



MAFIA

AND

CAPTIVE

A MARCHIANO MAFIA ROMANCE

ISA OLIVER

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MAFIA AND CAPTIVE

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This book features an Italian Mafia arranged marriage, enemies to lovers, an age gap, and a captive romance.

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DEDICATION

For my beautiful family.

I love you to the moon and back, always and forever.

xxx

Acknowledgements: Thank you so, so much to my family for allow the time to write and for your love and support. A huge thank you to for all your help and knowledge. Thank you to Chrisandra for your h support with this book. And also thanks to lovely Peachy Keen Services. And thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the readers, reviewers, and bloggers for your support.

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ring me
Magan
elp and
Author
lovely

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader, please note that while not wholly dark, this book is categorized as a dark romance due to some subject matter. Specific topics are listed on the next page. Please note that any beliefs, views, opinions, or statements in this novel are the views of specific characters as part of the storyline, and they are not the views of the author. Love Isa xxx

Marchiano Mafia Series (all can be read as standalones):

Mafia And Captive

(An Age Gap Dark Captive Romance)

Mafia And Protector

(A Dark Arranged Marriage Romance)

Mafia And Angel

(A Single Dad Age Gap Arranged Marriage)

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CONTENT NOTE-SPOILERS

Topics include:

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Mafia violence

Captive romance

Physical torture (not of the heroine)

Murder

CONTENT NOTE-SPOILERS

Topics include:

...

...

...

Mafia violence

Captive romance

Physical torture (not of the heroine)

Murder

MAFIA FAMILIES

Marchiano Family: Fratellanza Mafia, Chicago

Marco Marchiano (Capo)

Alessio Marchiano (Consigliere) - Marco's brother

Camillo Marchiano - Marco's brother

Danio Marchiano - Marco's brother

Debora Marchiano - Marco's sister

Lorenzo Marchiano - Marco's cousin

Annunciata Marchiano - Lorenzo's wife

Santino Family: Società Mafia, Los Angeles

Emanuel Santino (Capo)

Gabriel Santino - Emanuel's son and heir

Rafael Santino - Emanuel's son

Bonardi Family: Società Mafia, Los Angeles

Cecilio Bonardi (Underboss)

Casmundina Bonardi - Cecilio's wife

Jacob Bonardi - Cecilio's son and heir

Juliana Bonardi - Cecilio's daughter

Jessica Bonardi - Cecilio's daughter

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Bonardi Family: Società Mafia, Los Angeles

Cecilio Bonardi (Underboss)

Casmundina Bonardi - Cecilio's wife

Jacob Bonardi - Cecilio's son and heir

Juliana Bonardi - Cecilio's daughter

Jessica Bonardi - Cecilio's daughter

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CHAPTER 1

*Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora
nostra morte.*

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour
death.*

— the words every Made Man recites upon a death.

JULIANA

My younger sister, Jessica, handed over the garment bag that my mother had sent upstairs. I took it eagerly because I loved new clothes, yet I was half-filled with dread since I knew my mother's taste was so questionable.

Looking inside the bag, my heart sank as my eyes were assaulted by the glitzy sparkle of red sequins. "It's one of Mother's specialties," I sighed.

“Oh my,” said Jessica, as I pulled the outfit out of the bag, revealing a sequined skirt suit with a tight pencil skirt and matching jacket. This outfit my mother wanted me to wear at my meeting today with my father, Emanuel Santino.

Emanuel Santino was Capo, the boss of the Società Mafia in L. My father, Cecilio Bonardi, was one of his Underbosses, thus holding a prominent position in the organization. This was the first time I had been summoned to meet the Capo, and I was dreading it. If I had the choice, I would be anywhere but meeting him today. However, as a girl in the Mafia world, my main duty was to obey.

I looked in the bag again, but the only other items were skyscraper heels, a hot pink blouse, and a pink purse. I would have said that my mother intended to go with the outfit, but they clearly clashed rather than coordinated.

a della

of our

“What am I supposed to wear under the jacket? Should I just use one of the existing blouses? Do you think a white blouse would be the best option with this color combination?” My unease about today was clouding my judgment, making even the smallest decision impossible.

“Sorry, I forgot to say—Mother said to tell you not to wear a blouse like that today. It’s not appropriate.”

I gave a slight questioning look to Jessica but pulled on the skirt and jacket. “The jacket reveals too much of my cleavage to be decent,” my mother murmured, cringing at my reflection in the bedroom mirror.

“I think that’s Mother’s objective,” said Jessica, as she also winced at my somewhat appearance.

I looked in alarm at the clothes. This outfit was my mother’s idea of what a girl my age should be wearing in order to snare a good Mafia husband.

“Juliana, hurry up!” my mother shrieked up the stairs. “Your father is waiting.”

g a red-waiting.”

was the I looked quickly at my sister in desperation. “Jess, you’ve got to help her and put a tear in the skirt.”

“What do you mean?” Her brow puckered in confusion, but I knew she would help me because she was my best friend as well as my sister.

I turned around so that my back was to her. “Pull at the back slit so the seam comes apart.”

I felt a tug on my skirt and heard a rip. “That should spell the end of the skirt,” she giggled.

I rushed downstairs, finding my mother waiting for me in the hallway. Everything about her was over-the-top: big hair, brash clothes, bold silhouettes, and a loud voice. Her entire being was a throwback to the Eighties.

Tears gathered in her eyes at the sight of me, and she started sobbing loudly. “You look absolutely perfect. The Capo will be so impressed with you!”

Dear God, I was already feeling jittery with nerves, and my mother’s dramatics were the last thing I needed right now.

I turned around and heard a sharp intake of breath from my mother. “What on earth has happened to your skirt?”

I fixed a look of dismay on my face. “The skirt was skintight, and it tore when I tried to walk in it.”

“Why does the Lord try me in this way?” wailed my mother at the top of her voice. “Today is such an important day for our family, the first time the Capo is requesting to see my eldest daughter!”

My father came inside at that moment. “Are you still not ready, Juliet?” he said impatiently, ignoring Mother. He pulled back his sleeve, and I saw he was disappointedly at his watch. “We’ll be late for the Capo.”

“You’ll have to go up and change,” screeched Mother. “Be quick, help me know you can’t keep the Capo waiting.”

As I dashed upstairs, I started unbuttoning the jacket and I peeled it off. In a moment I was inside my bedroom, grabbing a much simpler dress from the closet. Once dressed, I ran back downstairs and out to the waiting car. On our manicured front lawn, I saw my mother throw herself to the ground in front of our stone statue of the Virgin Mary, pressing her hands together in supplication and muttering like a crazy person. Our family followed the Italian-American custom of displaying a saint statue in our front yard. My mother, however, only prayed to our Virgin Mary when one of three things was involved: death, money, or power.

No one had died as far as I was aware, nor did I expect that the man who had summoned me was sobbing or wishing to see me to give me a large sum of money. Therefore, that was the only reason for my summons today to be a power play—somehow going to be used as a pawn in one of the Società’s twisted power games. The thought of that made me shudder.

“What

It ripped

“Juliana, Cecilio, come in,” Emanuel Santino said in a severe tone, ushering us both into his office.

With only a slight hesitation, I walked forward and entered the office. My father stood at my side, tightly clenching my fists to stop my hands from shaking. “Juliana?”

Looking

—you “Sit down,” Emanuel instructed. Neither he nor my father showed emotion on their faces as I looked from one to the other.

off the “You’re probably wondering why I have asked to speak to you today,” Emanuel fixed his dark stare on me.

“Yes, sir,” I answered, trying not to sound as nervous as I felt. I was sure that my father and I had been summoned here to discuss our engagement to Emanuel Santino’s eldest son. A union between our families would send a message of strength to our rivals—this was a hard thing that had been planned by our families for a long time, and today I was dreading that it would finally be formalized.

I tried hard to look the Capo in the eye while he was talking, although the Capo looking at him filled me with trepidation.

I smoothed my dress over my legs, then stopped, knowing that if I was with my hands and clothes irritated my father. He said it revealed my nerves, and that showing nerves was showing weakness.

After accidentally-on-purpose ripping the red outfit, I had changed into an elegant powder-blue dress, and my dark hair was held back in a low ponytail. I was nineteen years old now, and a certain level of style was demanded of me at formal Società occasions—and being summoned to see the Capo was definitely one of those occasions.

“Juliana, you will have heard that we in the Società are forming an alliance with the Fratellanza in Chicago,” Emanuel carried on.

I nodded. I wasn’t sure what the Fratellanza had to do with me, but it was better than to say anything to the Capo unless asked a direct question.

The Fratellanza had killed several of our men over the last few years, and they were regarded as the most brutal Mafia organization in the United States. The Società were also Mafia, and while I was under no illusion

ed anytheir illegal dealings, they were at least known to conduct themselves
honor; indeed, they prided themselves on it—honor among thieves.

oday?” The Fratellanza, on the other hand, had no such honor.

“Some of my Underbosses and Captains are insisting on a marriage
between us and the Fratellanza. They see a union between the families
as being a good way to cement the business arrangement and our current
relationship.”

As I listened to him, a sense of unease unfurled over my body, making
my waxy hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

“I have decided, therefore, that you should marry the Capo of
the Fratellanza. Your wedding to Marco Marchiano will be in two months.

I managed to stop a gasp from escaping my lips. I was to be married
to Marco Marchiano.

I was to be married to the most brutal Capo in the Mafia.

This couldn't be happening, I thought, as panic engulfed my body.
An unfeeling sweat trickle down my back. Marco Marchiano murdered his own
brother at the age of eighteen so that he could take over as head of the Fratellanza.
He was a true monster.

I started to feel light-headed. I told myself to breathe, just breathe.
I had to get through the next few minutes.

Emanuel turned to my father. “Your eldest daughter is the perfect
choice for this union.”

My father tried to hide his surprise. “Yes, it's just that I thought
you and your eldest son, Gabriel, would eventually marry, as we've discussed
before, and from time to time.”

“Cecilio, I am sure you'll agree that the alliance between L.A. and C
is about the more pressing matter at the current time, given the difficulties

es withhaving with the Bratva.” Emanuel’s voice carried a clear tone of imp
as he referred to the Società’s ongoing problems with the Russian Maf

“Yes, yes, of course you are right,” spluttered my father. I su
arriagewondered why I had even been asked to this meeting since my father
ilies asCapo were discussing me as if I wasn’t here.

ngoing It was like my mind was in a fog. I couldn’t look at the Capo, so I f
my gaze on my father, while trying to ignore my racing pulse and
ing thepalms.

“So, I have your agreement,” said Emanuel to my father. It w
of thequestion; it was a statement.

’ time.” “Yes, certainly, anything the organization requires.” My father
ried tocareful as always not to cross the Capo on any matter. Of course, I
asked for my consent. That was taken as a given if my father agreed,
just had.

y and I I had been right when I had thought that today I would be made a p
parentsa power play.

nza. I had always known that as a Mafia daughter, I would have an a
marriage. I would marry a man chosen by my family since marriages
e. I justworld were chiefly a means to strengthen ties and allegiances.

I hadn’t expected, however, that I would be married to someone w
: choiceconsidered a savage, without the honor that the Mafia required
members.

Juliana My father and the Capo both looked toward me, and I realized th
scussedwere expecting me to say something.

“I-I won’t have finished school by then...”

Chicago “Your schooling is a formality and is hardly something you’ll ne
we arewife,” said my father irritably, dismissing my objection out of hand.

patience Emanuel continued staring at me with a penetrating look as if daring me to defy him, so I said the only thing that I could. “I understand.” I wondered suddenly was my voice that I had just heard, the sound seeming far away and and the perhaps, belonged to someone else.

“The engagement party will be held in a week’s time, and the marriage focused take place in two months. It is imperative that we get the alliance between the two organizations settled as soon as possible.” It was clear that I was just part of a business arrangement, but I felt like screaming that this was my wish and wasn’t that that they were talking about.

“Juliana, go wait in the foyer. Your father and I have a few business matters to discuss.” I realized that I had been dismissed. I wasn’t I couldn’t wait to get out of this room—I felt I was suffocating and in these four walls.

I had been dreading coming here today, thinking that the meeting was to mark my engagement to Emanuel Santino’s eldest son. I hadn’t expected however, to be told that I was about to be married to a rival Mafia Capomangano. Right now, the prospect of marrying someone like the Santino heir seemed as if it were in our like a fairytale ending.

Instead, I was marrying Marco Marchiano, and my nightmare was beginning.

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Emanuel continued staring at me with a penetrating look as if daring me to defy him, so I said the only thing that I could. “I understand.” I wondered if it was my voice that I had just heard, the sound seeming far away and as if it, perhaps, belonged to someone else.

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Instead, I was marrying Marco Marchiano, and my nightmare was just beginning.

CHAPTER 2

JULIANA

“I can’t believe they’re making you marry that monster,” wh Jessica.

I was in my bedroom with her and my mother, putting the fi touches to my dark hair for the engagement party which woul imminently. The week’s reprieve before my engagement had flown by

I felt something soft brush up against me. “Hey, boy,” I said, lookin at my dog. I was rewarded by him enthusiastically thumping his flu from side to side.

“I wish you girls wouldn’t let that animal into your bedr admonished my mother. “It leaves fur everywhere, and your dress for is going to be covered in it if you continue letting it put its paws on yo

She tried shooing him away. However, he was such a good-natured that he thought she was playing with him, and he leaped up at her and excitedly.

“Help, help! He’s trying to kill me!” screeched my mother, he flailing madly around herself.

We heard running footsteps thunder toward my room and the door open. Two soldiers rushed into the room, their guns aimed in front of the door.

I rolled my eyes at my mother’s theatrics as I gently pulled the door from her. “It’s okay,” I told the soldiers. “No one is about to die.”

They took in what was happening and, with the smallest of sighs, heathed their weapons and retreated from the room.

I stroked the dog’s soft ears as I looked around my childhood bedroom in our family mansion. My home held precious memories of my childhood of happy times with my siblings, Jacob and Jessica. My siblings meant the world to me. I would do everything in my power to keep them safe, I often found myself wishing we hadn’t been born into the Mafia world with all its inherent threats and dangers.

“Are you actually going to marry him?” Jess carried on, worryingly lowering her lip. She was even more nervous than I was, if that was even possible.

I put my necklace around my throat and tried to fasten the clasp, but my shaking fingers made the task difficult. “Jess, it’s not as if I have any say in the matter—none of us do in this life. You know our only purpose is to obey and do our duty.”

“Obedience and duty.” Those two words had been drummed into me from a very young age, and I was sick of hearing them.

My mother frowned. “Honestly, Jessica, it’s a great honor that Julianna has been chosen for this union.”

red dog “More like Juliana was the default choice, given that Emanuel Sa
barkedown daughter is too young to marry,” pointed out Jess.

“Juliana will be marrying the Capo of Chicago, placing her in a pos
er armstronger and making her the envy of many.” My mother, Casmundina B
was a typical Mafia wife: obedient and demure, yet ruthlessly ambiti
or bursther family.

hem. “Mother, we all know that as a woman, I will hold no power. M
g awayduties will be to obey my husband and provide him with heirs.”

“Well, regardless, make sure you look happy at the prospect. Today
olsteredMarco Marchiano’s first opportunity to see his proposed bride. He
years older than you, and he will expect a certain level of maturity fro
room innot to mention that your father will be furious if you do not perfor
ood andtoday.”

ant the *Perform*. I was terrified; however, I knew that I could not show w
and I’dto Marco Marchiano, and I hoped I would be able to put on th
ld withperformance of my life. The age gap between us concerned me, bu
honest, that was the least of my worries.

ing her My mother carried on babbling away, not giving me a moment’s
sible. “I’m overjoyed that at least one of my daughters will make a great m
but myJessica, you really should make more of an effort with your appear
choicewill be your turn to marry soon, but I’m not sure who will want to r
se is to girl as plain as you.”

Jessica merely shrugged off the remark, being used to our m
from atactlessness. It pained me, though, when I heard people refer to her a
plain.

ana has My mother thought it was a tragedy that Jessica hadn’t been bless
the same striking eyes as my brother and me. I thought, however, that

antino's was pretty in her own way; even more importantly, she was the kind I knew. Unfortunately, in this world, and particularly in the Mafia life, women were supposed to be beautiful, and men were meant to be powerful.

I checked my reflection in the mirror above the dresser. "I just don't know why I have to be yanked out of school so suddenly—I wish I could have just finished high school at least."

Although I was nineteen, I had missed a year of school after a severe case of pneumonia, so I still had a few months left until I would receive my high school diploma. I had been hoping to persuade my father to let me study veterinary nursing afterward, although I knew that would have been a well-shot given the sort of life we led.

"Don't think your father didn't tell me that when Emanuel spoke to you about weakness you tried to use your schooling as an excuse not to marry. As if you'll be the best high school diploma to be a Mafia wife!" exclaimed my mother, throwing her hands into the air. "You are lucky you weren't 'yanked' out of school before now and sent to the old country to learn how to cook."

peace. *The old country*—by that she meant Italy, the land of her birth and marriage. She reminisced about through rose-tinted glasses.

ance. It "You girls have had a privileged upbringing with servants to see to every need, and when you marry, your husband will provide the same wealthy lifestyle. High school diploma, indeed," she huffed.

mother's "I only meant—"

s being "I don't care what you meant, Juliana. Sometimes I think my daughters have turned into tactless Americans, despite my best efforts to bring them up within the traditions of the old country."

Jessica "But why does it all have to take place so quickly? Two months is

st girl I any time to make all the wedding arrangements.”

people What I really meant was that two months was not enough time to
d to bemysel. I would be leaving everyone and everything I knew here in L

moving across the country to Chicago to be the wife of the Fratellanza

on't see “Don't worry,” smiled my mother. “I have everything under control

ld havebeen waiting a long time for the day when one of my children gets ma

is the event that everyone is talking about, and it will be the wedding
re boutyear!”

ly High I looked at Jess. We both knew that the reason everyone was talkin

e studythe wedding was because of their shock that the Società would wed

a longtheir daughters to a brutal savage like Marco Marchiano.

I was being married off to a barbarian who had murdered his own p
to you,A shudder ran through me at the mere thought of meeting this man.

I need a I knew that some other Società families had been jealous when it ha
rowingrumored that I would wed Emanuel Santino's son and heir, and other r

schoolhad been envious that I was considered to be a beauty. Right now, how

would give anything to be unattractive and uninteresting so that
a placeMarchiano would not want to marry me.

There was a knock at my bedroom door, and my older brother,
to yourpopped his head around the door. “Hey, the Marchianos have arrived

sort ofdownstairs in the drawing room talking to Father and the Santino

Father wants Juliana to come down now.”

I took one last look at my reflection in the mirror before I sto
ughtersstraightened my back and held my head high, preparing myself to wa

you upthe lion's den.

; hardly

MARCO

prepare

.A. and Capo. We had arrived in L.A. at the home of the Bonardi family. It was my first visit to L.A. in years.

. I have married. It Two of my brothers, Alessio and Camillo, had accompanied me along with some of my best soldiers.

3 of the g about one of My brothers and I ruled the Fratellanza with a fist of iron. Together we were known as the ‘Kings of Chicago.’ On our way to the top, we had many men and made numerous enemies, one of them being the Societa

parents. As we drove up to the house, we could see that the front door was open and there was a welcoming committee: Emanuel Santino and Bonardi. Of course, the guards at the gate had already radioed ahead of them of our arrival.

ad been nothers “This is our last opportunity to change our minds,” Alessio declared. He clicked the car into park and turned off the engine.

vever, I Marco “No chance,” I drawled. “I’m looking forward to seeing the virgin. I have chosen to sacrifice to me.”

Jacob, and are family. My brother, Alessio, didn’t think much of this marriage that the was insisting on. He had analyzed the situation and still wasn’t convinced that the merits would outweigh the downsides. However, our escalating problems with the Russian Bratva meant that this strategic alliance was highly beneficial for both sides.

nod up, alk into “Cecilio Bonardi must be crazy agreeing to marry off his daughter to me,” added my other brother, Camillo, who was sitting behind us. He shook his head. “I mean, you’re hardly ideal son-in-law material.”

I chuckled. "I'm going to enjoy this. I like nothing more than seeing people afraid of me, and I'm sure that the young girl chosen was my first disappointment in that regard." I knew she was eight years younger than she was of age and that was all that mattered.

I looked at the large Bonardi mansion and its spacious grounds. "Judging by this, Cecilio Bonardi has done well for himself."

Over the years, the families running the Società had become very wealthy. They had started out in L.A. by controlling the port and the drug trade and extending their influence into various other enterprises.

Today was the official engagement party and the signing of the engagement contract between our organizations. The Italian Mafia was a traditional institution, and our families still followed the custom of signing an engagement contract.

At twenty-seven years of age, I was the eldest of my siblings. I had been initiated at the age of twelve, and from that day I had become a Made man who was part of the Mafia. Now I was Capo of the Fratellanza.

Alessio was my Consigliere, my second-in-command, while Camillo managed the enforcement side of our business. Our two youngest sons, Danio and Debora, had stayed home in Chicago today.

"I still don't fully trust the bastards. Are all the security details in place?" I asked Alessio.

"It's all under control. I've made detailed plans regarding protection for you today."

It was unlikely that they would try anything, but we all knew that we could never be sure of anything in our world.

We got out of our black SUV, and Alessio and Camillo followed me to the front steps of the Bonardi mansion.

g other “Marchiano,” greeted Emanuel Santino, holding out his hand to
will not mine. We all reluctantly shook hands, eyeballing each other and not
me, but each other one bit. “Let’s go through to the drawing room.”

As we entered the drawing room, I winced inwardly at the sig
Judging greeted me.

Fuck, it was straight out of the old country.
wealthy. This room was obviously kept for special occasions, where gues
before entertained and family photographs taken to be sent back to the rela
Italy, the décor screaming that the inhabitants of this house had ‘made
of the here in the Land of Stars and Stripes.

was a The furniture was heavy and carved, the chairs having ridiculous ov
ning antop scrolls on their arms and legs. Anything that wasn’t covered in
crimson fabric was coated instead with glitzy gold paint. There wa
ad been gold in the excessive mirrors and sconces adorning the walls, th
Man, a covered in burgundy flocked wallpaper.

There was even a green, white, and red Italian flag in the corner
Camilloroom, among various Italian ‘heirlooms.’

iblings, It was the height of tackiness and a travesty of Italian style. I

hoping that my wife-to-be did not take after her mother in the style sta
lace?” I Gabriel Santino and Jacob Bonardi were waiting for us inside the

Gabriel was now twenty-six years old and would inherit the posi
tion for Società Capo upon his father’s death. However, everyone knew that

was already heavily involved in managing their affairs, and it was pr
nat youth that he would be a ruthless and effective leader.

After drinks and small talk, Jacob was dispatched by his father to fi
e up the sister, Juliana.

Emanuel looked at me. “It is a shame that my own daughter is

shakeenough yet to marry. However, I am sure that you will not be disappointed with the girl we have to offer to you.”

