“I believe I’ve caught you, my little mouse,” he says as he slowly strips off his shirt. “And if I remember our rules, that means you’re going to submit to me. In everything. Including when I spank that ass for sneaking out and leaving me wondering where you were. And it means that you’re going to take my cock how I want it, any way I want, until I’m satisfied you’ve learned your lesson. All the while, I’m going to keep you on the edge for hours until you’re begging me with those pretty lips to let you come. But you won’t, because every time you get close, I’m going to stop. I’m going to ensure you see the error of your ways in running from me.”

Oh, God. I don’t know whether to be excited or scared. “And if I come?” I ask thickly.

His smile is feral as he steps forward. “Well, that means we have to start all over again, and I’ll ensure you don’t get to come for days. I’ll keep you tied up in this room, on the edge with my mouth, tongue, cock, and every toy

I can find, only letting you up to eat and use the bathroom.”

I nearly whimper at that. Why does that sound so hot? What the hell kind of sex addict has Nico unleashed in me? “Maybe I’ll escape again,” I say with a sass that I know is about to get me in more trouble.

“And I’ll catch you, Gia,” he assures me. “Because I will always find you, and I will always bring you back to me. No matter how far you run or try to hide. You’re mine. My wife, and that means that you belong with me.”

I shiver at his words. “And I’ll let you catch me,” I tell him. “But you have to admit it was a clever start to our honeymoon.”

Nico moves around the bed, advancing on me. “You certainly surprised me,” he concedes. “But do not think that I won’t make you pay every time you run away from me, Gia.” Then he’s on me.

And by the time we’re done, and I’m so utterly spent, I realize one thing. If this is the way it’s always going to end, I’ll be running more often. Because this little mouse needs to keep the big bad don on his toes.

CHAPTER 39

Alessio



“**YOU KNOW** he’s going to be fucking pissed at us when they finally emerge from there,” Massimo jokes from beside me as we watch Nico carry his grinning wife into the guest house. I make a mental note to have our housekeeper leave them some food and water since I’m sure they’re going to be in there a while. Lucky bastard.

“Just stay out of shooting or striking range,” I laugh.

Suddenly the door opens and we both turn to look at who’s come in. I arch a brow when I see Zeno, Father, and Aurelio step in, their faces serious. I’m instantly on alert. Something’s happened.

Aurelio shuts the door and then turns to us. “We’ve got something,” he says, holding up a file. “My informant found one of the De Luca missing women.”

I can feel my eyes widen. Shit, this is big. “Which one?”

Aurelio flips open the file. “Her name is Sienna Harris, and she’s Gia’s older sister by two years. She was adopted out to a family that lived part-time in Europe, the rest in California.”

“Far away from her birth family,” Father summarizes. “Are there any signs that she knows who she is?”

Aurelio shakes his head. “Not that my guy found. She’s twenty-six, and looks to be taking after her father in his graphic design business. She’s got quite the portfolio, and is almost a dead ringer for Gia. She’s a bit taller and heavier than her sister, but the face and genetic traits are all there.”

“Have our men watch her, make sure that none of the De Lucas or their allies get wind of her,” Father orders.

“That’s the other part,” Aurelio says grimly. “Her name was flagged in a search in New York. Not sure which one found her, or how, but my guy is already working on it.”

We all curse. “We need to bring her in,” I say immediately, looking at my father.

Father nods. “If they get her, then we’re already behind in this war. Alessio, take either Lazaro or Alonzo and bring her here.”

I nod. “I’ll need a copy of her file,” I say to Aurelio.

He hands me the one in his hands. “I have another one. Good luck.”

I open the file, and I’m met by the sight of a woman who indeed looks like Gia, but there’s also something different. Where Gia has an innocence about her, this woman does not. And while Gia’s eyes are dark, Sienna’s are a warm hazel.

I have to hope that she’ll be as reasonable as Gia, but something tells me that won’t be the case. Still, I like a challenge, and I’ve never met a woman who can resist my charm when I really want to use it.

“Tell my Boo Bear that I’m sorry I missed him,” I say with a wicked smile over my shoulder. “But I’m sure we’ll have time to catch up when I get back.”

I walk out to groans and laughter behind me. Time to get to work reunite Sienna Harris with her family. And I won’t be back without her, even if I have to take a page out of Nico’s book and kidnap her.

The End...for now

About the Author

I live in New Brunswick, Canada with my husband and our two dogs, Remi and Sako. When I'm not writing, I'm playing fetch with the dogs, talking to my parents for endless hours, annoying the crap out of my husband, or just enjoying life with my friends.

For more books and updates, check out my Facebook Group, Emily's Bookworms. All news is shared exclusively there first.



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