At that moment the door quietly opened, and everyone turned to look at that girl entering. I had been told that she was nineteen years old. She stood with a straight back and her head held high; however, her stiff posture betrayed the fear she felt. Good, I wanted a wife who would fear me as much as I feared her.

She hesitated, unsure where to go, before walking carefully toward my father and stopping at his side.

She was indeed a beauty. I guessed that she was around five foot seven-inches in her heels she would only just reach my chin. She was slender and elegant with curves in all the right places, her figure shown off in an ivory dress which was in striking contrast to her silky dark hair.

The ivory dress had probably been her parents’ idea to emphasize her purity, although I preferred to think of her as the lamb chosen to be sacrificed at the altar of the Fratellanza.

Despite her attractive body, it was her eyes I was drawn to. Their shimmering, blue gaze briefly looked at me before quickly darting away.

The innocence in those big blue pools attracted me like a bee to honey. I couldn’t wait to be the one to take her and ruin her.

Although she avoided looking at me, I had no qualms at letting my brother run over my bride-to-be. Today we would be signing the engagement contract, and I wanted to see what I would be getting. Her innocent face flushed with heat as she felt my assessing stare upon her, and I knew I would catch her making them blush even more on our wedding night.

I saw Gabriel Santino steal a glance at her. I detected a flicker of something in his eyes—I wasn’t sure what it was, and it took me

pointed moments to realize it was a flash of attraction.

My shoulders tensed. Of course I had heard that the Società had worked at the discussed a possible engagement between Juliana and Gabriel, but the walked history now as far as everyone was concerned. They better stay aware gave each other, I thought, and he better keep his hands off her—because she would obey mine now.

“So, what do you think?” Juliana’s father interrupted my thoughts. “Would she meet to your satisfaction? I can assure you that she will make an excellent wife. She is obedient and submissive, and I am certain she will give you pleasure in every way.” Her father could have been talking about a racehorse. Or a whore.

But then women in the Mafia world were treated like chattels—like possessions. They were there to please their husband and produce children. Every Made Man required a male heir to look powerful and command respect from his own men. And I was sure that she could bring me satisfaction.

“We need some time to speak alone,” I said, stating what I wanted rather than asking. I was a Capo; I would not ask permission from anyone to marry my future bride.

“Of course, of course,” her father nodded. He seemed keen on this, and did not hesitate to leave his daughter alone with me. I was sure that if he had a daughter, however, I wouldn’t leave her alone in the company of someone like me.

They filed out of the room, and as the heavy door clicked shut, she looked at it as if her last lifeline had just expired.

She stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, not having moved a few feet from where she had been standing.

“Come closer,” I commanded. “I want to get a proper look at you. I don’t want to miss anything.” I saw no need to mince my words. I would own her soon and the sooner she understood that, the better.

At my words, she stiffened her spine and lifted her chin. Her blue eyes were fringed with inky long lashes, looked directly into mine. She was trying to give an illusion of confidence; however, the slight tremor in her hands betrayed her fear.

She walked forward but deliberately stopped a few steps away from me. “Closer. I don’t bite, unless you want me to,” I growled.

She flinched at my words. Oh, how I would enjoy toying with the innocent. She took another step toward me but kept her eyes fixed on the ground to the right of my head. She was having trouble meeting my gaze now. She was closer to me.

She was still a few steps away from me. I sighed and stepped toward her, seizing her wrists and pulling her toward me.

She gasped. “Wh-What are you doing?”

“If I tell you to do something, I expect obedience.” My tone was terse. She was breathing a little too quickly, and I could feel her pulse rapidly in the wrists that I was still holding.

“Look at me,” I demanded, and she slowly raised her eyes up to me. “Do you agree to this union?” I asked her.

“I did agree.”

We stared at each other.

She took a deep breath as if to give her courage for what she said. “But we all know that women in this world have no real choice. Our only step is to obey and do whatever is asked of us.” The blush on her cheeks deepened, but this time it was through anger rather than embarrassment.

hat I'm "So, if you were given a free choice, you would not consent enough, marriage?"

"Of course I wouldn't. Why would I agree to give myself over to a r
ie eyes, like you?"

ying to Well, well. This little kitten had sharp claws. Although I didn't care
: hands married to cement this alliance, it was clear this girl would do anything
marry me. I liked her open defiance—it would make her all the swe
me. break.

"But you, as a man, can say no. No one will think any worse of you
is little say that you don't want to marry me."

1 a spot "I'm not going to let you get away from me that easily. Where w
ow that the fun in that?" My voice was hard, and I tried to not let her rile me
all, I was marrying her for power, not love. There was the added b
ard her, having a beautiful girl in my bed and someone to produce heirs for
those things were not my priority. The only thing that mattered to
forging the alliance and increasing my power.

se. She went to turn away.

beating "Not so fast," I said, making her inhale sharply as I gripped her arm
"I haven't given you the ring yet. After all, that is expected of us."

. "Have Her blue eyes blazed, although she relaxed her arm slightly wh
realized I intended nothing more than to give her the ring.

I took her hand. It was so small in my much larger one, emphasizing
fragility to me. I saw the slight tremor in her fingers, and although s
id next. trying hard to hide her fear of me, she wasn't succeeding. But I ha
duty I strained to notice every nuance of body language because even a subtle
ks had could tell so much about an enemy's intention. And until we were n
t. she was still the enemy.

to this I looked at her for a few moments, and then, with my other hand, I
for the ring in my pocket. I slid the large diamond onto the ring finger
nonsterleft hand. I felt satisfaction when I saw that it fitted perfectly, as it
have given that her family had told me her ring size beforehand.
e who I I kept her hand tightly in mine while I admired the ring, before
g not toback up at her. "Now you belong to me."

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I looked at her for a few moments, and then, with my other hand, I reached for the ring in my pocket. I slid the large diamond onto the ring finger of her left hand. I felt satisfaction when I saw that it fitted perfectly, as it should have given that her family had told me her ring size beforehand.

I kept her hand tightly in mine while I admired the ring, before looking back up at her. “Now you belong to me.”

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CHAPTER 3

JULIANA

I looked at the obscenely large ring.

The emerald-cut diamond was surrounded by smaller diamonds and a band of platinum. If I hadn't been so overwhelmed, I might have been impressed with it.

Danger rolled off the man standing in front of me, filling me with u
snatched my hand away. "If that's all, I should get back to my family."

The corner of his mouth rose in a smirk. "We should kiss to cl
deal."

I couldn't stop a gasp from escaping. "You know that I can't kiss
before my wedding. My father will slit your throat if you try otherwise

He chuckled, and I thought that was how the devil probably sou

looked carefully at the man I was supposed to marry. He was much taller than me, and underneath his suit I could tell that he was pure muscle. Even when he laughed, his symmetrical features remained hard and alert, and his piercing blue eyes made him seem even more dangerous for some reason.

He had dark hair and gray eyes—stormy eyes which made me nervous with their cold, calculating gaze. They say the eyes are the window to the soul, but I doubted he even had a soul.

Without question, he was handsome—one of the most beautiful men I had ever laid eyes on. A ripple rushed through me at the feel of his gaze on me, but whatever that ripple was, it was drowned out by the waves of men's eyes that rolled off him into the thick air between us.

As my emotions ran riot, the only thing I was sure about was that they had frightened me.

He let me push past him so that I could leave the room. And I was thankful for that as my heart thudded much too fast. Instinct told me this man didn't care about the rules of our world—that it wouldn't take much before he would seize whatever he wanted.

I set on my shoes. We returned to the other guests, and then it was time to sign the contract. Marco and I went into the office together with my father and Emanuel.

I had never liked this room. I was only ever summoned into my father's office when he had cause to reprimand me, usually for cursing or some other unladylike behavior. The dark wood-paneled walls had always felt to me as if they were foreboding as if they held sinister secrets that were not allowed to be unleashed. Today this office felt like my prison cell: once I signed the engagement contract, promising my body and soul to Marco Marini, there would be no escape.

My future husband was dressed in a black Brioni suit with a black

black shirt and a black tie. Brioni and black: the typical Mafia uniform. Not that he had also arrived in a black SUV. How fitting it was that he wore black is good given that it may as well have been my funeral today.

“Juliana, come sit down,” my father said, his voice falsely cheery. I shudder wasn’t fooled by his tone. I could see the hardness in his eyes, and I knew that this was work for him. Everything my father had done in his life

was for the sake of business: marry my mother, have children, kill enemies and get rid of them. I’d away his daughter.

But “So, everything is settled between you two now and you have the contract,” stated my father, smiling with pleasure. He expected full obedience from me and would accept nothing less.

My father and Emanuel joined in with an icy smile. “That just leaves the matter of the contract.”

I turned my head and glanced toward the door. My mind told me I should get out of this room and run as far away as possible; however, terror kept me rooted to my seat.

Emanuel pushed the contract across to my prospective husband. “The contract. You’ll find everything in order. Your lawyers communicated that you’re satisfied with the contract we have drawn up, and we incorporated your father’s amendments you requested. As agreed, the wedding will take place in a few other months’ time.”

Marco was standing beside me. I watched as he picked up the pen and signed the contract on the appropriate line. He then slid the contract across to me.

I slowly reached for the pen. My hand trembled, but I no longer had the strength to steady it and put on a brave façade. I swallowed the lump in my throat, determined not to cry. That would be the ultimate weakness.

No doubt I looked down at the contract, but it felt as though everything had turned black, and I couldn't think. At that moment I knew that my father was the only one that could help me. He might be a Made Man, but I was his daughter. He was the only one I could turn to now.

I knew "Father...?" I didn't even know what I was asking.

What was for "Even your father can't save you now," Marco said with a twisted smile. My father came and stood beside me and pointed to where I needed to sign. He rested his hand on my shoulder, gripping too tightly. "Julia, you need to sign the contract."

From me Everyone in the room was watching me, their eyes burning into me. This was just the first humiliation of many. In two months' time there would be the wedding ceremony and reception. Then I would be expected to bring in my wedding night and, even worse, produce the bedsheet for everyone to look at the following morning.

Except me I knew that in line with the Sicilian tradition of *cunzata del letto*, the bed would be prepared with the 'virgin sheet'. The virgin sheet could not be touched by married women; instead, just before the wedding, four unmarried girls would make up the bed with pure white, hand-embroidered sheets. They would also sprinkle rice between the sheets as good luck for the new bride in two fertility.

Tradition further dictated that on the morning after the wedding, the bride and husband would hang the bloodied virgin sheet out on a balcony. This tradition was insisted upon by the families to prove that the bride had been a virgin on her wedding night and that the marriage had been consummated.

What had the If the marriage wasn't consummated, then it could be annulled. An annulment in my situation would be a disaster, given that the marriage was a serious business arrangement between the two families.

stopped The Mafia still followed this vulgar tradition of insisting on the
nly onesheet—they loved anything to do with blood.

He was “Sign, Juliana,” commanded Marco.

I swallowed hard. Everyone knew that I did not want to marry hi
no one cared.

mile. I blindly signed the contract, abruptly pushing back my chair and
eded toto leave as soon as I finished my signature.

na, you Before I could walk away, Marco seized my arm, holding me fi
place.

ie. This “Let me go,” I hissed at him. “You’ve got what you wanted so
ould belonger needed here.”

leed on “I didn’t say that you could go yet.” His jaw was tightly clenched.

e to see I hesitated for a second, my mind scrambling, before turning m
toward my father. “Father, may I be excused please?”

the bed “It’s no longer your father’s decision,” Marco said, glaring down
not be “You belong to me now, and I decide what you can and can’t do.”

married I looked in horror toward my father, but he merely nodded. “He’
s. They You are his now that the engagement contract is signed, and no matt
bride’s happens, our promise of you to him is irrevocable.”

There were tears threatening to spill from my eyes, but I held the
ng, the with the last ounces of my strength. I slowly turned my head back
his was Marco.

on her Neither of us said a word. I knew that this wasn’t a battle I could wi

Through the lump in my throat, I squeezed out the words. “I’d lik
And annow.”

trategic He said nothing for a few seconds, his gray eyes piercing me. “Y
leave. I have business to discuss.”

virgin Then he finally let go of my arm. I couldn't get out of my father's fast enough, practically running in my haste to get away from him.

On my way back to my mother and sister, I ran into Gabriel Santino m—but Gabriel looked at me, concern evident in his arresting blue eyes. “are you alright?”

turning I nodded but couldn't say anything.

“I'm sorry, Juliana. I only found out about my father's plan the day rmly inhe told you. There was nothing I could do to stop it.” Gabriel understood no girl would want to be faced with the task of marrying a member I'm nobrutal Fratellanza, let alone its Capo.

“I never imagined that I would be married off to someone like *him*, in a shaky voice.

ly head It had always been expected that I would eventually marry Gabriel the aim of strengthening the ties between the two most powerful families at me.the organization. The gossips, however, liked to find more superficial for such a bond: I was one of the few girls within the Società who has right.eyes, and so the gossips had speculated for years that we would be preferred whatto each other, thinking that such a match would produce the most beautiful blue-eyed babies.

m back “You don't deserve to be married to a man like him,” Gabriel said in towardvoice. “Just know that I will always be here for you if you ever need r Società will still be your family, no matter what else happens.”

n. I looked into his eyes, but there was nothing more either of us could e to goWe both knew that our lives were bound by the rules of the Mafia we had been since the day we'd been born.

ou can With a small nod at him, I walked away and headed back to the courtroom where my mother and sister waited for me.

s office “Come sit, Juliana, and tell me everything that was said. Do you think I
approved of you? Did you both sign the contract?” My mother pressed
eagerly for all the details, oblivious to my despondency.

Juliana, I looked at Jessica, who gazed at me in sympathy and put her hand
to console me. “Don’t worry. You only have the dinner to get through.”

When it was time for the celebration dinner, the meal passed
beforeincident. My mother had gone to huge efforts to put on a feast fit for
ood thatbut I could only toy with my meal of roast beef. “Are you not
of theJuliana?” asked Jessica quietly.

“I can’t face food right now,” I whispered back. “I just want this done
” I saidover.”

The men talked business while my mother, Jess, and I kept
el, withThankfully, I was spared from any further conversations with
ilies inMarchiano.

reasons When he left with his brothers at the end of the evening, I knew that
ad bluenext time I would see him would be at our wedding—and that
omisedabsolutely terrified me.

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“Come sit, Juliana, and tell me everything that was said. Do you think he approved of you? Did you both sign the contract?” My mother pressed me eagerly for all the details, oblivious to my despondency.

I looked at Jessica, who gazed at me in sympathy and put her hand on mine to console me. “Don’t worry. You only have the dinner to get through now.”

When it was time for the celebration dinner, the meal passed without incident. My mother had gone to huge efforts to put on a feast fit for kings, but I could only toy with my meal of roast beef. “Are you not hungry, Juliana?” asked Jessica quietly.

“I can’t face food right now,” I whispered back. “I just want this day to be over.”

The men talked business while my mother, Jess, and I kept quiet. Thankfully, I was spared from any further conversations with Marco Marchiano.

When he left with his brothers at the end of the evening, I knew that the next time I would see him would be at our wedding—and that thought absolutely terrified me.

CHAPTER 4

JULIANA

After the announcement of the engagement, my mother made me go to Confession twice a week. She wanted nothing to jinx this wedding, and I wasn't going to take any chances.

As if I'd have anything to confess anyway. I was a Mafia daughter and wasn't allowed to do or say anything to get into trouble.

In the weeks leading up to the wedding day, my mother relished her role as the mother of the bride.

"Mother is in her element making all the wedding preparations," she said to Jessica.

"I know. To be honest, I couldn't care less about the arrangements, but I guess it's good that she doesn't feel the same or nothing would get caught up in said without humor."

Even picking out the wedding dress was not the dream I had thought would be when I was a little girl. Those were the dreams of an innocent unaware of the harsh realities of the Mafia world.

A couple of days before the wedding, my mother was adamant that my nails done. I didn't see what difference it would make, but my mother insisted that everyone would be looking at my every detail. My mother demanded that everything be perfect for this wedding, and it was easier to just go along with her rather than argue.

After lunch, Jacob came to collect me for my appointment at the salon. Jessica and I always had to go everywhere with protection, and my mother tried as often as possible to be the one to accompany us on such occasions. Despite being born into this life, I'd never quite gotten used to the requirement of having bodyguards around us all the time.

I was waiting for him in the dining room and turned when I heard a knock. "Come in."

"Hey, you," he greeted me.

"Hey, Jake."

He slung his arm around my shoulder and pulled me in for a quick kiss. "Observed" "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," I said, picking up my purse and looking up at him.

"s, but I We walked out to his car. "How are you doing? Are you feeling alone," I asked about the wedding?"

"As okay as I can," I said quietly.

ought it He looked hard at me. “Don’t worry, Juliana, I’ll be there on the c
ent girl, I’ll make sure that everything goes right for you.”

“Thanks, Jake,” I gave him a small smile, but as we both knew, it
part after the wedding that I was worried about.

He held the door open to his Mercedes convertible, waiting for m
in, before closing the door after me.

I knew he was respected and feared as a Made Man and that o
at I get believed he would make a good Underboss one day; however, he was
mother careful to hide his darker side when he was at home. He’d make a goo
mother for some Mafia daughter, I thought to myself.

asier to He was the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, and he had th
piercing blue eyes as me. He was wearing a dark suit, his suit jacket h
beauty his toned muscles, and a dress shirt without a tie. Girls were always ac
d Jacob his good looks, and I knew he had no shortage of females th
outings, themselves at him at the nightclubs owned by the Società.

to the He got into the driver’s seat and started the ignition. “Got your
on?” he checked with me before driving off.

ard him “Yes, of course,” I said with an exasperated sigh, although not bei
to help a small smile at the same time. He was overprotective like mos
men, but thankfully not overbearing.

As he drove, he flicked his gaze over to me as I fiddled with the
ck hug. my purse. “I can’t stand the thought of you being in Chicago after
married, Juliana. How the hell am I supposed to protect you when yo
another organization’s territory?” he growled. “I should have done r
g okay stop Father from agreeing to this madness in the first place.”

“It’s not your fault, Jake. Nothing would have changed Father’s m
won’t let anything come between him and the success of the Soci

lay and even the safety and wellbeing of his own daughter.” I couldn’t help the
of bitterness in my voice.

was the “Goddamnit,” he cursed furiously. “The only thing we can do now
pray that the truce between the Società and Fratellanza lasts.”

to get Because if it didn’t, I would be an outsider left in enemy territory
shivered at the thought.

our men Jacob reached across and placed his hand over my cold one, trying
always to console me, although we both knew that my fate now lay in the hands
of a catch monster.

When we arrived at the salon, Jacob parked right in front of it, ignoring
the same ‘No Parking’ sign. Most of the cops in the city were in the back pocket
of the Società, so he didn’t have to worry about minor inconveniences like
admiring tickets.

rowing He got out of the car, scanning the immediate area for any potential
before opening my door and waiting for me to step out of the car. He
seated his hand lightly at my elbow and led me into the salon. “One of our soldiers
guarding the back entrance. I’ll wait in the car—I can see everything
going on there and I’ve got some calls to make.”

the Mafia He could have come in and sat on the ‘man couch’, an area for guys
while the women had their treatments. If you were a normal girl, the
strap of a guy would be your bored boyfriend. However, if you were a Mafia girl
you’re waiting guy would be your bored bodyguard.

you’re in After getting my nails done, Jacob took me for my shift at the dog salon
I never volunteered once a week and today was going to be my last shift.

My mother would be furious if she realized that I’d come here straight
from the salon. Heaving my nails done. However, she was satisfied that Jacob was going
to the Società, not

the trace for the afternoon, and she was too preoccupied with last-minute work details to take much notice of me apart from that.

What was to come? When I arrived at the dog shelter, I headed straight to see Honey. She was a golden Labrador who had been at a shelter for a few months now. Her owner had died, leaving her without a home, so a neighbor had brought her into us.

Trying to get her mood to pick up. People coming into the shelter looking for a dog to rehome tended to go for the friendlier dogs, so they had steered me toward Honey who hadn't been willing to engage with anyone. I had been so worried about her future and who would want her.

It had only been a few days when a litter of abandoned puppies had come in. Honey had perked up. One of the puppies, Scamp, always wanted to play with her, up to Honey, and she had started mothering him and taking care of him. Scamp had been what had finally brought her out of her depression—she had a purpose in life and someone to love again and to love her back.

After that, it had been decided that Honey and Scamp would be rehomed as a pair. A young couple had now chosen them to be part of their family and they were picking up both dogs later today.

It was outcomes like this that had made me love my work at the shelter. I loved animals and had even looked into college courses to be a veterinary nurse, but I always knew in the back of my mind that my job was worth much more to him than a bargaining chip for a potential alliance.

At the end of my shift, I said goodbye to all the staff and dogs.

I was determined not to cry, but I wasn't able to hold back tears, especially when saying goodbye to Honey. I'd grown close to her and

wedding miss not seeing her every shift. My work had been a little window of normalcy in an otherwise constrained life. I would miss it very much.

she was After one last wave at everyone, Jacob started up his car and saw me drive home. He always looked out for Jess and me, and we were grateful for his thoughtfulness. I couldn't imagine what life was going to be like living in Chicago without my siblings, away from all the people I loved.

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clear of

nervous

On the morning of the wedding, I was woken up far too early by my mother who was bubbling over with excitement.

She ripped open my curtains. "What are you doing still asleep? It's a wonderful sunny day, the perfect day for a wedding! It's time to get up. There is so much to do to get you ready for your husband."

I groaned and covered my eyes, whether in response to the bright sunlight streaming through my bedroom windows or because of the thought of their wedding day ahead today, I wasn't quite sure.

My mother carried on with her babbling, oblivious to my subdued reaction. "I said to your father how lucky we were to get the church booked for Sunday. You know that is the day we Italians believe to be the lucky day, in regard to prosperity and fertility."

The Marchiano and Bonardi families were already prosperous and wealthy thanks to their less-than-legal dealings. And given the absolute necessity for me to produce a male heir for my husband, no one had argued against the wedding on a Sunday, and I had no doubt that my father's large dowry would

dow of to the church had smoothed the way to a Sunday suddenly be available. Money could do anything in our world and if that didn't work safely it was easy enough to resort to violence.

that. Soon everyone was fussing around me, and I was surrounded in Chicago—whirlwind consisting of my mother, sister, aunts, and cousins. They were here to help me get ready, along with the attentions of a professional beautician and hairdresser.

I looked over to my cousin's four-year-old daughter who would be the flower girl today. She was skipping around my bedroom, giggling with an adorable laugh while playing hide and seek with Jessica, her playmate, brightening my mood.

My mother pushed me into the bathroom to take a bath and insisted I pour an over-generous amount of scented oils into the water. "You need to smell special for your husband on your wedding night—he will appreciate the effort you make for him." I highly doubted he'd even notice, just as he got what he wanted tonight.

After bathing, it was time for a leg, underarm, and bikini wax. "Men have to go through this torture on their wedding day," Jess complained while she watched the beautician wield her waxing strips.

"No, they just have to bleed on their initiation day when they become a Made Man," replied my mother.

"And women are made to bleed on their wedding night," my aunt replied, with a bitterness to her tone.

I knew that my face showed horror and embarrassment at that conversation. Seeing this, my mother quickly steered the conversation toward an innocuous topic of the flower arrangements.

"Are you okay?" Jess whispered.

coming I nodded. "I'm as okay as I can be. Of course I know what's expected of me tonight, but that doesn't make it any easier. I doubt a man like Marchiano will show me any kindness or mercy."

led by a Jess squeezed my hand in understanding. She and I confided everything to each other, and we had talked about this already.

Professional After I had put on the dress, I looked at my reflection in the mirror, in awe of what I saw. "I have to admit this wedding dress is perfect," I told my Jess. The silk dress was overlaid with intricate lace and the fitted bodice cinched in at the waist before flaring out into a long, elegant skirt.

Effortlessness "Don't forget your jewelry," said Jess, handing me the pieces I had selected for today. So as not to take anything away from the dress, I decided to wear only a simple pair of diamond earrings, along with a diamond pendant necklace that had been a gift from my parents for my eighteenth birthday.

So long "Jess, will you help me with the veil?" With my sister's help, together we fixed the veil in place on top of my dark hair. The lace veil was shimmering in the light and floated around my body, quite unlike the heavy feeling I had experienced, weighing down inside of me.

Looking at myself in the mirror was surreal: I was dressed up for a special occasion on an elaborate day and I looked perfect in every sense, yet somehow I didn't like me, nor did I feel like me.

Chimed My thoughts were interrupted by my mother bustling back into my bedroom with a large box in her hands. "Your bouquet has arrived from the groom," she gushed excitedly. As was the Italian tradition, my bouquet was the gift from my husband-to-be. I tentatively opened the box and saw the vibrant red roses—his choice, not mine—and the sight of them caused a shiver to run through my body.

My mother turned to my sister with an uncomfortable look. “Je
Marcone need to have a word with Juliana alone.” Jess left the room, givin
knowing look, and I prepared myself for the mother-to-daughter talk I
thing to would have to endure.

I had attended a Catholic school referred to as the ‘Polo School’—a
slightly we never called it that in front of the adults because they claim
said to abbreviation was disrespectful. The school’s full name was Our L
ice was Pompei’s School, but the students had always reversed the initials
school to give it the nickname of the Polo School, the latter being le
; I had mouthful.

Most of the daughters from Società families were sent to this
with a school. Even though I had attended a Catholic school, of course I knew
on my sex. The very fact that the nuns wouldn’t talk about sex during our
lessons had made the girls at my school even more eager to learn ab
ther we taboo subject.

My mother stroked my dark hair, which the hairdresser had put u
ich was elegant style with a multitude of hairpins. “My eldest daughter is
married,” she sighed. “From the moment you were born, everyone kn
for this you would be a great beauty and that one day you would make
n’t look marriage.”

My mother sounded wistful but then appeared to mentally shake he
to my she remembered what she needed to say to me. “Today, you must c
m your duty to your family and the Società. Tonight, you must obey your h
t was a Try to please him and that will make it easier for you.”

Her words were hardly reassuring me.

She focused her gaze on the wall beyond me. “The physical side
marital relationship is always hard on the woman. You must endu

ssica, I husband's attentions until he is satisfied with the number of children I have produced. After that, hopefully he will look elsewhere for his diversions. But be sure that you never refuse him. It would not be a cross any Made Man, but that is doubly true for a man like Marchiano."

ed this She stroked my cheek and then, with a small sigh, she got up and went to my bedroom door. "I must go to the church now and greet our guests of the expected of me."

ess of a Once she had slipped away, Jess came back into my bedroom alone with my older brother, Jacob.

all-girls "Wow. You look...amazing," exclaimed Jacob. He came over and gave me a hug. He was being careful not to crease my dress, but I pushed myself into his arms, relishing his closeness. He had always taken care of Jess and me, but I would no longer have him nearby once I moved to Chicago.

"I still can't believe that they're marrying you to that evil bastard, Jess."

getting "Don't curse," Jacob and I scolded at the same time.

ew that Jess scowled. "You and Jake curse all the time."

a great Jacob raised his eyebrows. "We're older than you. And you're my sister, so I don't think I'm ever going to let you curse."

rself as I giggled. I would miss this, and I would miss them—more than life itself. Even though she was my little sister, Jess was only a year younger than me. At already eighteen years old, thoughts would soon turn to what I would be married to. The thought filled me with unease, and I found myself wishing that I could protect her forever.

of the "Jake, make sure you take care of Jess for me," I whispered, blinking back the tears that were prickling behind my eyelids.

When you “Always,” he promised, and the three of us hugged for what felt like the last time. Jacob held out a hand each to Jess and me. “Come on, it’s wise to let’s get you two down to the car.”

Marco With that, I took one final look around my childhood bedroom, making my way down to the waiting car.

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“Always,” he promised, and the three of us hugged for what felt like the last time. Jacob held out a hand each to Jess and me. “Come on, its time. Let’s get you two down to the car.”

With that, I took one final look around my childhood bedroom, before making my way down to the waiting car.

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CHAPTER 5

MARCO

I stood at the altar in the L.A. church chosen by the Bonardi family.

It was suitably old and imposing, though I hardly took any notice of the surroundings, having more pressing matters on my mind.

Alessio stood by my side as my best man, although his most important duty for today concerned security. “Our side of the church looks rather crowded,” he observed Alessio.

“I know. But the alliance between the Società and Fratellanza is still in its infancy. Apart from our soldiers, it’s best that the only people attending the wedding on our side of the family are our siblings.” I had three brothers and one sister, and they had come to L.A. with me today.

Alessio was twenty-six years old and just one year younger than I was. He was just as good a shot and fighter as me and could take care of himself.

Even Camillo, at eighteen years of age, was initiated into the Fratellanza. He knew how to defend himself.

I couldn't help worrying, though, about my two youngest siblings and Debi. "I know Danio is fifteen already and next year will be initiated into the Fratellanza, but I can't stop thinking of him as a kid, especially still in high school."

"I know," frowned Alessio. "I'd feel better if he and Debi had been able to stay home in Chicago today, but it would have looked odd if they didn't attend the wedding."

Debi was the baby of the family. She was fourteen and her four brothers were determined to keep her as innocent as possible, for as long as possible. Our whole lives revolved around keeping her safe from the dangers of our world. With both our parents dead, it would have looked strange if our siblings had not attended the wedding today—it would look as though we didn't trust the Società Mafia.

Although both sides knew the other didn't trust them, neither would I. I was the only one of my family who was an adult. I had to play an important role in the alliance. I had to be the empty vessel, the one who would be filled with the Russians and be to our mutual benefit.

My thoughts drifted to my bride. I hoped that Juliana would not have been prompted to make her vows today. If she showed any defiance, she would be sorry tonight—her family would no longer be able to protect her.

I looked across at Alessio who had nervous energy bounding off his sister. "Is everything in place?" I checked with him quietly.

He smiled. "Yes, everything is arranged and confirmed. I've made extensive contingency plans involving security, escape, and exfiltration options, for myself and the family."

nza and the need arise.”

My brother, Alessio, wasn't convinced about the proposed alliance between the Fratellanza and the Società. He said that I didn't always think things through, but I preferred to think of it as being unpredictable as he's enemies. And the proposed alliance, with a rival Mafia family whom we both known to despise, had definitely taken the Russians by surprise.

Alessio liked to consider things from all angles, while I was more energetic and didn't shy from my tactics. He liked control, while I thrived on chaos. Which is probably why our partnership as Capo and Consigliere had been so successful and our older brother hadn't to

I looked around the church. Debi was sitting in the pews, in between Camillo and Camilla. She gave me a little wave and I winked back at her. She looked really pretty in her dress today and she was very excited about the wedding. At least that made one of us.

There were noises at the other end of the church, and then the doors started to open, and the large wooden doors opened. I looked up expectantly, waiting for my bride to appear.

A flower girl, who looked to be about four or five years old, proceeded down the aisle, scattering rose petals as she went along. Another girl, whom I recognized from the engagement party as Juliana's sister, was a bridesmaid and she followed closely behind, making sure to keep the flower girl covered when the young child quickly started to lose concentration.

Then Juliana appeared on the arm of her father. Her white lace dress emphasized her innocence and made her seem even more fragile than I'd met her the first time. Even with the veil over her face, I could see her intense bright blue eyes as she made her way down the aisle and came closer to me.

I'd met her the first time. Even with the veil over her face, I could see her intense bright blue eyes as she made her way down the aisle and came closer to me. She gripped her father's arm tightly, and I could see her knuckles

white. She was holding on for dear life. As she walked toward me, she kept her eyes straight ahead and avoided my gaze.

When they reached the altar, her father lifted her veil and revealed her face to me. I held out my hand, and Cecilio placed Juliana's hand in mine.

As I closed my fingers firmly around hers, her eyes darted to mine quickly, but I didn't miss the anxiety in her features nor the stony coldness of her hand in mine.

The Catholic priest began the wedding service, and I looked at Juliana again. She continued to avoid meeting my gaze, filling me with a sense of irrational anger.

After addressing the congregation, the priest turned to Juliana and asked, "Marco and Juliana, have you come here to enter into marriage freely and wholeheartedly?" An inappropriate question given the circumstances, but even the Mafia couldn't change the words required by Catholic religion.

"I have," I said, and turned to Juliana.

She kept her eyes forward and her voice quiet as she replied, "I have." I felt a swell of satisfaction that I hadn't needed to force the words out of her. "Are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his church?"

We both replied, "I am."

"Since it is your intention to enter the covenant of holy matrimony, I now join your right hands, and declare your consent before God and his church," decreed the priest.

As I turned toward Juliana, I saw out of the corner of my eye the flower girl running behind us and Jessica going to grab her.

In that split second, a gunshot rang out across the church.

he kept I saw Jessica fall to the ground.

And at once all hell broke loose.

er face I automatically drew my gun knowing that my brothers and soldiers
be doing the same. We never went anywhere without our weapons, n
ne. Sheto a wedding. I could see the Società soldiers brandishing their own gu
the icy *That bullet had been meant for me.*

It had been meant for me, but Jessica had gotten caught in the cross
ross atI aimed my weapon, I pushed Juliana to the ground behind me and
with anshield her with my body.

Screams and gunshots rang out and my gaze swung to Debi. Dar
nd me.already pulling her out of the church.

without Women and children hit the floor as they had all been trained to do
ven theyoung age while the men exchanged gunfire.

l by the The wedding had been a trap.

Fury had taken over my body and was driving my actions.

The Società wanted me dead and had used Juliana to lure me to L.A
ave.” I Here I was more vulnerable than if I were in my own territory of C
f her. My organization would be substantially weakened if I was killed—
ig themSocietà had probably planned to take out my brothers today as well.

Once I saw that Debi had reached safety outside the church, I g
Juliana and dragged her to her feet and out of the church with me.

ry, join “What are you doing?” screamed Juliana.

hurch,” “We need to get out of here!” I pulled her behind me and half drag
out of the church.

ne little Outside I shouted at Camillo. “Protect Debi. Don’t let her out o
sight!” I saw him bundle her into an SUV with him and Danio.

Juliana struggled as I pushed her into another SUV. “Let me go!”

I remember her saying those exact same words to me in her father's
after signing the engagement contract—I hadn't let her go then, and I
wouldn't let her go now.

“Jess was shot! I need to make sure that she's alright. I need to
her.” Juliana was more worried about her sister than herself and her
reflected the shock she was in. Her voice became higher and her tone
fire. “I need to stay with my sister. Please don't do this. Please
I cried, looking back toward the church.

But it was no good. Perhaps I should have felt some guilt at what
I was doing. But I wasn't a good man. I was a Made Man.

She had signed the contract.

She had signed herself over to me.

She was mine now.

And I was never letting her go.

I saw Alessio dragging the body of one of our injured soldiers out
today. He pushed him into another vehicle and then ran over to our
Chicago and got into the driver's seat.

The injured had been all loaded into vehicles now and we needed
them medical attention ASAP. I could see our soldiers getting ready to
grabbed my signal.

Once I was sure that Camillo's vehicle had safely moved off, I told
to hit the gas. Through a cacophony of shouts, slamming car doors, squeaked
tires, and the roar of adrenaline in my ears, we sped away from the car
the church.

“I'll tell Camillo and Danio to head to the private airfield to the west
city. That will be our best bet for escaping L.A.,” said Alessio, as I
our weapons with more ammunition.

s office I nodded in agreement. “I’ve already ruled out the city airfield and it wasn’t more likely to attract the attention of the FBI. Even with our backhanded support from the FBI, they won’t ignore a shootout in the middle of the city which would be with pose a significant danger to the civilian population.”

er eyes “The airfield to the north of the city is out of the equation too. It’s time for the Società to cut us off en-route there.”

e!” she Alessio had multiple planes on standby, providing us with different exfiltration options in a fluid situation such as this.

t I was “A couple of Società vehicles are on our tail,” said Alessio as he checked the rearview mirror.

I glanced over my shoulder. “We need to lose them.” I pulled out my handgun. Lowering my window I took aim at their tires, at the same time trying to dodge their bullets.

Both our cars and theirs would have bulletproof glass, but we could aim for each other’s tires to derail the vehicle. I was the best shot in my SUV Fratellanza, and together with Alessio’s defensive driving skills, I took out both Società vehicles, one by one.

l to get As I reached for the ammunition to reload my weapon, Juliana dove for the car door handle, thrusting the door wide open as the SUV sped down the road.

Alessio I was too quick for her, seizing her arm and wrenching her back into the vehicle, lunging across her to grab the door shut and shoving her back against the seat.

“For fuck’s sake, lock the goddamn doors!” I shouted at Alessio.

it of the “Christ, Marco, you need to get her under control! We need to focus on getting the hell out of L.A.”

She fought against me but I didn’t have time for her right now.

s that'sworry, I'll deal with her," I gritted out, my gaze fixed on the thrash
iders tonext to me.

h could I knew what had to be done.

I reached under the seat for the medical kit we kept in every vehicle.

oo easy I opened the kit, pulling out what I needed: a syringe.

ifferent JULIANA

hecked As soon as I heard Marco say that he would deal with me, I shrar
against the seat and tried to get as far away from him as possible.

ny gun. I knew that Jacob, Gabriel and the others would be trying to get m
ying to but once I was no longer in Società territory it would be much har

ld still them to rescue me and much more difficult to find anyone else to help

t in the "Please don't do this," I pleaded, shaking my head from side t
ook out Terror was coursing through my veins—terror at what had just happen
terror at what was going to happen next.

for the But he continued to come toward me. And then I saw him tak
own the syringe. I felt the blood drain from my face.

into the The syringe in his hand made it difficult for him to restrain me with
free hand, giving me a chance.

inst her I couldn't just give in. I struggled against his hold, kicking out my l
hitting out with my arms.

ocus on Then he shoved hard at me, making me fall back so that I was lying
sprawled across the back seat.

"Don't I tried to scramble up into a sitting position. But he twisted arou
threw his leg over my body, straddling my hips with his muscled thi

ing girlanchoring me to the seat.

I bucked my body violently under him. His weight was heavy, crushed and forcing the air from my lungs.

The syringe was getting closer.

“Stop fighting,” he growled into my hair as he reached for me and gripped my upper arms.

One of my hands managed to escape his grasp and I lashed out blindly, clawing my nails down his cheek.

He grimaced as he felt my nails gouge his skin open. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he snarled, the aggression in his voice making my blood freeze. “You’re going to pay for this. You’re going to pay for everything that happened today.”

He restrained my arms in his hands. I frantically tried to evade him, but he tightened his grip and immobilized my arms which were held out to the side. I tried to push him away.

I knew that nothing could save me now. I was trapped—I had no chance of escape him and no chance of overpowering him.

As I saw the needle advancing, my panic doubled. I tried to shrug my body away from him.

But I felt a sharp, cold prick at the base of my neck, and suddenly everything seemed to slow down, everything except for the cold pain that was coursing through my veins.

But then even that slowed down, as everything went black.

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CHAPTER 6

MARCO

As soon as we reached the private airfield, we headed straight to that Alessio had arranged to be fully fueled and on standby.

I had been in constant contact with my soldiers while on the way airfield and they were also heading back to Chicago.

“What’s the current situation?” asked Alessio, as he saw me hang phone to one of my soldiers.

I had to force the words out. “Three of our soldiers are dead, plus two are seriously injured. Fuck, the Società bastards tricked us probably planned all along to kill us.”

Juliana was still unconscious as I got out of the SUV. I roughly s her body into my arms and pulled her against my chest. Her limbs w

and pliant against my hard body as I carried her onto the private jet, her skin with its translucent skin looking serene like an angel.

Goddamnit, she had been the perfect screen to hide the Società's plan behind. She had been their Trojan horse, and she had been part of an elaborate ploy to lie to me and deceive me.

The supposed wedding had been a cunning plan to get me and my family all away from the safety and protection of our home city.

As soon as I had put her in her seat, I went over to check on Debi. Her cheeks were stained with tears, and I felt my heart ache that she'd have to witness this 'bloody wedding' today. In our world, bloody weddings were rare but they existed—no one expected bloodshed at a Mafia wedding, sometimes it was unavoidable when one side betrayed the other.

Debi was fourteen and I wished I could protect her forever. "Don't worry, shortcake, it's going to be alright." I held her in my arms, letting her rest her head against my chest. "It'll take more than a few bullets to get rid of me. I'm on the jet now and I'm going to get you home. You're safe, we all are, I promise."

"I was so scared, Marco. I saw blood pouring out of one of the soldiers. He looked as though he might die. I just don't get why they did that." Debi sobbed.

There wasn't anything I could say to explain it to her. This was the way of our world.

Once Debi had calmed down, I got her settled into her seat.

"Well, I won't be giving the city of L.A. a five-star rating on TripAdvisor after today," muttered Camillo from where he stood in the aisle of the jet.

"This wasn't supposed to be a goddamn holiday," I snarled.

"Aww, I was looking forward to seeing some of the sights. We never go to any other cities—you know, because we're unwelcome just

er face everywhere,” complained Camillo.

“Why would you want to go to any other city?” My brother could be deadly goddamn irritating sometimes. “We’re the Kings of Chicago—and of this best fucking city in the world.”

I strode back to my seat. We were getting ready to take off as soon as our brothers received the necessary clearance from the air traffic control.

As I sat down next to Juliana, I noticed that her arm was bleeding. He must have gashed it against something when I pushed her to the ground. I had to check it out—I would take a look at it when we were airborne. I would feel a lot better once we were no longer on Californian soil.

While we were waiting for take-off, Alessio came over to me. “W

fuck, Marco? We should leave her behind,” he said, signaling toward J

“Hey, “She’s mine now, and she’s coming with us.”

her cry “Christ, Marco, we’ve got Debi with us. They’ll come after us . We’re Juliana back. We need to get back to Chicago ASAP and having her promise.” is just asking for trouble.”

iers. He “We’ll be fine—we’re taking off soon.” I wasn’t in the mood for it,” she Alessio’s in-depth examinations of the pros and cons of a situation.

“And until then we’re sitting ducks while our plane is on the way of waiting for clearance to take off.

“I vote with Alessio,” chipped in Camillo.

“You don’t get a fucking vote,” I snapped at my brother.

Advisor “For God’s sake, Marco, we’re safer leaving her behind. Even (jet. agrees with me.” Alessio wasn’t letting this go.

“And what makes you think this is a fucking democracy?” I growled at her. “It’s my decision as Capo. That’s final.”

I didn’t often pull rank on Alessio, but I barely had a handle

emotions and I didn't want to discuss this further.

After my brothers returned to their seats, I looked across at Juliana. She remained unconscious. I couldn't believe that I had allowed myself to be tempted by the beauty sleeping next to me.

Juliana was the Società's version of 'Pandora', I thought, a bitter-sweet coating my throat. Just as Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, had caused the creation of the exquisite Pandora and then directed Hermes to fill her with lies and guile, the Società had molded Juliana into a beautiful siren. He had offered her as a gift to me under the pretense of a marriage pact. But she had been a trick used to lure me into a trap, so that destruction and what she could be unleashed upon the Fratellanza.

I was raging about the Società's attack on us today, but I knew I was furious that this girl was not what I had thought.

Then I had to remind myself that the only reason I had wanted to marry her was to gain power via the alliance and that getting her as my wife had been just a side benefit.

I looked down at the girl next to me, my gaze trailing over her blood-soaked, ripped dress.

I wasn't sure I liked her like this—a part of me preferred her when she was lashing out and fighting me.

The white fabric of her dress was splattered with drops of blood, pouring from the gash on her arm. I ran my fingers over those droplets. Sor Camillo about blood always got my adrenaline going, its bright red color caught my senses, calling to the darker side of me.

Her expression was serene right now, almost angelic. But that would last, not when she came around and realized that she was now in my hands, that she was now my captive.

Her white dress screamed innocence; however, the red droplets on her face told me that this angel had been tainted by darkness today.

This was only the start. I would take her body and break her innocence, break that protective shell that had guarded her all her life from the corrupt taste of our world.

She might have the face of an angel, but she had the heart of a traitor with her. She was supposed to be my wife. Now she would be my revenge.

They'd

not really,

and ruin

We had been up in the air for a couple of hours when I heard a love cry from next to me and Juliana stirred in her seat.

She was coming around as the drug I had injected into her was wearing off. I turned toward her and saw her trying to open her eyes.

"Wh-what's happening?" she stammered as she tried to sit up. "Where are we?"

I narrowed my eyes. "We're going home," I replied.

I saw confusion on her face as she looked around us and took in what was. "Home?"

"Back to Chicago."

Panic filled her eyes, joining the confusion and terror that were swirling there. "I have to go back to L.A."

I turned away from her.

"I need to make sure Jess is going to be alright." When I didn't reply, her voice rose an octave. "Why are you doing this to me?"

f blood I looked at her and saw the emotion shining in her clear blue eyes
hardened my heart. “You belong to me now. I’m taking you to yo
ence—home.”

rueities “You’re crazy! I don’t belong to you.” She forced the words out
her patent fear of me.

r. “That’s where you’re wrong. You signed the contract and therefore
you now.” My voice was harsh.

“You can’t buy a human being through a contract,” she spat at me
can’t own me. That contract will never stand up in a court of law.”

“It doesn’t need to stand up in a court of law. It’s enforceable in ou
—the Mafia world. You may be young, but you’re not naive. You kno
v moan things work, and you know that your family has to honor the contrac
you.”

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happened.

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woozy, and my words had their intended effect as they dealt anoth
blow to her.

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I looked at her and saw the emotion shining in her clear blue eyes. And I hardened my heart. “You belong to me now. I’m taking you to your new home.”

“You’re crazy! I don’t belong to you.” She forced the words out despite her patent fear of me.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You signed the contract and therefore I own you now.” My voice was harsh.

“You can’t buy a human being through a contract,” she spat at me. “You can’t own me. That contract will never stand up in a court of law.”

“It doesn’t need to stand up in a court of law. It’s enforceable in our world—the Mafia world. You may be young, but you’re not naive. You know how things work, and you know that your family has to honor the contract, as do you.”

Her gaze faltered, as though she was trying to comprehend what had happened.

She was probably in shock, together with the drug still making her feel woozy, and my words had their intended effect as they dealt another hard blow to her.

CHAPTER 7

JULIANA

I felt like I'd lost control of everything.

I looked out of the window of the jet, wondering if I could still see I

But all I could see was the black darkness. It was so dark that I c
even see the stars.

I looked down at my hands, fisting them in a futile attempt to st
shaking.

I hadn't been expecting a fairytale wedding today. But I also
expected what had just happened: a bloody wedding. Of course I'
about them. But I had never experienced one and I had always hoped
never to witness one, never mind have it happen on my very own w
day.

A Mafia bloody wedding—the stuff of nightmares. When the f turned on each other, and the wedding turned into a slaughter. I stil understand what had happened and how Jess could have been shot.

I'd been kidnapped by a maniac, I thought, as a shudder ran thro body. I had expected to lose my family today when I moved to C However, I never thought that I might lose my sister in a shooting, freedom.

By now, tears of fear and confusion were leaving a trail down my we flew through the night. I turned to Marco. “Do you know if Jess she alive?” I forced the words out. It was as if saying them out lou what had happened real.

He remained silent.

“Please just tell me that. Please just tell me if my sister is alright.”

“I imagine she will be fine,” he answered, clenching his jaw.

“How can you be so calm about it? My eighteen-year-old sister’s be and in a church of all places.”

..A. “The whole fucking thing was planned by your precious S couldn’t Therefore, they would have had a doctor on standby and she woul gotten medical attention straightaway. It didn’t look as if the bullc op their major blood vessel.”

“What do you mean that it was planned by my family?”

hadn’t Marco narrowed his gaze at me. “The shot your sister took was me l heard me. This whole engagement and marriage were just a sham to lure my to God to L.A. to take us out.”

wedding “You can’t be serious?” I felt my face pale, and I was too shocked cry anymore. “My own family shot Jess?”

“Yeah, and you and your sister are just collateral damage in the whc

amiliesshow.”

I didn't I was horrified, but I also knew I couldn't trust anything a Marchia to me. My head felt as if it was splintering into pieces as someone had driven my nails into it. I rubbed at my temples, not that it helped. I didn't think Chicago was anything that could help me to feel better at this stage.

nor my Marco got up and disappeared to the back of the plane. I looked around and saw his brothers and sister seated further away from us. They didn't face anything to me, obviously hating me because the Società was their enemy. I sank back into the wide leather seat and closed my eyes, willing myself to stop pounding. I was glad that Marco had gone elsewhere in the plane because I couldn't bear to look at him right now.

Whatever he claimed, I knew that his men were definitely the ones that shot Jess. My father would never endanger his own family by allowing a shootout at the church.

When shot My mind was in turmoil. *The man I was supposed to marry had killed me.* I had already been fearful that my new life with this man would be difficult, but now I was absolutely certain that my life with him would be a complete nightmare.

When I hit a I was feeling drowsy, probably due to the drug Marco had injected with, and I must have drifted off again because the next thing I felt was someone touching my arm.

When I forced my eyes open to see what was going on.

When Marco was bent over my arm. He had thrown me to the ground when the gunfire had started, and I remembered gashing it. He was inspecting the wound and feeling it gently with his fingertips. “You're lucky. This needs stitches. I'll clean it up for you and put a dressing on it.”

When I said “Lucky? I don't think anyone could consider me lucky after to

whispered.

no said I didn't have the physical energy or mental strength to fight him ar
nmeredso I just rested my weary head against the seat and let him treat my wo
lk there

MARCO

around
ln't say She was a good actress, I'd give her that, pretending not to know ab
my. family's plan today. She was smart enough to pretend ignorance, b
y head wouldn't save her now.
e cabin

I examined her wound and then proceeded to clean it. It wasn't a ki
I didn't want it getting infected—she would be of no use to me dead.
hat had Although I loved the sight and feel of blood, I could tell by the lool
wing a eyes that she didn't feel the same.

It was a fairly minor injury, and it just needed cleaning up and t
napped keep an eye on it. I gave a twisted smile. "I like the sight of your b
ould be gives me satisfaction to see you bleed." I could feel her pulse beatin
ld be a too fast under my fingers.

"Is that your plan? You're going to hurt me just so you can see my l
ted me
elt was "This wasn't intentional," I said, nodding toward her arm. "But I c
you now whenever I like—because you are mine."

She stiffened at my words, keeping her eyes on me, waiting to see
was going to do to her.

hen the As I cradled her slender arm in my large hands, I felt a desire to stro
ing my to run my fingers over the sensitive skin on the inside of her wrist,
s won't delicate forearm, to the crease inside her elbow, and then let my
day," I explore the rest of her.

day," I

Holding on to her arm, I looked up into her eyes and saw her swallow
 anymore, Gripping her arm in one hand, I used my other hand to open the r
 und. kit I had grabbed on the way to my seat—Alessio had ensured that all
 on standby were equipped with several such kits.

I found myself reluctant to clean up her wound, to wipe away her l
 liked the look of her perfection being spoiled. I liked to see that she c
 hurt.

I got the antiseptic out of the medical kit. Juliana hissed as I appli
 out that the open skin, and she tried to pull her arm back.

“Keep still. I need to clean this to stop it from getting infected,”
 ndness. severely, as I held her arm firmly in place.

I kept my eyes on her arm and focused on the task at hand. I could :
 k in her eyes watching me. Once I had cleaned the wound, I applied a dressing
 should do for now.”

When I’d
 hood. It Juliana pulled her hand away and rubbed at her temples.

Her head was obviously troubling her. I watched her and then hande
 g much bottle of water. “Here. Drink this. It will get rid of the headache faster.

“I wouldn’t have a headache in the first place if you hadn’t drugge
 blood?” she snapped at me.

I clenched my jaw. She was playing with fire.

Thankfully she said no more—my tolerance was by now at an all-tir
 what I She slowly drank the water and then closed her eyes again, turning h
 ke her, toward the window, either to sleep or to ignore me.

A little while later the seatbelt sign came on as we encountered turb
 up her I reached across Juliana who looked as though she had drifted off aga
 fingers jumped when she felt my arm across her and startled awake. “Don’
 me.”

w hard. I pulled my hand away. “You need to put your seatbelt on. We
medical turbulence.”

the jets When Juliana didn’t fasten her seat belt, I felt annoyance rise up in
she had just ignored my instruction. If she couldn’t obey even a
blood. I command like putting on her seatbelt, she was going to make
ould be extremely difficult for herself in the days to come.

“Put your seatbelt on. Now,” I ordered.

ed it to “Why?”

“Because it will keep you safe.”

’ I said “Are you kidding me? Today I’ve been shot at, drugged, and kid
and you’re worried about a fucking seatbelt?”

feel her I didn’t have the patience to deal with her right now. “Do it. Or I
, “That for you.”

With her mouth set in a rigid line, she buckled up her seatbelt. I gu
thought that preferable to having my hands near her.

ed her a Satisfied, I got up and went to talk to Alessio.

” Debi seemed a bit less upset now. Danio had been trying to take he
ed me,” off what had happened today. Right now, she was curled up against h
with his arm around her, and they were laughing at something on his

Those two were as close as two siblings could be. As the two yo
ne low siblings they had gravitated toward each other, especially after Cami
ier face initiated and had gotten busy working with Alessio and me.

Danio was still in school like Debi, so they naturally spent a lot
ulence together. He was keen to be initiated into the Fratellanza, but we wou
in. She until he was sixteen, like we had with Camillo.

t touch Danio looked earnestly at Debi. “You know I would never let a
happen to you, right?”

“I’ve hit “I know,” replied Debi. And with that she threw her arms around him
“I love you, Danio.”

me that He hugged her back. “Yeah, ditto.”

simple “Hey, have you seen the video of the cat skateboarding in the stadium?”
things stadium?” asked Debi, searching for another video on his phone. Within
the moment of seriousness was gone, and they went back to laughing and
joking around.

I turned to Alessio. “Any update on how long until we land in Chicago?”

“Not long now. It’s probably about twenty minutes until we reach Chicago.”
napped, The pilot said we’ve had a tailwind behind us and we’ve made good time.
Good. We were nearly home, back on our own territory, in the city we
’ll do it ruled.

Soon I would be showing my bride her new home.

less she And soon I would make her sorry that she ever thought she could trust

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“I know,” replied Debi. And with that she threw her arms around his neck.
“I love you, Danio.”

He hugged her back. “Yeah, ditto.”

“Hey, have you seen the video of the cat skateboarding in the football stadium?” asked Debi, searching for another video on his phone. With that, the moment of seriousness was gone, and they went back to laughing and joking around.

I turned to Alessio. “Any update on how long until we land in Chicago?”

“Not long now. It’s probably about twenty minutes until we reach Chicago. The pilot said we’ve had a tailwind behind us and we’ve made good time.”

Good. We were nearly home, back on our own territory, in the city where I ruled.

Soon I would be showing my bride her new home.

And soon I would make her sorry that she ever thought she could trick me.

CHAPTER 8

MARCO

It was late when we landed in Chicago. I stood up and looked at her, but she made no move to rise.

A tear at the top of her dress revealed her slender shoulder and a glimpse of the swell of her breast. I felt my dick stir at the sight of her naked skin. It would be fun to break in my defiant little virgin.

“Come on. Time to go.”

As she finally got to her feet and moved into the aisle of the plane, I saw that her legs were still wobbly. The drug had still not fully worn off and she looked shattered with exhaustion.

I steadied her with my arm, but she pushed it away. “I don’t need help.”

“Whatever you say.” My voice was like granite as I took my arm. Almost immediately she stumbled and would have fallen to the floor my catching her. “Stop being so stubborn. I’m trying to stop you from yourself.” I gripped her arm as we exited the plane and went down to our waiting cars.

Camillo took Danio and Debi in one car. Alessio drove the second when we reached it, I opened the rear door. “Get in,” I instructed Juliana

She looked as if she might disobey me and refuse, but she got in an argument. However, after climbing into the car, she moved across and sat as far away from me as possible. I’d let her have that for now.

The night had turned chilly. She hugged her arms around herself looked out of the car window. I could tell she was trying to identify landmarks and was probably already trying to plot an escape plan.

But now that I’d got her, I wouldn’t ever be letting her go.

Juliana,

glimpse

flesh. It

No one said anything on the drive home. We drove down Lake Drive, and the view of Lake Michigan filled me with calm for the first time today.

I could

off, plus

Today had been a nightmare and my family were finally safe now were back in Chicago, back in my empire.

and your

When we reached the Marchiano estate, the guards at the perimeter opened the electric gates and we drove through. I could see Juliana trying to count the many guards there were and probably also if they were armed.

away. Upon reaching the mansion, I got out and moved around to Juliana's car but for opened the door and reluctantly she stepped out of the car, looking up at the hurtinghouse. Her legs were still shaky, so I decided to pick her up and carry her up the stairsinside. I put one hand under her legs and the other around her back, clasp her soft body against my hard one.

car and "Put me down! I can walk by myself."

na. I ignored her and instead grasped her more tightly to my chest withoutstruggled to free herself, thinking that I liked the feel of her body v against the seatagainst mine. "I'm supposed to carry my bride across the threshold to my new home."

as she "But we didn't actually get married, remember?"

identify "It doesn't matter. You signed the contract and you're mine now. I'll throw out a wedding for us soon enough." She blanched at my words.

When I got inside, I didn't put her down and instead carried her up upstairs. I took her into the bedroom and put her down on the bed. I could tell that she was trying to look brave, but I could still see the fear in her eyes. I knew I wasn't a good man.

"Get ready for bed. I'll be back." I stalked out of the room, and I closed the door behind me.

first time

JULIANA

that we

I heard the door click shut and then the sound of a lock turning. The door openedgoing to be my prison cell.

see how At first, I could only stand with my arms wrapped around myself, my cold fingertips against my skin and shaking uncontrollably. Being

s side. In this room—in his bedroom—brought home to me that I was n
p at the captive.

urry her I was still feeling nauseous and my brain felt foggy, and I wasn't s
utching was due to the drug he injected me with or the terror I was feeling. W
the cause, I felt terrible. I tried to swallow down my panic, but it kep
to take over my whole mind and body, wrapping its icy tentacles arou
as shethroat, making it feel like I couldn't breathe.

vrithing After attempting to calm myself for a few minutes, I got up and
l of her around the bedroom. I looked around myself and attempted to take
surroundings. The room had been furnished in a masculine style an
was little to soften the room's hard feel. I tried to look around, but n
I'll sort kept returning to the large bed.

Someone obviously slept in this bed. The nightstand on one side of
straight a half-drunk bottle of water and a phone charger. The room had a
ould seemusk and lemongrass, just like the cologne Marco had worn today.

res. She This was obviously his bedroom. And this was where I would be e:
to sleep now. And do other things.

locked My wedding night was always going to be difficult, but now I wa
held prisoner by a man who I hadn't even married.

I sat on the bed. My body ached with tiredness and my head was thu
My eyes felt gritty from my earlier tears and my current exhaustion. I
to put my head down on the pillow and fall into a deep sleep, but I kn
he wouldn't let me do that, not before he had claimed me.

his was I decided to distract myself and explore more before he came back.
feeling through a door which led me into an adjoining bathroom. I washed my
locked and face in the hope that it might help clear my mind. The bathroc
luxurious, with a marble stone floor, dual vanities, a large walk-in

low his and a huge bathtub. I looked around me, trying to take in my new ca
wondering if he was expecting me to make myself pretty for our w
ure if it night.

hatever I looked at my reflection in the vanity mirror. My eyes looked huge
t trying face and my skin was unnaturally pale.

und my I wandered back into the bedroom and decided to try the window
they were also locked. There was no way out.

walked

in my MARCO

id there

ny eyes

I headed back downstairs to check on my siblings. Alessio and C
were old enough and ugly enough to look after themselves. I wanted t
it held sure that Danio and Debi were okay though.

hint of

“Come on, shortcake, it’s time for bed,” I said to Debi, putting r
around her.

xpected

“Go get ready and I’ll be up soon to tuck you in.” I had a few th
discuss first with Alessio.

s being

We needed to get the security footage from the church to see exact
had happened. No self-respecting church frequented by the Mafi
imping. without CCTV these days.

longed

Tonight, I also needed to visit in person the families of my dead sol
ew that was the last thing I felt like doing, but they deserved to hear it from m
was my duty as Capo.

. I went

I recited the words every Made Man said upon a death: “*Santa
Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell’ora della nostra*

om was

shower

The meaning of those words was always so poignant: ‘Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.’

The prayer was said as much for myself as for my dead soldiers.

Once I was done talking with Alessio, I went up to check on Debi. She was already asleep. I pulled the comforter up around her and kissed her gently on the forehead. I was livid at the Società for what they had made my little witness today. I took one last look at her and then headed out to visit the families of the dead soldiers.

JULIANA

Camillo

After looking around the bedroom, I sank down into a velvet armchair and stood in front of the windows. My mind wouldn’t stop racing as I tried to comprehend what had happened today and what would happen tonight.

I huddled into the armchair and wrapped my arms around myself. I suddenly felt cold and had goosebumps on my arms. I didn’t know if it was because it was actually cold in here or if it was because of what would happen tonight in this room.

I could hardly keep awake and I longed to just curl up and sleep. I knew that I needed to stay awake, to be prepared for when he returned. I had always known that my marriage would be arranged and that it would be to a Made Man. It was forbidden to marry outsiders. In our world, we didn’t marry for love—we married according to our family’s objectives.

I hadn’t expected a knight in shining armor to sweep me off my feet. I never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that I would be kidnapped

other of wedding day by a heartless maniac.

All the stories I had heard while growing up about the horrifying b of the Fratellanza, ordered or carried out by Marco Marchiano, kept she washrough my mind.

ntly on While we could never talk about such matters in front of outsiders le sisterfamilies liked nothing more than to gossip about these things visit thethemselves. Dear Lord, would I be the next topic of gossip discussed wives of the Società Mafia during one of their coffee mornings back i Would my name be mentioned in dramatic whispers, the wives preten be horrified and disgusted but at the same time secretly delighting in t gossip they could speculate about and spread?

No matter how much I willed my brain to stop these thoughts, m pair that kept spinning out of control, feeling like it was taking my sanity with i tried to

yself. I

f it was

would

I didn't remember falling asleep. But I must have done because t thing I knew, I felt muscular arms around me lifting me out of the arm

I jerked awake and tried to see what was happening. The sky outsi dark but someone must have switched on a lamp in the room.

My eyes hadn't adjusted to the bright light, but I knew that my kic was back.

And that he was expecting something from me.

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CHAPTER 9

JULIANA

“I’m taking you to bed,” he said in a hard tone.

His eyes were intense on my face, almost burning me with their searing the edges of the terror galloping through my body.

“No—I’m not sleeping in that bed with you.” I struggled against him, trying to twist out of his hold.

He gave a twisted smile, making my stomach turn over. “We won’t be doing much sleeping. Anyway, you’re my captive. And captives don’t have a choice.”

“I’ll scream,” I threatened, saying the only thing I could think of as my mind scrambled frantically.

“Go ahead. As if anyone here would help you. Besides, I like a captive who screams.”

I felt the blood drain from my face, but I couldn't just give in to
couldn't just give in to whatever he had planned for me. I thrashed
hold, kicking out with my arms and legs, trying to get away from him.

He tightened his grip around me, walking over to his bed and
throwing me onto it.

The moment my back hit the mattress I quickly turned around on
hands and knees and clambered against the silk of my dress to the other
of the bed.

I got across the mattress and my feet swiftly hit the hard floor on the
side of the bed.

As I looked around feverishly, my gaze went to the door of the bedroom.
I might be able to make it out of here.

"Don't even think about it, Juliana. There's nowhere you can run to."
voice was dark, unnerving me with its unspoken threats.

"I don't understand what you want with me, what you're going to do
me?"

His gaze, "I'm sure you can imagine." His drawl made the hair on the back of
neck stand up as I watched his eyes glint at me.

His grasp, "But we weren't married and I'm not your wife...do you expect me to
your whore?" My blood ran cold. "Surely you won't treat me like that."
I tried to appear brave, but I couldn't stop a shudder running through my
body.

He just looked at me, not responding to me, as if whatever he had in
mind upon was a foregone conclusion no matter what I said, no matter how
I pleaded.

"You can't hold me responsible for the actions of the Società, for a
woman done by your enemy which I had no control over?"

He prowled a couple of steps closer to me. "Can't I? You must know

to him, *You* are now also my enemy...and mine to punish however I see fit.”
I bolted for the door. I was hindered by my long dress and slowed down by my fear. I stumbled but managed to put my hand on the door handle and pulled it roughly open.

My heart leapt into my throat and I cried out when his large hand clamped down on my hand in an iron grip.
His other arm hauled me toward him, crashing my back into his chest before he bent his head to my ear. “You can’t escape me, beautiful. The others should already know that, but it seems I may need to drive that message home to you.”
I squeezed my eyes shut as his voice ominously caressed the shell of my ear.

“Come.” His hand seized my arm and yanked me away from the door.
I tried to take a gulp of air, but even breathing was difficult right now. I silently prayed that maybe he’d at least be gentle with me.

He led me over to the bed again. “Take off the dress,” he commanded.
I took a shaky breath. “No. I’m not taking my clothes off in front of you.”
He smirked. “We’ll see. I plan for you to be naked in this room and waiting for me to be lying on my bed with your thighs spread wide open and waiting for me.”

As he spoke, he ran his fingers softly over the gash on my arm, making me flinch as his hand sent needles of adrenaline piercing through my body.
His touch from him brought him closer to taking me and brought me closing myself. He was out for revenge.

“Take your dress off. Do it—now. It would be a shame to have to see your pretty skin if you keep defying me. It would be much more fun to see you now that your tight pussy with my cum.”

My cheeks flushed bright crimson as I shook my head at him. My own byor supposed-to-be-my-husband-by-now or whatever he wanted and turnhimself, referring so crudely to sex was mortifying and terrifying in measure. “You disgust me.”

fingers My words had no effect on his plans. “You’re not wearing that c bed. Take. It. Off.”

s chest He exhaled heavily when I didn’t start undressing. “Turn around il. Youdemanded. But my feet were frozen to the spot.

ige into When I didn’t move, he walked behind me. Towering above me, I h breath as I felt his hands graze over my shoulders, jerking at the l of mycontact from his fingers. I wanted to scream at him not to touch me knew it would do no good and it wouldn’t stop him.

or. He ran his fingertips down my neck and slowly unzipped my dress now. Ithe cool air kiss my bare skin, the feeling starting at the base of my ne spreading down the length of my spine as the back of my dress gradu ed. open. He took his time, drawing out my torment and undoing me furth you.” I shivered. Maybe I should have just taken off the dress myself. Tha lot, forwouldn’t have had to feel his hands on me now.

ting for The dress pooled at my feet. “Step out of it,” he ordered, as he h hand out to me.

ing me I looked warily at him, unable to reach out to the hand which wou . Every me. Ignoring him, I instead wrapped my arms around myself, steppi loser tothe heaped fabric of the dress.

I was left standing in my wedding lingerie—a matching white la o markpanties, and garter. I wished now that I hadn’t let my mother insist o to marksexy items and had instead gone with my first choice of something pl more substantial.

fiancé, He ran his gaze over me in an assessing stare before he raised his hand to call me again.

on equal I recoiled from his impending touch, automatically retreating a step from his reach.

dresser to But he snarled and stalked toward me, taking a step forward with each step I took back until my back painfully met the hard wall, a snarl escaping my tight throat.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you...yet.”

held my Time appeared to stand still, lengthening my dread. “Yet?”

sudden I was trapped between the wall and his hard body. His hand reached toward my panties. I bit my lip to stop a scream from escaping.

I felt his cool fingers skim over the lace of my panties and touch my thighs. I felt Everything seemed to go into slow motion.

back and He ran his fingertips along my upper legs, stroking the softest part of my thighs between my legs, letting his touch linger, before roughly tugging at my garter and letting it fall to the floor.

it way I I swallowed hard and I risked a look up at him to find that he was undressing.

held his He removed his gun holster first, laying it on top of the dresser. Unbuttoning the top couple of his shirt buttons, he pulled it over his head and tossed it onto the armchair that I had been sitting on before. His arms were thick with muscle and led up to powerful shoulders. His torso was toned, with a tanned olive skin was dusted with dark hair and scattered with scars from his military injuries. It was clear that his body was ruthlessly fit and a deadly weapon. I looked at the tattoos covering his back and one arm. These had been completely covered when he had worn a long-sleeved dress shirt. The

hand to also a tattoo at the top of his left shoulder, depicting what I knew to be the symbol of the Fratellanza—a knife piercing a hand.

He kicked off his shoes and moved on to his dress pants, unzipping them and pulling them down to reveal strong, muscular thighs.

I couldn't stop myself from watching him. I felt a sheen of cold sweat between my breasts at the thought of how this man would punish me for the Società's wrongs. He was a killer and a murderer, and he would have no qualms about hurting me on what should have been our wedding night.

He stepped out of his pants and was left in only his boxer briefs, and he turned around to throw his pants onto the armchair to join his shirt. I stopped the panic rising up my body. It propelled my legs to run for the door again.

But he was too quick for me. Catching me, he wrapped his arms around the back of my legs and hauled me over his shoulder with a grunt, flipping me over his shoulder so swiftly that I felt the air whooshing past my lungs as my torso slammed against his back.

I was drowning in his strength. He was stealing the oxygen from my lungs, the fight from my body, the sanity from my soul.

He carried me back toward the bed in a few long strides. The suddenness of his movements and the tightness of his grip around my body made me pure breathless. I tried to kick my legs free but he had them completely restrained with his arm, making it impossible for me to get out of his grip.

I drummed my fists onto his back, but my hands just connected with his hard muscle, and it was as if he hardly felt my blows. Arriving at the bed he flipped me back down and I tried to spin away from him.

“Stop struggling!” He grabbed both my arms and whirled me around to face him. His charcoal eyes were wild. “You need to learn how to ob-

to be the growled.

My breath was coming in heaving gulps now, but I still felt like I couldn't get enough oxygen into my lungs as tears spilled down my face.

He released me. "Get into bed."

I sweat I was paralyzed.

for the "I said, get into bed."

I have no But I couldn't move. I could barely keep myself standing and it felt like though my legs were about to give way under me.

As he said "This is the last time I'm going to tell you..." His voice was dead and I couldn't know, dripping with unspoken threat. "Get into that bed—now. We're going to sleep."

My mouth fell open. "We're going to...sleep?" I stammered.

He said "Yes, sleep. It's been a fucking long day and we both need to get some rest."

out of "We're going to get some rest?"

He reached behind me and turned down the comforter and sheets. "I hesitated, but having run out of options, I did the only thing I could do—I climbed beneath the cold sheets."

He turned off the lamp on his nightstand, shrouding us in complete darkness. My fear wouldn't stop its rampage through my body—darkness the unfamiliar room seemed even more foreboding, as if a monster was next to me.

h more

foot of MARCO

ound to

ey," he

After breaking the news of my soldiers' deaths to their families, I couldn't think of anything I felt like was consummating my relationship with Juliana.

Three men dead. Three faithful soldiers from loyal families who had served the Fratellanza. Despite my hard front, I was not immune to the grief of their families. We would look after their dependents and they would have no financial worries, but nothing could bring back their loved ones. As if the loss of loved ones had been my responsibility. It had been my duty to protect the Fratellanza from our enemies.

But I had been deceived by the Società, fooled by their lies and blinded by my attraction to the beauty they had flaunted in front of me.

Fuck. They would pay, and she would pay, if it was the last thing I did.

I turned my eyes to Juliana. She had scooted across the bed and lay as far away from me as possible. I'd give her that much tonight. I didn't want to handle on my rage, and she was right to keep as far away from me as possible.

How easy it would be to fuck my anger out of my system, punish her for her treachery and the Società's treachery. Once she had signed the contract, she had been mine, and she should have been loyal to me completely.

This little traitor could wait for now. There was nowhere for her to go. She would receive her punishment soon enough.

It was dark in the room as I lay down in bed. She was faced away from me and laid rigidly on the edge of the mattress, obviously not trusting what I had said to her about my intentions for tonight. I could tell she was trying to stay awake until I fell asleep—as if I might take advantage of her while she was sleeping. Not that it would be difficult to take her. Her wedding lingerie

the last been chosen to arouse her husband—the wispy nothings made of lace
complete tease, just like the girl laying next to me.

and long I listened to her rapid breaths slow down, and after a while, I heard
the grief breathing change into the steady rhythm of sleep. The drug I had knocked
her out with earlier would still be working its way out of her system and it
would make her drowsy until tomorrow at least. I should have given her a
larger dose, but the syringes we kept prepared in all our medical kits were designed
for their normal target of large strapping enemies, not small, fragile girls like
Juliana.

It was strange having someone sleep with me in my bed. I had never
seen anyone sleep the entire night in my bed since the kids had been young.
My chest ached as I remembered Debi and Danio sneaking into my room
as far as they could when they couldn't sleep after our parents had died.

Debi used to slip quietly into my bedroom, clinging onto her fluffy
blanket as puppy as I would lift her onto my bed. Debi had been five then and
Danio had only been a year older than her. They used to come to my bed
crying themselves to sleep. I remembered how Debi's small body had snuggled
into mine and shaken with sobs until she would fall asleep exhausted, still
crying and holding onto her favorite toy. And for every one of those moments, I
tried to comfort myself.

She had been too young to have to deal with such loss. Her hands
had been so small, and each tear rolling down from her huge brown
eyes would kill me just a little bit more.

Trying to comfort the kids had never made the pain any less—either
for them or for me. I knew that I hadn't deserved absolution from my sins
because she would have done anything if it meant my siblings hurting less.

When I was sure Juliana was asleep, I turned toward her and looked
at her face. This was the first time today that I'd seen her without w

were aher face. I continued staring at her, looking at what was mine.

I should have taken her as my wife today.

ard her But now I had taken her as my prize...and I would use her as my rev

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I should have taken her as my wife today.

But now I had taken her as my prize...and I would use her as my revenge.

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CHAPTER 10

JULIANA

I woke up and for a few seconds, it seemed as though it were an morning of my life.

But then I stretched out in bed and felt the unfamiliar sheets around my body and my eyes flew open.

The memories of yesterday came crashing into my mind just as they overwhelm the shore at high tide. Dear Lord, did yesterday really happen?

I looked down at my body clad in just my wedding lingerie, and I knew that my memories were a very real occurrence. My terror pushed away the exhaustion that lingered from yesterday. I let my gaze fall on the other side of the bed—it was empty. Marco must have already woken and, as I could hear any sounds from the adjoining bathroom, I assumed that he had gone there alone.

I tried to hold my anxiety inside me. I felt like screaming out, but that wouldn't help me. There was nobody in this mansion to hear me for the Marchiano's, and none of them would go against their Capo me.

Maybe it was better that Marco thought that I was still asleep? That wouldn't come for me just yet.

My brain started racing. Was he planning on using me as a bar chip? To trade me for money or territory?

Did he plan to rape me? Or kill me?

Would he use me until he got bored of me? Or would he just straight away?

I had to stop these thoughts from going around my head or I was going to drive myself mad. My mind swiftly turned to Jessica, wondering—how that she was still alive. I couldn't believe that I had been worrying myself when my sister might already be dead.

I couldn't let my thoughts overwhelm me. I needed to take some control or this situation would totally consume me.

I quietly got out of bed and wrapped one of the sheets around my body—being in only my wedding lingerie made me feel too vulnerable. The hardwood floor was cool against my bare feet, but it wasn't that which made me shiver through my body.

After considering my options for a few moments, I decided to put my wedding dress back on, even though the dress was ripped and had blood on the side from where I had cut my arm. If Marco came back in, I might feel stupid, but I wasn't half-naked when I faced him.

I got my dress on, but I could only get the back zipper up halfway. My sister had helped me do up the zipper yesterday when I had first put the dress

I knew *Yesterday*—it felt like a lifetime ago that I had been in my bedroom except dressed for my wedding day, with my little flower girl running around help giggling. I prayed to God that she too was alright and unhurt, desperately wished that I could just talk to my family to find out how everyone was and what was going on.

I was sitting on the bed when I heard the lock turn in the door and the door slowly opened.

And there he stood. Marco Marchiano. His eyes held mine as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, the door that I knew a kill meant there was no chance of my escaping through.

going to MARCO

opening—

going about

Before I could say anything, she stood up from the bed and walked to the bathroom. “I’m going to have a shower.”

control,

“Not so fast.” I pushed her back onto the mattress.

Using one arm, she managed to catch herself in a half sitting, half reclining position. With her other hand she held up the bodice of her wedding dress which had its zipper undone. As she fell back onto the bed, she clasped it more tightly. The folds of fabric were teasing me with glimpses of her bra and the swell of her heavy breasts.

put my

“I see you’ve put your wedding dress back on. Perhaps you’re hoping we finish what we started yesterday?”

anger if

“In your dreams. Yesterday was a lucky escape for me.” She was attempting to appear strong, but she couldn’t hide her fear from me.

Jessica

son.

getting “Hardly an escape. You’re at my mercy here on my estate without a
mind and of being my wife. You are a mere captive.”

and I “Being your wife wouldn’t allow me any additional privileges
but how monster like you.” She had hatred in her eyes, but she knew little of re
having spent the entire nineteen years of her life cocooned and pamper
then the her family. I was twenty-seven now, but I had been initiated at the
twelve into the Fratellanza, into a world of violence and death. The
walked been no idyllic childhood for me.

fter last I looked at her in her wedding dress. “You’re rather fond of that
aren’t you? I have to say you looked stunning in it yesterday.”

She didn’t reply as I prowled closer to her. “When you walked down
aisle toward me, for one moment there you had me thinking that I
lucky man to be getting such a beauty for my wife—to be getting such
to give me pleasure in my bed.”

toward She flushed red at my reference to sex.

“But that’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

inclining “I-I don’t understand.” Her voice was hesitant.

g dress “Of course you understand. You played your role perfectly.”

ed at it “My role?”

er lacy I pierced her with a hard gaze, matching the harsh tone of my voice
role of being a tease.”

ing that Her blue eyes widened. I was going to enjoy using my dick in her, to
her with it as I drove it into her tight body. Just as she had used her be
her supposed naivety to taunt me and trick me.

ne was “I don’t know what you’re talking about...” She had been the
choice for this fucking deception. Her baby blue eyes made her appear
butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

the title My jaw tightened. Soon she would have my cock in her mouth
would force her to suck it hard and swallow my seed down her treac
from aguileful throat.

al hate, “You flaunted your virgin body in your white dress at the contract s
ered byfluttered your eyelashes at me and pretended to be an innocent.” I was
age ofhard just looking at her perfect lips, thinking of how I would use ther
ere hadand again without mercy until she had satisfied me.

“I *am* innocent...Your twisted games have nothing to do with m
t dress,spat at me.

I leaned down and pushed myself toward her on the bed, captur
own the slender body between my arms which I anchored on either side of l
[was aMy face was so close to hers and I could smell her sweet scent. It w
a bodyso easy to breach those last few centimeters, to capture those lips i
between mine, and then take her body however I wished until s
begging me to stop.

I ran my fingertips over those luscious lips, down her throat and che
my finger slipped into that enticing valley between her tits.

I could feel the heat of her skin and the fullness of her breasts. Her
were quick and heavy and she was almost panting.

. “Your Fuck, I couldn’t wait to have her panting under me. Writhing un
body.

anting But before that, I pushed myself back up to my feet. As she see
ody andfond of her dress, I took my cell phone out.

Selecting the camera, I took a photograph of her.

perfect “What are you doing?”

ear like “Taking a photo.”

“Why?” she asked in confusion.

, and I “To send to your family,” I responded.

herous, “But I’m not dressed,” she said quickly, pulling her dress more against herself.

signing, My lips curled up in a cruel smile. “I can see that.”

getting I could see my words ticking over in her mind. “With how I love you, I might think...that...” Her voice had risen in horror.

“Oh, so you’re not as naive as you make out?” I gave her a cruel smile. “That’s the point. It will leave them wondering whether their dear,

Mafia princess is still as pure as the driven snow. I wonder if they would be willing to get you back if they think you are used goods?”

her lap. Her ripped, bloodstained dress was unzipped and hanging loosely from her lap. Her body was exposed, and here she was sitting on my unmade bed. I would send a rough photo to her family—it would leave them wondering whether she was the innocent virgin...or if I had deflowered her on what would have been her wedding night.

Her face fell, and part of me felt unnecessarily callous until I remembered what her family had done yesterday and her role in enticing me to L.A. breaths “You should take that shower.”

“I think I’ll wait until later.” I knew she was having second thoughts about the shower now that I was standing in front of her.

Too bad, I was looking forward to seeing that tantalizing body of hers. A glimpse of her sleeping in my bed in her lacy lingerie this morning had made me want to stay in bed and make her mine. Instead, I had jerked off in the shower, coming as I thought of her tight silky pussy gripping my thrusting cock.

“No. You’ll shower *now*. Don’t make me drag you into that shower,” I warned. “You’re playing a dangerous game—a dangerous game you

win.”

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CHAPTER 11

MARCO

She wouldn't win this battle of wills between us.

I was not a good man, and I was already having a hard time ignoring her stirring cock. Her defiance made me want to take her even more.

She paused, but then she got up and walked over to the bathroom.

"Good girl," I said, pleased that she was obeying my command.

Once in the bathroom, she stood in front of the shower, toying with her dress. I switched on the water to heat. "Go ahead."

"Can I have some privacy?" she snapped.

"No."

She paled at my reply. "Are you going to just stand there and watch?" she asked in alarm with her eyes wide.

“Yes. I’ve been looking forward to seeing what’s under the wrap my prize.”

“I hate you.”

“Get undressed and in the shower, or I’ll have to undress you myself last night. But this time I’ll get to take off your pretty bra and panties too.”

My words pushed her into action. She didn’t want my hands on her again. She undid her zipper and let the dress slide to the ground, hesitating as she stood in her white virginal bra and panties.

“And the rest, beautiful.” The ‘beautiful’ part was true, especially those startling blue eyes of hers, but I used the word to taunt her. “You’ve got anything I haven’t seen before.”

Of course, as a man in our world, I had been free to sleep around and make the most of it—after all, I was twenty-seven years old and a blooded male. It was only women that had to stay pure for their wedding night. And how I was looking forward to savoring my nineteen-year-old virgin.

ing my She narrowed her eyes and then turned her back to me. With trembling fingers, she unclasped her bra and let it fall to the floor and quickly pulled her panties down her thighs, at the same time moving forward hastily into the shower.

with her “Wait! Turn around and face me.”

She had her back to me and I could see the sumptuous curve of her buttocks. I also wanted a clear look at the rest of her. She looked as though she was going to defy me, but then she slowly turned around and her eyes spanned the room. “What do you want to see?”

Good, I preferred a girl who got angry instead of crying.

I had imagined how her breasts would look naked since the first time

ping of met her, and I was not disappointed. They were heavy and tipped with dark nipples that stood erect as she quivered under my stare, and my watered at the thought of having those succulent nubs in my mouth.

elf like I let my gaze wander down her exposed body, over her smooth belly oo.” her pink pussy lips which were just visible between her legs. Her cheek ear flushed red, but she kept up her scowl.

ating as “Go get washed,” I said, nodding toward the shower. She quickly got the shower, turning her back to me again.

ly with I could tell my watching was making her nervous, and her movements were quick and jerky as she shampooed and conditioned her dark hair. she poured body wash onto a sponge and soaped her body before letting hot water cascade down over her as she rinsed clean, droplets of a red-clinging temptingly to her flawless skin. Dear God, what was she doing to me?

year-old She stayed under the hot stream of water for as long as possible, probably hoping that I would get bored and leave, but nothing was going to make me miss this show. When I decided she had been in the shower for long enough or rather my cock couldn't take it anymore, I called for her to get out. “Time's up.”

“Let me guess, this is like a prison where showers are strictly timed.

I hardened my expression. “I can be strict with you if that's what you want.”

she was She swallowed, not saying anything further as she turned off the water. She stayed standing in the shower, with her arms wrapped around herself. “Do you have a towel please?”

“I've got one for you here. Get out.” I held a clean towel open in my hand. She paused but then stepped out of the shower into my arms. I pat

h large, dry with the towel, taking my time to admire her nakedness as my ha
r mouth her curves under the soft towel.

Seeing her like this, helpless and vulnerable, triggered something in
7 and to a primitive level—she was mine to do with as I wished.

ks were I could see she hated being exposed to me and at my mercy

remained fully clothed. I crouched down to my haunches to dry h
got into starting at her slim ankles and perfect calves, before rubbing the tow
the back of her sensual thighs. I then carried on upwards.

vements My eyes came level with her slit which was teasing a glimpse of her
r. Then that illicit place that was my right to take. Her pussy lips were wet fi
ting the shower, and I couldn't wait to have them wet with something else.

f water By now she couldn't hide the deep blush in her cheeks. How swe
oing to blushing bride.

When I was satisfied that she was dry, I wrapped a clean towel aro
robably body and tucked the end in over her breasts, letting my hand linger the
ake me She tried to push past me, but I held onto her upper arms and look
enough, her eyes as they glittered with fierce tears. "Go wait for me in the bedr
get out. She rushed off, trying to get some temporary respite from my nearn

I took a deep breath. My cock was rock hard from seeing her, touch
" and smelling her. I adjusted myself and thought that it felt like a lo
at you since I'd had my hand pumping around my dick this morning.

I walked through the bedroom and unlocked the main door, grab
ater and couple of her bags from the hallway. Her belongings had been sent a

"Can I Chicago last week in preparation for her arrival. "Your things arrive
days ago. You can unpack. There is plenty of spare closet space fi
7 arms. things."

tted her "I don't plan on hanging around, so I don't need to unpack. I ju

nds felt some clothes for today,” she huffed.

“You will be staying. Whether you unpack or not is up to you.” I said to her. “Are you on birth control?”

She flushed. “What?”

while I “You heard.”

er legs, She remained silent, riling me further. “Answer me,” I demanded.

rel over “Um, yes. My mother said that I should start it before our wedding night...” Her words drifted off as she flushed a deeper red.

pussy, “Good.” Then I grabbed her breakfast tray from where I had left it on the door.

Placing it on top of the dresser, I left the room and made sure to lock the door behind me.

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“You heard.”

She remained silent, riling me further. “Answer me,” I demanded.

“Um, yes. My mother said that I should start it before our wedding night...” Her words drifted off as she flushed a deeper red.

“Good.” Then I grabbed her breakfast tray from where I had left it outside the door.

Placing it on top of the dresser, I left the room and made sure to lock the door behind me.

CHAPTER 12

JULIANA

He left without saying another word and locked the door behind him.

Now he was gone, I felt I could breathe again. In the bathroom he looked at me like a predator eyes its prey. He was dangerous and I had to get away from him. His question about birth control had unnerved me. He wouldn't be asking unless he wanted *that* from me. I needed to get away before that could happen.

Being kept under lock and key meant that I really was being kept as a prisoner. Although this room was a pretty luxurious prison.

I unzipped one of my bags to get some clothes to dress in. I looked at dresses, blouses, and skirts which my mother maintained would be appropriate outfits for a Mafia wife and for the Capo's wife.

I picked out a plain black bra and black panties. I tried to choose the sexy undergarments that I had. I didn't want him looking at me again, I didn't want to draw his attention. I picked out some jeans and a t-shirt. I wasn't going to dress up for my captor.

I unwrapped the towel from my body and got dressed as quickly as possible. I couldn't help wondering if there were any cameras in the room watching me. That would be really creepy of him, but I knew I shouldn't underestimate him after what I had seen of him so far.

Once I was dressed, I looked at the breakfast tray with disinterest. I was anything but hungry. I gulped down the glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. It felt so good that I was sure I must be dehydrated. I then drank myself some coffee and let the hot caffeine seep into my system and help soothe my frazzled brain.

I couldn't stop thinking about Jessica and wondering how she was. I could just pick up my phone and call her, but I had nothing of my own apart from my clothes. My phone, laptop, tablet, and anything else that he had, he had, but they would be useful were in a different bag, but of course he hadn't handed those to me. I knew I He was trying to keep me as isolated as possible.

I really After a while, with nothing else to do, I wandered over to the window to get a look out at the Marchiano estate. It was opulent, but it was not a prison.

It was as if The grounds appeared to be extensive with expansive green lawns and a row of trees stretching into what looked to be a wooded area. There was an outdoor swimming pool, as well as an impressive glasshouse containing an indoor pool, and I imagined that the indoor pool was the preferable option during the cold Chicago winters.

I could see a large garage block, probably filled with multiple black

he least There was also a helipad with a chopper on it—the perfect way to es
n and I thought, had I known how to fly one. What I couldn't see though, v
-shirt. I boundary of the estate. Damn, that meant that it must be pretty larg
being able to see where the boundary and exit were, made it all the ha
ckly as plot my escape.

is room Being too distracted with my concern over Jess to think about an
not to plan right now, I let my eyes wander back over the gardens and tried to
serene view calm me.

t, being I hadn't seen much of the outside of the house when we had
orange because of the darkness, although I had been able to make out that i
poured large modern property which was a short drive from the guarded pe
nd help gates. I wondered if there was more than one exit. Probably not, beca
would make security harder and a man like Marco Marchiano woul
I wish I many enemies he would want his family protected from.

vn here One thing I had noticed upon our arrival was the huge traditional st
it might the Virgin Mary on the front lawn, standing out in blatant contrast
e to me. modern house. It must have been nearly ten feet tall.

This statue was incongruous not only with the mansion but also v
ow and man I'd met. I was surprised that Marco even had a statue of a sain
s still a front yard. He could hardly be thought of as devout—I mean, come
killed people for a living.

and lots I turned my gaze back from the gardens to look around the bed
was an could have been in a hotel. High-end dark furniture stood out agai
ning an muted walls, the sheets were high count Egyptian cotton, and the co
option was so light that it must have been filled with the finest down feather

my hand over the two armchairs in front of the windows, enjoying the
: SUVs.

scape, I of the velvet fabric and of the cashmere throws draped across them. Was that crime didn't pay?

ge. Not For a few minutes I just stood there, trying to push the despair further to body—but, failing miserably, I felt tears overcome me and roll down cheeks.

escape
to let the MARCO

arrived After watching Juliana shower and taking her breakfast, I left the bed. It was a I couldn't trust myself to be around her while I was still furious. perimeter yesterday.

use that She would wait. Juliana and the Società had played me for a fool. I'd have had made me look weak. They had made it look like I couldn't keep family and men safe.

statue of Fuck, three men died yesterday. That could easily have been one of the brothers or Debi. They were my whole world—I would lay down my life for them and kill anyone who threatened them.

with the I made my way downstairs to eat breakfast with the rest of the family. It was in his My brothers were all talking at once. Alessio was trying to talk to Camillo, he about a business issue; however, Camillo was ignoring him and talking to Danio about baseball. I looked across at Debi and couldn't help notice that she was quieter than usual.

inst the As we sat around the kitchen island and I watched my siblings, I felt all too familiar stab at my heart, particularly when I looked at Danio. I ran Debi.

to caress They were growing up without their mom—and that was all down to

ho said They were better off with my father being dead, but no child should grow up without their mom. My worst guilt was about Debi. She was not my real female role models in her life. Instead, she was surrounded by friends who could never replace the maternal love she'd lost, no matter how hard they tried to fill the void.

Once we'd finished breakfast and everyone started to get up from their seats, I turned to my youngest brother. "Danio, have you managed to check the church CCTV yet?" He was the technical genius of the family and went to with all our I.T. issues. He even dressed the part, with sneakers, and a hoodie being his outfit of choice.

"The Società deleted it, probably not wanting us to watch it and get an idea of what went on. But I managed to retrieve the deleted file from the server because they forgot to delete it from there."

"Good job. Get it up and we'll watch it now." I sat down next to Danio and we watched the footage together on his laptop. It felt strange watching the start of the wedding ceremony on the CCTV. I saw Debi when she waved to me from the pews and I had winked back at her. It made my heart run cold to think that the shooter probably also had her in his range yesterday.

We continued to watch the footage, seeing the start of the ceremony until it came the gunshots. "Freeze the video." We froze the video and replayed it several times in slow motion and from the different angles of the camera.

"As I thought, the Società were aiming for me with their first shot. That's why I saw a sniper up in the eaves of the church," I said, pointing to the shooter in the corner of the screen.

"Well, either Juliana is a very good actress, or she was genuinely surprised by the shooting as we were," commented Danio.

"Shut it, Danio, I'm trying to watch this." I was irritated that

ld have probably right, I reluctantly admitted to myself. Juliana definitely didn't
had no as if she had expected or been prepared for any of it. She looked con-
ur guys shocked by what happened.

7 hard I That didn't change the fact though, that she was part of a family of 1

She hadn't wanted to leave L.A. with me, despite the fact that she had
m their herself over to me in the contract. I had been forced to drag her away
get the church yesterday.

who we She would need to be taught obedience at the very least. She would
t jeans, learn that her loyalties were to me now, not the Società.

“Man, that poor girl who got shot instead. That was Juliana's sister,
: a clear asked Danio. Trust him to be concerned about the Società girl who got
m their He was still young, but he would toughen up as he got older. At

parents had died, Alessio and I had brought up Camillo, Danio, and
Danio, very differently from how we had been raised by our deranged father.

atching Danio was impatient to be initiated into the Fratellanza, but Alessio
she had had decided we wanted our younger brothers to have as long a child-
y blood possible before being initiated into the Mafia world. Therefore, Cami-
sterday. not been initiated until he was sixteen, and Danio would also have
y. Then until he was sixteen to enter the Fratellanza.

laid it I was glad we had waited to initiate Camillo—he might look like
amas. guy, and he certainly did his Enforcer role without hesitation due
ere was family loyalty, but he didn't lust after blood the same way I did.

shown “Maybe we should find out how the sister is, you know, because
must be pretty worried about her,” carried on Danio, oblivious to my s-
nely as the mention of Juliana's family.

“For Christ's sake, Danio, Juliana's family nearly killed us. It's the
he was fault they shot one of their own. I'm not worried about Juliana's feelin-

It's not like neither should you be."

completely "But she's just a girl. She's not responsible for the actions of her father."

"Her family is Società Mafia. That makes her our enemy, period."

traitors. Danio tried a different angle. "If one of you guys had been shot, I would want someone to tell me how you were doing."

My friend "Yeah, I know," I replied.

Danio just continued to look at me with his big brown eyes. They were like Debi's eyes. Gentle and soulful. Fuck. These kids always manage to worm their way under my skin.

right?" "Shouldn't you be doing something else like schoolwork—I thought you had an English paper due?" I tried to change the subject, not liking the direction this conversation had taken.

Debi "Yeah, I do. I'm heading over to study with Carolinne later," he said, referring to his best friend, Carolinne Tocchini, before turning back to his laptop. He would stay glued to that screen all day if he could.

It was as if I went to find Alessio to ask when the funerals for our soldiers would be held. Danio told me that he was in the gym room. As I made my way to the back part of the house, I couldn't help but see the images from the CCTV from the night of the shooting in my mind.

It was a tough thought. Had the sniper hit me, he probably would have taken down my brother and sent him to his next. A shudder went through me. I would lay down my life for my country and the thought of my siblings dying shook me to the core and ignited a fury even further.

And the only member of the Società I could exact my revenge on was currently upstairs in my bedroom. Revenge would be the sweetest feeling.

When I came back from talking with Alessio, Danio called me to his room and showed me something on his laptop. "I've hacked into the computer system and found some interesting things."

the hospital where Jessica Bonardi is being treated. I've got an update
nily." condition."

Fuck, that boy was too caring for his own good.

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the hospital where Jessica Bonardi is being treated. I've got an update on her condition."

Fuck, that boy was too caring for his own good.

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CHAPTER 13

MARCO

When I took up a lunch tray up to Juliana later on, I saw that the breakfast tray from earlier was still sitting on the dresser untouched apart from the bread and coffee.

“You need to eat.” I took the plate with her lunch sandwich and brought it over to where she was sitting on the bed.

She was dressed in a simple white t-shirt and blue jeans, with no makeup on her bare face and showing faint smudges under her huge blue eyes. Her appearance made her look even younger than her nineteen years and somehow more vulnerable. It reminded me that she was eight years younger than me and that she had been sheltered all her life—that is, until now.

Perhaps my conscience was pricking after seeing her on the church steps, I was taken by complete surprise when she heard the gunshots. Then I noticed

shook myself. I was a Made Man—I wasn't burdened by that thing of conscience.

She took her lunch plate from me and checked the filling to find ham, cheese, and salad, but she continued looking at the food with no interest. "Did you put poison in it?"

"That would be such a waste—given I can think of far more interesting things to do with you."

Her face blanched at my words.

"Eat," I said, nodding toward the sandwich in front of her.

She looked at the sandwich without any enthusiasm. I was beginning to get out of tolerance. She hardly ate anything yesterday, given our preoccupation with escaping L.A., and she hadn't touched her breakfast this morning. "Have you heard anything about Jessica yet?" she asked quietly, as if afraid of my reaction upon hearing a mention of her treacherous family.

"Eat your sandwich and then I'll tell you what I know."

She looked surprised at my response, but she picked up the sandwich and took a bite into it, eating it all quickly and barely chewing each mouthful before swallowing.

"Slow down. There's no rush."

She ignored me and that riled me—she really needed to learn to do what she was told.

"There, I'm finished. Now tell me what you know about Jess. Please hurry."

I looked at her for a few long seconds, seeing the eagerness in her eyes. She clearly loved her sister as much as I cared about my own sibling.

As the news sources tell us that she was shot in the shoulder, but the bullet missed the major arteries and was a through and through. They've patched her up, but she's still in the hospital due to the amount of blood she lost. As I thought,

called at they had a doctor on standby at the church. It was just bad luck that caught in the crossfire.”

l it was Juliana exhaled a ragged breath. “But she’ll be okay?”

nistrust. “She’s not critical. She should be okay, barring any complications.”

“And what about her shoulder? Will it heal fully?”

resting “They don’t seem worried about it. They are happy with her prog far.” I saw her eyes fill with tears, which slowly trickled down her cl picked up her empty plate and headed toward the door. “There’s water tray if you want it.”

g to run I closed the door and turned the lock behind me, firmly shutting he upationher prison.

. “Have

l of my JULIANA

ich and I felt relief, knowing that Jessica was going to be okay.

before I still wished that I could see her with my own eyes and speak myself. But knowing that she was not in any critical danger lifted amount of tension from my shoulders.

o as she After a few minutes, I went over to the tray to see what else the There was a fruit salad with pineapple, pear, and strawberries, so I tu and ate it all, my appetite coming back to me. There was also a caraf e.” with water and sliced lemon and I poured some into a glass and d er eyes. enjoying its coolness and the sharp zest of the lemon.

s. “Our After lunch, I didn’t know if it was the exhaustion from yesterday c sed the up with me, but I lay down on the bed and took a nap. up, but

hought,

she got When I woke up, the late afternoon sun was filtering into the bedroom. I walked over to the windows and feeling the warmth of the sun through the glass, I wondered how long I would be kept in this room. I would stay here forever. Or maybe until he was bored of me and decided to kill me.

The Fratellanza were not known to show any mercy to women if they were considered to be enemies or traitors. And I was part of the Società, so I was definitely considered to be an enemy.

My thoughts turned toward tonight. Would my captor show me mercy again tonight, as he did last night? If he wasn't going to touch me, he wouldn't have been interested in whether I was on birth control.

I felt panic starting to swirl in my stomach again, now that it was late toward evening. How much longer would I be alone in this room until he came to me? Suddenly the thought of being isolated and alone in this room became more appealing when compared to the thought of being here with him.

I couldn't just wait for him to do whatever he had planned for me. I started looking around the room, opening all the drawers and closets, trying to find anything that I could use as a weapon or that could help me escape.

Even if I could get out of this room, I would still need to make sure I could find anyone else in the house and the guards at the estate perimeter. But I couldn't think about that now. I had to focus on one step at a time.

I had no luck in the bedroom. The drawers and closets held nothing useful from Marco's clothes. And, of course, many of these clothes were in the color of choice for the Mafia. Black hid the blood most easily.

After my search in the bedroom came up fruitless, I moved into the adjoining bathroom and looked through the drawers in the vanities.

room. I There wasn't so much as a razor blade in the bathroom. He must have shining thought to remove anything that I could use.

Perhaps My eye caught the fork on the lunch tray. It wasn't much but it w had, and I couldn't just sit back and let him do whatever he wanted to y were I put the fork in the pocket of my jeans. I really hoped that there y I was any cameras in the bathroom or bedroom, I thought to myself, as I around trying to see if I could spot any. I couldn't see anything, but t mercy best cameras were the ones that were hidden, tricking the person me, he watched into a false sense of privacy.

My nerves were all over the place. I told myself that it was the ad reading and that was a good thing. But it was making my body feel like until he electricity going through it and making me jumpy.

is room I was no expert on how to stab someone. On TV crime shows, the re with seemed to aim for the kidney area when stabbing someone. I wasn't sure where the kidneys were in relation to the rest of the abdomen. I started should have paid more attention to the nuns in our biology lessons. to find I decided that I would just aim in the general direction and hope best. I just needed enough time to get out of this room and then hopefi it past of the house.

ouldn't In the evening Marco came in with my dinner finally. It seemed as been waiting hours for Marco to arrive. But now that he was here, I ig apart for a bit more time before I had to put my plan into action.

1 black, Dinner actually smelled good, and I silently berated myself for no more today. I would need all the energy I could get.

nto the "Good, I see you finished the rest of your lunch." I watched him se s there. my tray, shivering as I noticed his dark hair and shadowy eyes. Eve about his body screamed danger to me.

already I wasn't sure if he was going to come nearer to me, so I decided to
toward him on the pretext of checking what was for dinner. "I was hungry
as all I must have gotten my appetite back. Dinner smells good, what is it?"

me. My voice sounded unnaturally high to me. I stood next to him, trying
weren't to act nervous, as he uncovered the plate to reveal a pasta dish.

looked Fear made me hesitate.

when the My hands felt clammy with sweat.

it being But then I withdrew my hand from my pocket, my fingers wrapped
the fork.

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it had

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my often

exactly

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I wasn't sure if he was going to come nearer to me, so I decided to walk toward him on the pretext of checking what was for dinner. "I was hungry. I must have gotten my appetite back. Dinner smells good, what is it?"

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My hands felt clammy with sweat.

But then I withdrew my hand from my pocket, my fingers wrapped around the fork.

And as he turned toward me, I stabbed the fork into his abdomen.

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CHAPTER 14

JULIANA

His reflexes were quick.

His expression didn't change but his body leapt into action. He block my arm and managed to deflect the full extent of my blow.

Where I did manage to connect with his body it felt like I had s solid wall.

He hit my wrist and made it shoot with pain so that I dropped the heard my lost chance clatter loudly onto the hardwood floor.

I knew I wouldn't get this opportunity again. I decided to make a ru My movements felt sluggish as if I were moving against heavy wate must have been fast because I was nearly at the door.

I focused on the door and getting my hand on the handle before fee vice-like grip around my arm suddenly yanking me back toward h

making me scream out loud.

I stumbled but managed to stay on my feet. I used my momentum my elbow into his rib cage. My arm throbbed with agony where it hit l He looked as if he had barely felt my blow. “You shouldn’t have don he snarled.

The grayness of his eyes was almost black as if any mercy he mig shown me had been swallowed up by a black hole. And he smiled a smile at me.

He picked me up, ignoring my struggling limbs. His arms were constricting my torso making it hard to get air into my lungs. He too steps across the room and threw me onto the bed. The little air left lungs whooshed out of my body as I thudded down onto the mattress: still tried to leap up from the bed.

He stalked closer to me again and blocked me in, his eyes fixed on lasers and caging me in with their glare. His hands shoved at my sh making me lose my balance and fall back on the bed. As my back tried to mattress he kneeled over me, with one knee either side of my body cag in.

truck a I clawed at his arms and chest, trying to get away from him.

I felt his hand grab my wrist and turned my head to see his tight r fork. I restraining my right arm. I tried to dodge my other hand away from l despite my struggles he caught it too.

n for it. My muscles strained in protest as he savagely tugged my arms ab r. But I head, while at the same time his powerful thighs pinned my legs dov the mattress.

ling his I was panting from my exertions. I could see his fury in the tense im and held his body above me with his muscles bunched up tightly.

I couldn't give up just yet. I tried to break free of his grip, twist to rambody under him. His ribs. He pressed himself against me and suddenly I froze, realizing that e that,"hard. He was aroused by my struggles.

I lay under him, still except for the heaving pants which were mak ht havechest rapidly rise and fall.

twisted "You are mine. You won't escape me. Now or ever," he growled i ear, making me shiver at the coldness in his voice. I tried to move r harshlyaway from his lips, but I could barely move with his heavy body on k a fewmine.

t in my I waited for my punishment, my arms aching while they quiverec s. But Ihold. I was no match for his strength or his cruelty.

Laying under him, my eyes were drawn to the top of his v-neck t-sl me likethe dark hair which trailed down toward his chest. His scent consun oulders,with its hint of musk and lemongrass along with the slight under hit themasculine sweat.

ging me He looked at me intently as we just lay there.

He got up then and pointed toward the tray. "Eat. You'll nee strength for later." His voice was as hard as flint. He walked out of th nuscleswithout another glance at me.

aim but After he was gone, I stayed lying on the bed for a few minutes, atte to steady my ragged breaths and racing pulse. I thought about what ove mymeant about later but pushed that from my mind and tried to ca vn ontogalloping heart rate.

A long while later, my hunger eventually pulled me toward the way hefood. I went over and saw that he had brought me a pasta dish with a

ing myham and mushroom sauce. As I ate, I thought it tasted good—they mu
a housekeeper. At least I wouldn't starve while I was kept here.

he was

ing my

nto my As the light started to fade, I decided to get undressed for bed.

ny face I still hadn't unpacked my clothes, so I went over to my bags and
top of look through them. Rummaging through, I saw some of the
nightdresses that my mother had bought for me, saying that my h
l in his would expect me to dress like this for him in the bedroom. I snorted.

I thought back over the last couple of months when we had bee
hirt and preparing for my life as a new wife, never imagining then that I w
ied me, expected to sleep in the bed of a man I wasn't even married to.

tone of I wondered what my family's reaction had been to the photo Mar
them of me in my torn and bloody wedding dress, sitting on his unma

I cringed with embarrassment and felt my cheeks heat. I didn't w
d your parents or the Società discussing what would be the first time I wou
ie room sex, speculating on whether he had taken me last night and if he ha
rough with me.

rompting I had to stop thinking about it. Shoving aside the racy lingerie my
he had had packed, I picked out some simple sleep shorts and a tank top. I t
ilm my nightclothes into the bathroom with me to get changed and brush my t

Again, just as last night, I curled up on the velvet armchair in fron
tray of windows and waited for him to return. I'd put on a light robe o
creamy

ist havenightclothes as the air had turned cooler. From the armchair I watched
sun disappear and the darkness take over.

When he returned later that evening, my senses went on high alert.
that he would still be angry about what I did earlier, trying to stab him
the fork. Maybe it hadn't been the best idea, but it had been the only
could think of.

I was sitting in the dark, so he switched on the nightstand lamp
I took a watched him while he undressed.

wispy
husband MARCO

in busy "Come to bed," I said.

ould be "What are you going to do?" She bit down nervously on her lower lip.

"Come to bed and see." She remained in the armchair. Fuck, would
co sent ever be obedient? "Don't make me drag you into this bed," I warned.

de bed. She walked slowly toward the bed, her bare feet silent against the
ant my floor as if she were afraid that any sound might provoke me after what
ld have happened earlier. She slipped off her robe, letting it slide down her
ad been arms, before quickly getting under the covers.

I turned off the lamp on my nightstand and got into bed. She had
mother away from me again, but that didn't fit in with my plans for her tonight.

ook the I wrapped my arm around her middle and tugged her toward me so
eeth. back fitted into my chest. She gave a little squeak of surprise and
t of the scramble out of my hold. Her body writhing against me was making
ver my harden into an erect spike.

hed the “You should stop moving against me like that,” I said in a gruff vo
arousal starting to undo me.

I knew She ignored me at first but then, sensing the stiff rod pushing aga
im withass, she abruptly stopped wriggling.

thing I “Just relax,” I murmured.

But I could feel her body tensed up in my arms, probably because s
, and I wondering what I would do next.

“We’re just going to go to sleep,” I said in a low voice.

She was silent for a few moments. “We are?” she asked incredulous

“Yeah. Now relax.” Fuck, this girl was killing me. I wouldn’t take
anger, not when she was a virgin. And that stunt she pulled earlier v
fork had definitely made me rage.

I didn’t know what she had been planning to do if she had gotten p
ip.
uld she There was no way she would have been able to get off the estate. Tha
rookie move by my innocent little virgin.

Her body was rigid with tension, but I didn’t loosen my grip. In
wooden waited for her breathing to relax and for her muscles to yield to sleep.
hat had

The heat from her body merged into mine, enclosing both of us in
slender cocoon. I didn’t usually like cuddling women, but for some reason
holding her.

While she slept, I noticed how her body fitted perfectly into mine a
t.
that her her against me. As we lay there, I admired her profile against the moon
tried to ran my nose down her silky hair and inhaled. She smelled perfect.

ly cock

ice, my I woke up with a start, my hand automatically going to my gun
nightstand.

inst her I flipped on the nightstand light and scanned the room before check
security feeds via my phone. Juliana was asleep next to me and eve
was as it should have been, but I still felt unsettled.

she was I always felt unsettled.

I looked at the time—it was only 1.26 a.m. Fuck, I thought as I la
down, pounding my pillow back into shape. I tried to relax but nothin
ly. the strange feeling inside of me.

her in I sighed as I shut my eyes, willing sleep to come to me, but knowin
with the would elude me.

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I woke up with a start, my hand automatically going to my gun on the nightstand.

I flipped on the nightstand light and scanned the room before checking the security feeds via my phone. Juliana was asleep next to me and everything was as it should have been, but I still felt unsettled.

I always felt unsettled.

I looked at the time—it was only 1.26 a.m. Fuck, I thought as I lay back down, pounding my pillow back into shape. I tried to relax but nothing eased the strange feeling inside of me.

I sighed as I shut my eyes, willing sleep to come to me, but knowing that it would elude me.

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CHAPTER 15

JULIANA

When I woke in the morning, Marco's side of the bed was rump empty.

He was gone again already. I'm not sure how he managed to sneak quietly, but I was glad I was alone. During the night I had tried to free from his strong embrace but as soon as I had tried to move, he woke awake and dragging me back into his firm hold.

This was my third day here. If he was going to kill me, he probably have done it by now—he didn't strike me as the patient kind. Maybe been wrong in thinking that was his ultimate plan for me?

As I lay against the pillows, I noticed that the sheets held a hint masculine scent. I couldn't get away from him even when he wasn't he

I decided to get up and I walked over to the dresser where I saw that the breakfast tray had already been left. I was trapped here, with no way out, so I decided to eat breakfast and keep my strength up in case another opportunity to escape arose. I spooned some natural yogurt and berry compote into a bowl of muesli and poured myself a cup of coffee. I carried these over to the armchair and sat down to eat my breakfast.

I would have to be smarter about making an escape plan, and I also had to be able to get a sense of the layout of the house and grounds if I was going to make it out of here—I wasn't going to let yesterday's failed attempt deter me.

After I had finished my breakfast and coffee, I saw that Marco had left another one of my bags by the bedroom door. I eagerly tore through it, hoping, no praying, that it held my laptop or phone, but it just held my clothes and toiletries, including my favorite shampoo. I sighed and carried some of the things through to the bathroom and took a shower. I wanted to be showered and dressed before Marco came back.

I dressed in some yoga pants and a top and then spent the morning looking out so I could see out of the window.

When it must have been around lunchtime, I heard the lock turn and the door could be opened. The door opened and Marco walked in.

I saw his expression and I felt my insides go cold. He was going to punish me now for my attempted escape yesterday.

I stood up from the bed as he walked into the room. That way he towered over me slightly less than if I remained sitting on the bed.

He was wearing pale gray jeans, dark boots, and a black t-shirt that emphasized his powerful muscles and strength, making me shiver.

"Come," he instructed, holding out his hand.

that my I looked at it dumbfounded. Was he going to let me out of this room out, so I he going to take me to a torture room or a dark basement for my punishment? He was a Made Man, and I knew for sure that he would have something into that nearby.

or to the Perhaps I should refuse to leave this room?

But, deep down, I knew second guessing him was futile—I had to take the risk if I was going to get a look around this house and find a way to escape. Everything I learned about him, his family, and this house would be useful in formulating an escape plan.

I had to stop letting my fear get in the way if I was going to find a way out of here and away from him.

Through it, I moved forward, but I didn't take his hand.

More of As I passed him, he firmly grabbed my wrist as if to show who was in control. His grip was inescapable, conveying how he felt right now. I really shouldn't have tried that escape yesterday.

He led me out of the room and down the hallway. This was my first gazing look at the house. On that first night we had arrived late and exhausted; everything had been a bit of a blur. He took me down the staircase and into what appeared to be a large living area. He was walking fast with long strides, not giving me much time to take in my surroundings while I tried to keep up with him.

The room we walked into had a huge sitting room which was open to a dining room and spacious kitchen. I guessed that this must be the living area. He carried on tugging me along with him until he came to an abrupt halt and pulled me to a standstill too.

“Explain.” His tone was a clear order.

“What do you mean?” I frowned with confusion.

n? Was “That.” He nodded toward the couches. His anger seemed to mean
hment?could only utter one-word commands today.

ere like I frowned at his tone, wondering what was going on and what it ha
with me.

I could see his younger sister, Debi, and his brother, Danio, sitting
ake the floor, partly hidden from view by the couches, and then I heard a f
escape.bark.

seful in I yanked my arm from Marco’s grip and ran over to where I had he
sound come from. “Mr. Fluffy!”

way out And on hearing my voice, my beloved dog gave an excited, loud b
leaped up from Debi’s arms to come bounding over to me. For the fi
since I had arrived in this hellhole, I had a reason to smile. As I thi
was in arms around my pooch, he barked nonstop and couldn’t help himse
Fuck, llicking my face, causing a giggle to burst from my throat.

“Mr. Fluffy?” said Alessio. I looked up and saw Alessio and Cami
: proper come into the room. Alessio stood with his arms folded across his c
sted, so less than pleased expression on his face. What was it with these guys
nd into obviously weren’t big animal lovers.

his long “I’ve missed you, Mr. Fluffy,” I exclaimed. “I wasn’t expecting yo
tried to few more days. I’m so happy to see you.” And I couldn’t help gigglin
as he ran around me in animated circles. Danio and Debi, who ha
-plan to sitting on the floor with him, laughed along with me.

ir main “So help me God, you better start talking, Juliana,” said Marco. I
e to an up to see him scowling. “What is this?”

I shrugged. “He’s my dog obviously.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“I know he’s arrived a few days sooner than expected, but that’s a

that heright?”

“Bonus?” thundered Marco. Oh Lord, we were back to the angry on id to douterances again.

“Yes. I didn’t expect him until next week because he’s been poorly ; on thebeen at the vets, but they must have decided he was well enough t familiarhome. Before the wedding, I had arranged for a pet courier company t him to Chicago because the vet wasn’t going to release him until after ard theleft L.A.”

“Nobody said anything about a dog.” Marco griped. ark and “We’re definitely not having a dog in this house. No way,” o rst timeAlessio.

ew my “And a Made Man can’t have such a ridiculous-looking animal for If fromcommented Camillo, with a look of complete bewilderment on hi

Camillo was the scariest looking out of the Marchiano brothers, beir illo hadlike an ox and having numerous tattoos all over his body.

chest, a I sighed. “I don’t see what the problem is. He’s just a dog. Surely ;? Theyone dog in the house isn’t going to threaten your big scary reputation?”

“Maybe he’s got a listening device implanted in him? He might b ou for asort of Società spy,” commented Camillo as he eyed up my pet suspi ig more“Are you sure he’s even a dog? He looks like a rust-colored grizzly be id been “Of course he’s a dog. He’s a Chow Chow dog. This is what the like.”

looked “How the fuck did he even get past the perimeter guards?” Alessio as if Mr. Fluffy was some sort of lethal intruder who should hav detected.

Danio looked up at Alessio. “The pet courier company needed a si . bonus,for delivery. One of the soldiers at the gate signed for him.”

Alessio looked even more annoyed now. “For Christ’s sake, one re-worded soldier let him in? When I find out which soldier was stupid enough to do that, he’ll wish that he’d never been born.”

and has Marco carried on glaring at me. “It doesn’t matter. The dog’s not going to come. And that’s final.”

to bring “You’re the one that insisted you wanted me. And I come with Mr. Marco. Don’t the marriage vows say something like ‘with all my worldly goods I thee endow’?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t actually get married or get around to making marriage vows, remember?” said Marco, using my words from the first time I said that back at me.

a pet,” “Let me return to L.A. then,” I retorted in a sweet voice. “Mr. Fluffy is more than welcome there.”

big built “What sort of stupid name is Mr. Fluffy anyway?” Camillo interrupted while he kept looking at my dog as if he were some sort of alien.

having “It was his name when we got him at the animal shelter. Anyway, he has a big fur coat.”

he some “Ow, ow, ow! He just bit me,” shrieked Camillo.

iciously. I smiled to myself. I’d always known my dog was a good judge of character.

ey look “He should be called *Mr. Fucky* instead,” Camillo muttered in a voice loud enough for me to hear.

asked, “We come as a package. Take it or leave it,” I announced, taking the dog and marching back upstairs.

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CHAPTER 16

MARCO

I watched as Juliana hurried back up the staircase with her dog, appearing eager to get back to the bedroom.

We all stood around for a few moments, looking at her retreating, before I decided I needed a distraction from my current bad mood.

“Go and lock the door to my bedroom so she can’t escape,” I told Camillo before heading into the office to do some work.

Before I could get started, Alessio marched in. “That dog can’t stop know that, don’t you?” Alessio stood with his legs apart and with his arms crossed over his chest, and I could see he was deadly serious about this.

“I know. Leave it to me.”

“I mean it, Marco. Juliana shouldn’t even be in this house, and the way her dog is staying too.” Alessio had a warning note to his voice.

meeting his eyes, I could see this was non-negotiable for him.

“Look, I’ll sort it out. The dog won’t be staying,” I sighed.

“The girl shouldn’t even be here in the first place. What’s the point of having her here? You were only marrying her to cement our alliance with Società, but now that’s blown up we don’t need her around. I just don’t know why we’re keeping her.”

“We aren’t keeping her. *I’m* keeping her. She’s mine. And I’ll do whatever the fuck I want with her, including using her for my enjoyment. So wish.”

Alessio’s expression made it clear that he didn’t agree with my plan.

I carried on. “She’s the best revenge. Just think how they’ll be out there with minds with panic, wondering what I’m doing to their little innocent, and I’m defiling her and dishonoring that pure body of hers.” I gave a cruel smile. “They’ll fucking regret the day they came up with their plan to take her. They rolled the dice when they promised her to me, and then they lied. It’s their own damn fault for playing. And now they have to pay the price.”

“And the price is?” asked Alessio, raising an eyebrow.

“The price is her dishonor, her defilement, and her life. The purest things in a Made Man’s life are his daughters. They’ll be driving themselves to their deaths, not knowing what we’re doing to her, not knowing if she’s still alive. Their deaths will be their punishment.”

Alessio regarded me. “If it’s about revenge, Marco, we can go back to the States and find some Società fuckers for you to torture and kill.” He wasn’t going to let this go.

“Look, Juliana is staying. That’s final. The dog situation I’ll handle. I’ll get it sent back to L.A. Happy?”

“I’d be happier if the kids weren’t already getting attached to that a

declared Alessio.

“The dog’s been here all of five minutes. No one is getting attached to it. Don’t trust me.”

Right then, Camillo barged into my office. “I vote we get rid of the dog.” He blurted out, interrupting our discussion.

“I’ve already told you Camillo, you’re our Enforcer—you *don’t* get to vote,” I snapped.

“This isn’t a business matter. It’s a family issue, so I should get to vote,” I complained Camillo.

I sat down at my desk to get back to work, then realized I didn’t have my phone. “For fuck’s sake, I’ve left my phone in the kitchen.” Pushing back my chair, I got up to fetch it, Alessio following me back to the kitchen. Camillo trailing after us still whining about the dog.

Debi and Danio were tidying up the breakfast dishes. When Debi saw me, she ran to me and started on about the dog. “Marco, please can we keep the dog?”

“Fluffy? Oh please, Marco,” begged Debi. Debi and Danio had always wanted a dog and had asked for one several times, but Alessio was adamant that we weren’t having a dog in the house.

“We’ll help look after it, feed it and take it for walks and stuff. It’ll be awesome,” chimed in Danio.

“Please, please, please, Marco,” pleaded Debi.

“No one’s getting attached to the dog, huh?” said Alessio, raising his eyebrows at me in an ‘I-told-you-so’ expression. “It sounds to me like you’re getting ready to sign us all up to the Mr. Fluffy Fan Club.”

I looked at Debi and Danio. “Look, the dog isn’t staying, so don’t get attached to it. You can love with him. Understand?” I didn’t like saying no to Danio, and especially not to Debi.

not to Debi when she looked at me with those big brown eyes of hers. I had to tell her that if I agreed to keep the dog, Alessio would cut my dick off.

“But didn’t you see how cute he was? He’s so soft and adorable. I told her he really liked me.” Debi seemed oblivious to my warning that the dog was staying.

Camillo scowled. “That dog is not cute. He attacked me, your own leg. He’s a vicious savage.” Although Camillo was grumbling, he also had to say, “I was hurt that Debi had already forgotten about the dog biting me. Look at the wound he’s left,” he exclaimed, while pointing to a non-existent mark on my ankle.

Debi looked seriously at Camillo. “You did insult him by saying he was stupid and ridiculous and that his name was stupid.”

Camillo rolled his eyes. “He’s an animal. He can’t understand what I’m saying.”

Debi gazed at Camillo doubtfully. “He seems pretty smart to me.”

Walking back to the office, I tried to swallow down my annoyance. I’d never heard so much fucking dog talk in my life, and it was only 7 a.m.

It’ll be

JULIANA

Today followed pretty much the same pattern as yesterday, with Debi alone in the bedroom and meals being brought up to me. However, I had my dog for company, and that made all the difference.

Another difference was that my meals were brought up by Alessio and Marco. I wasn’t sure where Marco was and when I asked Alessio, he

ers, but answer my question. He seemed particularly moody and kept sl
daggers at Mr. Fluffy.

think he I realized that if Marco was planning to torture me, he probably
was not have taken me to his torture chamber already. The fact that he hadn't
tortured, or killed me yet made me feel a little stronger in myself,
brother. having my dog with me so that I was no longer all alone. And since
looked had told me that my sister was going to be alright, that had also made
at the a little better.

on his I still wasn't sure exactly what Marco wanted with me. Perhaps he
to torment me, and he would keep me until he got bored of me?

looked Just as yesterday, when it started to get dark, I got undressed and
my nightclothes. Tonight, instead of sitting on the velvet armchair
that we cross-legged on the floor playing with my pet dog. He had definitely
me and was full of energy and antics.

Later, when I heard the lock turning in the door, I looked up and
Marco walk in. He scowled, whether at me or at my dog I wasn't sure
y 10.00 was probably at us both.

Marco was about to get undressed when I stopped him. "Mr. Fluffy
to pee. Can you take him outside please?"

Marco looked at me and gave me a hard stare. His top lip curled
annoyance, and he didn't reply.

me left "Unless you want him to pee on the bedroom floor?"

today I "For fuck's sake, I'm not your damn dog-sitter. Come on, *Dog*. You
exactly two minutes to pee and then I am bringing you back inside
you're done or not."

sio, not "Charming. Is that how you speak to your men? I can see now why
e didn't fear you."

hooting “Careful, beautiful.” He continued to stare at me, and I just stared
him. Then he turned and took Mr. Fluffy outside with him.

would I breathed out a sigh of relief. I probably shouldn’t provoke him, but
t raped, was the only way I could take my frustration out right now.

as did I got ready for bed, and a few minutes later, Marco arrived back
Marcobedroom with Mr. Fluffy in tow.

me feel “He’s not sleeping in our bed, so don’t get any ideas,” he snapped.

“I’d rather have my own bedroom and my own bed.”

wanted “Life is full of disappointments. Deal with it.”

I took a couple of spare pillows from the closet and used them to
put on bed for my dog. He seemed happy enough with the improvised dog bed,
r, I sat gave it a sniff and walked around it a few times before leaping onto
missed snuggling down.

Marco turned out the lights and climbed into bed. As he did yesterday
and saw laid behind me and pulled me back into his arms and held me again,
a, but it chest. I lay rigidly in his arms and into the dark, I said, “He really needs
out to exercise twice a day, plus obviously to pee.”

y needs When Marco didn’t reply, I carried on. “Will you be able to take care
for me?”

urled in “I’ve already told you I’m not your dog-sitter. You need to take care
yourself.”

I became very still. “Does that mean that I’m allowed out of this room
I’ve got “If that means Dog doesn’t pee on the floor, then yes. But not by any
whether I’ll take you out after breakfast.”

I smiled into the darkness. I was going to be allowed to leave this room
by they tomorrow. My dog always brought happiness and joy everywhere he
thought to myself, while I drifted off to sleep.

back at

but that

in the By the next morning, Marco had changed his mind and instead to
Fluffy outside after breakfast by himself.

He didn't trust me, I knew that, but I was still bitterly disappoint
frustrated. I knew from what he'd said that the funerals of his dead
were today, and I guessed that was probably souring his mood.

make a I wondered again how Jess was getting on and prayed that si
ed and recovering. Whenever I thought back to the church, I felt worry ar
it and churn up my insides as if it was somehow my fault that Jess got hurt-
been at my wedding after all.

day, he And I was her older sister and I had always looked out for her ur
inst his day—until I had been dragged away from her while she lay bleedi
ls to go unconscious on the floor.

aim out

aim out

m?" The next couple of days followed the same routine. Marco and I
the same bed, but all my meals were in the bedroom and Marco would
ourself. Mr. Fluffy twice a day for a run around in the gardens. I suspected tha
and Debi might be involved in the dog walking.

s room Later that week, I was in a particularly irritable mood one evening
went, I been locked in this room for days now," I griped.

“Well, you shouldn’t have tried to escape before,” responded Marco

“You’re punishing me, is that it?”

“No, beautiful. You would know if I was punishing you.”

After a silence, he said, “You can come with me tomorrow when I take Mr. dog for a walk after breakfast.”

“Really?” I asked eagerly.

“Yes.” He looked at me carefully. “But you have to give me some soldiers want.”

I hesitated. “Like what?”

His eyes burned into me. “Like we take a shower together.”

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CHAPTER 17

JULIANA

I didn't say anything for a second, my mind whirring.

"That hardly seems like a fair exchange." My voice sounded high normal, and I was having difficulty getting the words to come out.

"You asked for something that you want, to go outside, so I'm asking something I want in return. That's how this is going to work. You decide whether to agree or not."

He waited for me to answer. I frowned slightly, trying to think. "A shower?"

"Only a shower. I won't do anything you don't want."

"How do I know I can trust you?" I must have been crazy to even consider this.

"Have I hurt you so far?"

“What, you mean apart from kidnapping me, locking me in this room, not letting me speak to my family?”

Marco narrowed his eyes. “If you had come willingly as per the contract you signed, those things wouldn’t have been necessary. I could have had you a lot worse, especially after you tried to stab me and escape. I could have physically hurt you. But it’s your choice—I won’t force you.”

I considered what he had just said. I was probably doing a deal with the devil, but I had to get out of this room before I went completely crazy.

“Okay,” I whispered quietly.

MARCO

We looked at each other and when Juliana didn’t make a move toward the bathroom, I stepped slowly toward her. Her eyes were wide, and she looked like a deer caught in headlights. And I was her predator: the big bad wolf. I took her hand and pulled her toward the bathroom. She stiffened but she followed behind me.

When we got to the bathroom, I let go of her hand and turned on the shower to heat up. The sound of the falling water broke the silence in the room.

She didn’t move. I started to unbutton my shirt and she just watched. When I had undone the top few buttons, I pulled it off over my head. Then I undid my belt and zipper and took my pants off.

I was left standing in my boxer briefs and my cock was already sticking against the fabric in anticipation of our shower.

om and As I went to take my briefs off, I saw Juliana's eyes go even w
alarm and she turned around quickly and started undressing, probabl
contracteffort to avoid looking at my erection. She took off her top and jeans,
treatedher slim body in just her pale blue panties and bra.

haven't She reached around to unclasp her bra, struggling due to her
fingers. "Let me." I stilled her by placing my hands on her shoulders a
with theI undid the clasp, pushing the straps off her arms.

She kept her back to me and placed her fingers in the waistband
panties. She started to remove them and then bent to push them furthe
her long legs, not realizing that in doing so she gave me a delicious
her pink pussy.

ard the How I would love to see her bent over on all fours on my bed, w
looked thighs spread open, waiting for my cock. By now I was rock hard,
hadn't even gotten into the shower yet.

After taking off her panties, she looked over her shoulder at me.

olf. "Get in." I gestured for her to get into the shower.

er arm, She swallowed and stepped into the large shower. She stood un
e water showerhead, allowing the hot water to tumble over her curves like a w

ence in I just watched her for a few long seconds, before moving to join he
shower. I stood close to her so that we were both under the large show

ied me. She kept her back to me and reached for her shampoo, probabl
something to do with her hands.

ad, and "No," I said, and she turned her head around in surprise. "Give it to
said in a gruff tone.

raining She slowly handed me the bottle containing her jasmine-scented sh
As she watched me, I poured a small amount into my palm and then s
across both palms. "Turn your head away from me."

She hesitated, but then did as she was told. She was learning.

With her facing away from me, I rested my palms on the back of her head, making her jump. “Relax. I’m just going to wash your hair.” And with that, I proceeded to spread the shampoo throughout her dark locks, inhaling a soft, flowery scent.

Once I was satisfied with the lather, I held her firmly by her upper arms and pushed her back under the spray, letting the water wash the suds from her hair. Next, I applied some conditioner to her strands and then used my fingers to massage her scalp. She tilted back her head a little, pushing her head into my hands as a kitten would when it’s petted.

I grasped her by her arms and turned her around to face me. I looked into her eyes and raised my fingers back to her scalp, and as I continued to knead my fingers in her hair, she closed her eyes, and I heard a low moan escape from her parted lips.

Fuck, her response to my touch was a fan to my desire.

I pushed her back under the spray again, and while the conditioner ran down her hair, I grabbed the body wash and poured some onto my fingers and rubbed my palms together.

Juliana had turned away from me as she rinsed the conditioner out of her hair. I placed my soapy palms on her shoulders, making her flinch abruptly as she turned her head around quickly to see what I was doing. Washing her hair was one thing, but having my hands on her naked skin was making her panic.

“Shh, beautiful. Let me wash you,” I said, keeping my hands in place and gently massaging her shoulders.

She didn’t respond, but she turned her head back away from me and spread her arms over her shoulders and lightly down her arms, before I soaped her

back and ran my palms over the luscious globes of her ass, squeezing her head, fullness.

That, I moved my hands back up to her arms and turned her around to facing theShe didn't resist. Her pupils were dilated in those big blue eyes of hers as she was taking shallow breaths.

er arms She was turned on.

s away. I kept my eyes fixed on her as I glided my soapy hands over her cheeks to her throat and collarbone, moving my hands lower until they reached her breasts. Fuck, her nipples were rock hard under my gaze and tightened when I ran my hands roughly over her breasts, groping each one in my hand. I rolled each nipple between my finger and thumb, making them hard and fuller, and as I did so, she gasped and closed her eyes.

Now sigh I moved behind her and pulled her back against my chest and then ran my hands to her soapy breasts. As she leaned her head back against my shoulder, I could see the arousal on her face, and I moved my hand down to wash over her smooth belly until I reached the strip of dark hair on her mound. She had been waxed, probably on the morning of the wedding preparation for her first night as my wife. The beautician had left a strip of hair on either side of her slit, teasing me with its silky strands and turning calling me to run my fingers through it and discover the secrets it hid. It was one The white body wash contrasted perfectly with her dark nipples and pussy hair. I moved my hands around the tops of her thighs, parting her legs a little and stroking the delicate skin of her inner thighs.

Her eyes were shut now, and I watched her face as my fingers glided over her outer labia before parting her inner lips and finding a slender swollen, erect and soaked with her arousal.

She gave a small cry as my fingers touched that bundle of nerves. I

ing their eyes were tightly shut.

“Look at me,” I commanded.

face me. Reluctantly she opened her eyes, her cheeks flamed in embarrassment, and This was the first time her pussy had been touched by a man, but I going to go easy on her. “Keep your eyes on mine, otherwise I’ll stop to watch you.”

delicate After a pause, when I was sure that she wasn’t going to close her breasts, again, I carried on exploring her clit, working it with my fingers further running my fingertips back to the entrance of her pussy.

palms. By now the body wash had rinsed off under the spray of the shower. I long alternated between playing with her pussy lips and rubbing her clit in circles. As the tension coiled in her body and her folds became more sensitive she closed her eyes.

against my “No. Look at me,” I ordered, my voice hard with need, and I stopped my fingers from moving until she fixed her gaze back on me.

and. As she approached her climax, her breaths came in quick pants, and I had her palms pressed up against my muscled thighs behind her.

narrow She was struggling to keep her legs standing and I wrapped my other arm, tightly above her belly, feeling her heavy, naked breasts resting on my forearm.

and dark I felt her muscles tense and, as she clung desperately to my forearms, her legs wrapped around her, she screamed out while I worked my fingers relentlessly on her clit, not stopping when she tried to push my hand away. I finally inhaled, feeling her pussy entrance flood with moisture as she came. I held her hands.

I continued to massage her clit until I had wrung out every last bit of pleasure. By now cries and spread her pussy’s juices over her entire labia.

Her legs had buckled, and I was holding her up against my body v
strong arms. Her eyes were closed now and, as her breaths started to r
nt. normal, she froze as if realizing what had just happened.

wasn't She spun around and opened her eyes, tearing herself from my e
. I wantand backing up against the glass wall.

"You said it would just be a shower," she hissed at me, pushing p
er eyesand running out of the shower. She nearly slipped on the wet fl
beforemanaged to right herself, grabbing a towel as she escaped to the bedro

I let her go. She needed a few minutes to calm down, and I needed
ower. I care of my aching cock. I grabbed some more body wash and soap
n smallthrobbing erection, leaning back against the cool tiled wall as I imagin
lippy, it was her juicy pussy that was gripping my cock hard and replaying
mind the sound of her screaming as she came.

ped my It didn't take me long to climax like this, and I sighed heavily as I
my thick, white cum onto the tiled wall before watching the showe
and shewash it away.

Satisfied for now, I turned off the water and dried myself off. I th
er armtowel onto the counter and walked back naked into the bedroom, v
on myfound Juliana already in my bed.

forearm JULIANA

ntlessly

sharply

at my

After barely drying myself, I grabbed some new nightclothes and
as quickly as possible with my shaking hands.

t of her

Once I was dressed, I leapt under the covers and lay there, a qu
wreck.

with my return to burned with shame and embarrassment—I had orgasmed at the hands of my captor.

embrace My mind and body had betrayed me, allowing him to do that to me and I was horrified by the effect he'd had on my body and how easily he's manipulated me.

door but A few minutes later, while still trying to hold back the tears threatening to fall, I heard him come back into the bedroom.

to take He put on a clean pair of boxer briefs and got into bed. My back turned to him so I didn't have to watch him, and I lay on the edge of the bed as far away from him as possible, just as I had on my first night here.

in my Lying down, he slung his arm around my torso and pulled me back toward the center of the bed into his embrace, just as he did each night now.

spurred "Let me go," I rasped, struggling against him and trying to free myself from his hold.

"No. You are mine. When will you understand that?"

rew the "You said it would just be a shower. I never agreed to...to that, I mean where you did in there."

"To me touching your pussy and making you come?"

I felt my cheeks heat in anger and embarrassment at his crude words.

"You could have stopped me at any time. I didn't hear you protest because you were too busy screaming. I like a girl who's noisy in bed."

dressed "You don't play fair," I said, feeling my cheeks go even redder at the mention of my screams. I had never orgasmed like that at my own hands, but somehow, he had completely unraveled me.

livering "I'm not a good man. I never said I play fair. You wanted that as much as I did."

cheeks I remained silent. I couldn't talk about this with him.

s of my “Look, you're still a virgin if that matters to you. I didn't take that
won't until you beg me to.”

e. I was “I'll never beg you,” I retorted.

pulated “We'll see.” Even though I was facing away from him, I could h
smirk in his voice.

at were I continued trying to get out of his hold and managed to ram my
back into his chest, but he hardly seemed to feel it.

ck was “Stop,” he said, rolling me onto my back and grabbing both my
he bed, restraining them over my head. His hard body was over mine and h
thick thighs were pinning my legs to the mattress. “Do you want to c
toward teasing me, or do you want to stop and go to sleep? Either is fine w
beautiful.”

myself I froze. I realized there was no escape for me tonight, so I took
breath and slackened my tense muscles. “I want to sleep,” I whispe
longer having the energy to argue with him.

to what My physical weakness as a woman frustrated me. He let go of my
and pulled me back into his arms. I let him do this, knowing that f
would get me nowhere. Instead, I closed my eyes and willed sleep to t
to a place of oblivion.

ig. You

MARCO

r at his

fingers,

She didn't struggle tonight to stay awake. I think she wanted sleep t
so that she could get away from me—and what had happened in the
ich as I tonight.

I felt her finally relax in my arms as she drifted off into sleep. I listened—and I heard her gentle breathing.

For fuck's sake, I could hear her dog snoring as well.

I let my mind wander back to our shower, to her deliciously responsive body. She had wanted it as much as I had.

I had never forced a woman, and I wouldn't force her. There would never be an elbow challenge in that, and I liked a challenge.

No, I didn't want just her body. I wanted her mind and soul too.

her wrists,
her face is bare,
she carries on
with me,

My eyes blinked open, and my hand flew to the weapon beside me. I took a deep breath. My finger was poised on the trigger.

I clicked on the light on my nightstand, checking the room and at the same time ensuring that Juliana was still beside me where she should have been.

Like I always did on nights like these, I reached for my phone and checked the security feeds and logged into the guard reports to see if there had been any unusual activity over the last few hours.

But, as always, everything was just fine. Everything that was, except for me.

I knew what had woken me up—and it wasn't anything going on in the house or on the estate.

I had been woken by what was going on in my mind.

I had been dreaming again about the day our mom died. Fuck, just thinking about it made me so angry. Worse, it made guilt attack my soul.

ened to I looked across at Juliana. I wouldn't have liked to have stayed in b
her, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to sleep after my nightmare.
3.45 a.m. but I got up to start my day. There was always plenty of wori
ponsiveand I was glad to have that to take my mind off things.

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I looked across at Juliana. I wouldn't have liked to have stayed in bed with her, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to sleep after my nightmare. It was 3.45 a.m. but I got up to start my day. There was always plenty of work to do, and I was glad to have that to take my mind off things.

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CHAPTER 18

MARCO

The next morning, after we woke, Juliana did her best to ignore me.

After getting dressed, I went to leave the bedroom as usual. But this time I stopped at the bedroom door and held it open, signaling for Juliana to come to the front of me.

She looked at me, puzzled. “I thought we were having breakfast before going on the dog walk?”

“Yeah, we’ll have breakfast first and then we’ll take him for a walk.

“I’m being allowed to eat breakfast downstairs?” she asked with surprise.

“You’ll be going downstairs anyway for the walk, so if you have breakfast downstairs that will save me a trip up with your tray.”

JULIANA

I tried to hide my excitement as I walked out of the bedroom for the first time in days. My pooch followed on my heels. He seemed as excited to see us leaving the room together.

When we got downstairs, we went to the main living area. Today I had a better look around me. Alessio and Debi were sitting around the big island eating breakfast, while Camillo and Danio were playing a video game on the big screen in front of the couches.

“Hey, it’s too early for that. Switch that game off and come have breakfast,” said Marco as he walked toward the couches. I bet he didn’t even say that it was too early for killing.

Debi gave me a shy smile. “Hi, Juliana. Me and Danio got some things for Mr. Fluffy yesterday. Do you want to see?” she asked eagerly.

“Sure, I’d love that.” Maybe Debi could be an ally and I should be able to make a friend of her. Before I started on breakfast, I looked through the things that Debi and Danio had got from the pet store. There was a dog toy, dog toys, and a ball thrower that would come in handy when we took walks.

“These are great, Debi. Thank you so much for getting these. Mr. Fluffy was supposed to send his things over after the wedding but, you know, things must have distracted her.”

“I’m heading out—I’ve got some business to take care of,” said Marco, pushing his chair back and getting up. “It’s like fucking doggy day here,” he muttered, stepping over the new dog equipment and toys.

Ignoring him, I sat down at the kitchen island and Marco passed me some homemade pancakes. I poured myself a cup of coffee and dug in.

breakfast.

he first

s me to MARCO

I took a After breakfast, we took the dog into the gardens for his morning
kitchen when I could finally get him out of the kitchen. “Come on, Mr. F, do
o game coming or not?” If you asked me, the dog needed some training
following orders.

re your As soon as the dog was through the back door, he ran off madly, c
n’t ever large circle and then coming back to Juliana. She bent down to h
ruffled his ears. Then he took off again around the garden, stopping
ings for now and again to chase his own tail around in smaller circles.

I looked at his antics. “That dog is a maniac.”

re trying “It takes one to know one,” Juliana shot back at me.

ugh the I felt the corner of my mouth lift in a small smile.

og bed, “So, did you always want to be a killer?” she asked me.

him for I chuckled. “You’re very direct when you want to be. And, yes, I
knew I would be a Made Man and a killer—although we only kill those
y sister deserve it.”

v, other “How very noble of you,” she said dryly.

“And what did you want to be when you were growing up? A doctor
Alessio, heal all the men tortured by the Società?” I said mockingly.

care in “No, of course not.” She hesitated. “Actually, I wanted to work
animals and be a veterinary nurse.”

ie some “Ah, so I wasn’t far off with my guess. Although instead of
nto my humans, you see animals as being more worthy of your care.”

She looked across at me as we walked. “I used to volunteer at a dog in L.A. It was something worthwhile to do and I enjoyed it.”

“I’m not really an animal person,” I declared.

“Yeah, I kinda figured,” she murmured.

I didn’t know if it was being outside in the fresh air and among the grass and trees or if it was because we were starting to get used to each other. Today felt more relaxed, even after what happened last night.

Being outside with her dog seemed to relax Juliana. The estate’s grounds were huge, and we followed the dog who seemed to already have a sense for his way around the gardens, no doubt due to the long walk Debi and Danio had been taking him on.

Juliana had brought the ball thrower with her and when the dog returned to her and started jumping at the thrower, she threw the ball for him to retrieve. “I can’t tell you how good it feels to be outside,” she said, as she raised her face to the sun and let her skin drink in the warmth of its rays.

“I don’t really spend as much time out here as I did when Danio and Debi were younger. Danio is more interested in computer games these days and Debi is always doing whatever girls like to do.”

For most of our time outside we walked in silence. But it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. Juliana was enjoying the feeling of being outdoors. It was with reluctance that she headed back to the bedroom when I said it was time to go back in.

We walked back via the front of the house. “Why do you have the stone statue of Mary here on your front lawn? You’re hardly the pious kind, are you?”

I looked at the stone statue. “When we moved to this house, Debi helped me to bring the statue from my parents’ house. I had it brought here for her memories caught in my throat for a moment, causing an unwanted v

shelteremotion before I mentally shook myself. “It took six guys to me
fucking thing.”

“You shouldn’t blaspheme the Virgin Mary.”

“I’m not blaspheming Mary, just the stone she’s made of. Anywa
gardensgrown to like her for some reason. She makes the place feel like home.
her, but She looked carefully at me. “She’s someone to watch out for you gu

I looked away from her. “I don’t need anyone to look out for me. E
groundslike the thought of her taking care of my siblings.”

a good
lks that

irned to

etrieve. Later that morning, a knock sounded at my door, and I looked up
sed herAnni. She was the wife of my cousin, Lorenzo.

“Hi Marco,” she chirped.

id Debi She came in and sat in the chair in front of my desk. As usual, s
ays anddressed in her own quirky way. Her cobalt-blue dress had puffy sleeve
green trim, and she wore it with Converse sneakers, while her white
sn’t anhair was styled in its usual short bob. She completely rebelled against
ide andtypical Mafia wife, both in terms of looks and attitude.

l it was “It’s customary to wait to be invited into someone’s office.”

“It’s okay. I know you don’t go in for social niceties and would pr
Virginhave just left me standing in the doorway, so I invited myself in.
, something I want to talk to you about.”

wanted I checked the time. “Where the fuck is Lorenzo? He’s suppose
er.” Mymeeting me now.”

vave of

“He’s still in the car, on a call to someone about some issue. He said you he’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Given that my cousin hadn’t yet graced me with his presence, I may, I’ve really have an excuse to get rid of his wife. “What did you want about?” I asked carefully.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t be at the wedding, but you know how even but I do thought it wouldn’t be that safe.”

“No problem. I’m glad you weren’t there given what happened.”

She nodded. “Yeah, about that...Lorenzo tells me you’ve brought home with you.”

“And?” I barked. Anni wasn’t shy about saying what was on her mind. I knew that I should just get this conversation over and done with as soon as possible.

She sighed. “Look, I know that there are no girls in the Fratellanza attracted to, and I know that you probably feel you’re at the age where you want to settle down, but there are better ways to find a girl than kidnapping one.”

“I didn’t kidnap her. She was mine as soon as she signed the contract being a blonde took what belonged to me.” My tone was abrupt and held a dark edge. Anni didn’t let that deter her.

“You know that mine and Lorenzo’s engagement and wedding probably exactly run smoothly, and then we struggled with our marriage at the start. I have

“Your point is?” I gritted out.

“I just think that marrying a girl you’ve got through kidnapping is a bad idea. Especially as there are easier ways to find a girl.”

“And what are these easier ways?” I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation with her.

d to tell Anni beamed her sweet smile at me. “Online dating apps.”

“Anni, I don’t think—”

I didn’t “I knew you would feel too shy to set up a profile, so I’ve already done it for you.” She thrust her cell phone at me. “Here, take a look. And if you start complaining about our Mafia world and the need for secrecy, everyone blah, blah, blah, just read it and you’ll see that I’ve managed to mention your badman ways.”

I looked at the screen and I saw the name ‘Mervin.’

the girl “Er, who’s Mervin, and what’s he got to do with me?”

“That’s your alias. I just thought that you might want to avoid using your real name, but I made your alias something similar to your real name so it wouldn’t feel weird being called it.”

“No, being called Mervin doesn’t sound weird at all,” I said drily.

you’re “Click on your name and it’ll bring up your profile.” Anni was beaming over with annoying enthusiasm. I was beginning to wonder how Lohan, who was a grumpy asshole at times, managed to put up with her on this basis.

It. I just Against my better judgment, I tapped on the screen, my eyes widened, but saw a photo of me looking back. A photo of me...with a dog. “What the hell is this?”

I didn’t “Male dating profiles get more hits if the man has his kid or pet photo with him. And it’s not just a myth—I wouldn’t just blindly believe something that I’ve read. I’ve studied various raw data and calculated a really statistical probability of a profile click is thirty-seven percent higher for a man if he has a child or animal in his profile picture.” Christ, why did my cousin have to marry a math nerd? Couldn’t he have just married a blonde?

I looked back down at the photo. “Mr. Fluffy isn’t my pet,” I snapped. “I know, but Danio told me that you have a dog in the house, and one onethought why not use the dog in your profile photo. Genius, right?”

before “No, *not genius*. I don’t recall ever having my picture taken with the dog and an animal, and the photo makes me look like I’ve got a stick up my ass.”

make no “Lorenzo always says that Danio is the tech guru in the family, so I asked him to photoshop you and Mr. Fluffy into a photo together. Danio couldn’t find a recent photo with you smiling, and this was the photo I found where you looked the least murderous and stabby. It’s bad online dating etiquette to use an old photo, so we just went with the best recent one so that we could find.”

“And using a fake name, plus photoshopping a picture to make it look like I adore dogs, isn’t ‘bad online dating etiquette’, right?”

stammering Anni narrowed her eyes at me. “You could at least give this a chance. Lorenzo, all the trouble I’ve gone to. You haven’t even read the profile yet.”

a daily I scrolled down the screen to read what she had written about me. It was generic bullshit and didn’t sound like me at all. Under hobbies, she’d written “Loves people, loves pets, and loves smiling.”

he fuck What the *actual* fuck?

At that moment, Lorenzo finally made an appearance. “Marco’s not in the delayed—”

believe He came to a halt when he saw me holding Anni’s phone.

that the His eyes lasered into his wife. “Anni, you didn’t show him the photo for a profile, did you?” he barked. “I told you to delete it.”

did my “I don’t take my orders from you, Lorenzo,” she said obstinately.

a dumb “Sorry about this, Marco.” He yanked Anni out of the chair and practically pushed her out of the door. “We’ve got a tennis match scheduled for

ed. work—I'll see you there and deal with you then," he growled at her
nd so I shutting the door and turning back to me.

I silently pushed Anni's phone back across the desk to him.

it dumb "I'll get it deleted, Marco. She means well. I told her you're a cold
bastard and she shouldn't waste her time on you, but she can't help
o I gotShe's just worried about things not working out between you and the
said hey you being lonely."

10to he "Can we talk about something other than my fucking love life?" I fu
onlinehim.

ent one "Sure thing, boss."

As we talked about business, I couldn't help thinking about what A
ok likesaid about kidnapping not being the best start to a marriage.

But then I brushed those thoughts aside. I wasn't the one who'd star
ce afterwar, and I wasn't the one who was going to show mercy.

was all

written:

I took Juliana her lunch into the bedroom again, but I hoped that i
, I gotfeel as claustrophobic now that she had been allowed outside this morn

That evening I came and collected Juliana and took her downst
dinner. "I'll take you and Mr. F outside after dinner for a walk."

dating "Mr. F?" Juliana looked puzzled at my new name for her dog.

"Debi doesn't like me calling the animal 'Dog'. I'm not sure why
please her I'll call him 'Mr. F' instead." I wasn't going to call any
ctically

or after

before 'Mr. Fluffy', not for anyone. I mean, I was a Made Man and a Capo had a reputation to maintain.

Downstairs, we all sat around the kitchen island to eat. Dinner was hearty lasagna with grilled Mediterranean vegetables on the side. "Alessio, lasagna is my favorite," exclaimed Debi, when she saw what was for dinner. "That's why I cook it so often," Alessio said with a smile at Debi.

"You cooked this?" Juliana asked, probably surprised that a Made Man could cook as well as this.

Alessio merely nodded, but Camillo added, "Alessio and Marco learned to cook when us kids moved in with them." "Zip it, Camillo," I snapped. Juliana didn't need to know all the details of our family life. I wondered if I would have been so secretive had we actually gotten married.

The rest of the meal was just casual conversation, talking about Debi's school and talking about sports. Our family was huge baseball fans, even Debi. While we were eating, I noticed Juliana trying to look thoughtful, probably for possible escape avenues. I whispered into her ear, "The best way to escape, beautiful, so save your efforts. You'll need all your strength for later tonight."

I saw her face go pale. I liked to toy with her like a cat toying with a mouse, and I'm sure my words left her wondering what I expected from her tonight.

After dinner, I got up and looked to Juliana. "Come on, let's get out of here, but to walk over and done with."

She called Mr. F and together we took him for his evening walk to the gardens.

We walked to the area which we called the fruit orchard. "It's nice

), and Itranquil,” remarked Juliana. “What are these trees?”

“They’re a mixture of cherry, apple, pear, and plum trees. Danio ar
s a richloved coming out to pick the fruit from the trees when they were young
o, youralways been one of my favorite places on the estate.”

inner. Mr. F ran up to us and stood looking at me with his ball in his mou
wants to play fetch,” Juliana told me.

le Man “You better get on with it then. Dealing with animals and their s
covered toys is beyond my pay grade.”

urned to “Don’t worry, Mr. Fluffy, I’ll play with you,” giggled Juliana as
off between the trees while Mr. F chased after her to get his ball back
tails ofone of his favorite games it seemed.

actually I followed them deeper into the orchard. Turning back in a circle
looking where she was going, Juliana ran straight into me, stumbling
nio andlost her balance.

ill fans, I caught her in my arms before she fell completely, and I held her
around,clasped against my chest.

re’s no She had been laughing, but as my eyes blazed into hers, her smile fa
strength

JULIANA

with a

om her

My smile faltered as his silvery gray eyes blazed into mine. His
were rolled up revealing his thick forearms dusted with dark hair. He
the dog close to me that I could smell his clean, masculine scent with its hint c
and lemongrass.

through

I don’t remember how it happened, but I felt the sudden sensatio
warm lips pressing gently against my mouth.

ce here,

I tried to pull back, but he held me firmly in place and pulled me and Debi against him. His body heat scorched me through our clothes, telling me he wanted me. It's much he wanted me.

My mind stopped. I knew he was dangerous and this was madness. "He couldn't think as I felt a haze drift over my mind and spread down to my limbs.

lobber-

MARCO

she ran

. It was

She froze when my lips met hers and she tried to pull away.

and not She seemed shocked and I knew that she had never been kissed before. I would have to take my time with her.

as she

Although I held her tightly to me, I kept my lips gentle on hers. /

tightly she didn't respond.

tightly

But then I felt her body soften in my hold and I saw her eyes slowly

altered. as she savored the sensation.

As she relaxed, I gently coaxed her lips with my tongue, and I felt part as she gave a soft moan. That moan went straight to my cock, and that soon I wanted to hear her moaning as she writhed naked under my bed.

sleeves As her lips parted in the moan, I slipped inside her mouth and stroked my tongue gently with mine. She tasted of sweetness and innocence. Her musk intoxicated me, making desire blaze through my body.

I continued coaxing her tongue until I felt a small response from her. Her tongue hesitantly met mine. A surge of triumph coursed through my body as I felt her attraction to me.

tighter Her small hands, which before had been pushing against me, were now resting tentatively against my chest. She was pushing her body into me, making small sighs as I took her with my mouth.

s. But I I took my time with her, letting the passion slowly seep from my bones through hers. I didn't want to break her. I wanted her to bend and come willingly to me.

When I finally pulled away, I could see her cheeks were flushed and her lips swollen. She looked confused, so I gently took her hand. "Come on, let me get you inside," I said in a low voice.

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Her small hands, which before had been pushing against me, were now resting tentatively against my chest. She was pushing her body into mine, making small sighs as I took her with my mouth.

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CHAPTER 19

JULIANA

We didn't talk as he led me back inside.

Mr. Fluffy followed behind us as Marco took me upstairs.

He had kissed me for the first time...and I had let him.

My mind was frozen. I couldn't understand what was happening to us. He was my captor and I had just let him kiss me.

I had told myself after the shower yesterday that it had just been me responding physically to his touch. But the kiss today had taken over my mind and left me wanting more. It had seemed different to when we had been in the shower together and, somehow, even more intimate.

While he kissed me, I had been able to feel his hard muscles through his shirt and my fingers had wanted to stroke him, to feel him.

I flushed, realizing that my panties were damp and sticking to my skin. My core was throbbing from that kiss.

I pressed my fingers to my swollen lips. How could one kiss from this man reduce me to a quivering wreck and make my insides melt into liquid? Christ, what was wrong with me?

After he took me back into his bedroom, I was surprised by his next move. “Go to bed without me. I have to visit one of our hotels to do some business.”

I hadn’t expected that. “When will you be back?”

“Not until late. Get some sleep.”

He didn’t ask to shower together again, thank God, because I was high on the kiss already and I didn’t think I could cope with that as well.

That night, it took me much longer than normal to fall asleep.

Although I tried to block out thoughts of what had just happened, my mind kept replaying the kiss over and over again, reliving every look, touch, and stroke that had been exchanged between us.

I didn’t understand what was happening. I had been here barely a week and I was already starting to lose perspective.

between He was probably the cruelest man in Chicago...so why had I felt like I was in heaven when he had kissed me?

my body Then I reminded myself of things he had done for me over the last few days. He’d updated me about Jess’s condition even though he didn’t like me and he’d let me have my dog when I knew how easily he could have sent me away or worse.

ugh his He was letting me mix with his family now and taking me for walks in the gardens. These were all things that a captor wouldn’t permit his prisoners to do. Perhaps I had been wrong about his intentions and wrong to be afraid of him.

sex and Despite my kidnapping and everything that had happened, I knew
I had enjoyed his company today. Worse still, I craved more of it—an
his man of him.
d heat?

t words
al with

Later, I didn't know what time it was, but I must have been in a daze
when I heard my name whispered.

I woke up with a start to find a tall man standing over me. His hand
shaken over my mouth.

Panic surged through my body. I tried to fight and pulled at the wrist
hand clamping down on my mouth. The man was too strong for me.
my mind “Shh. We're here to rescue you.”

rich and I stilled when I heard his words. As I fought the foggy
fuddled brain and my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I found myself
peek and into a pair of piercing blue eyes. They were eyes that were so similar to

I knew those eyes: it was Jacob.
like this Thank God—*he had come to save me.*

As he saw the recognition appear in my eyes, he took his restraints
ast few away and I leapt into his arms. “Jake, oh Jake,” I sobbed with relief
have to, initial panic subsiding, although adrenaline was quickly taking its place
ent him electrifying all my nerves.

I noticed behind Jacob was another one of my father's men, Cornelio
s in the Cornelio had acted as my personal bodyguard for as long as I
captive. remember.
of him?

“No one is downstairs,” whispered Jacob. “We just need to keep quiet more we get outside the perimeter gates. My men are waiting for us there behind me and don’t make a sound.”

I nodded, my heart in my throat. I was finally getting out of here.

Jacob and Cornelio were all dressed in black, camouflaging themselves in the dark. Mr. Fluffy had been woken by the movements and he pressed himself affectionately into Jacob, recognizing his familiar scent.

There was no time for me to dress. I was barefoot and only wearing sleep shorts and tank top.

I felt the cool night air kissing my skin as I hurried with them out of the bedroom, taking Mr. Fluffy by the collar and urging him forward.

We silently made our way down the staircase and kept as close to the wall as possible.

For a second my thoughts turned guiltily to Debi and Danio. I hoped—God that we made it out of here without any gunshots being fired.

The house was dark. I was still unfamiliar with this house and jittery on my nerves. I stumbled as we came down the stairs. Cornelio was behind me and quickly righted my step.

Once outside we made our way carefully and silently through the gates of the estate, and Jacob told me that half a mile beyond the perimeter were two SUVs with more Società soldiers.

At night the gardens looked completely different—creepy somehow as if the trees were watching us. It made my skin crawl or perhaps it was Cornelio prickling at my skin.

We would be at the estate perimeter in a couple more minutes. Almost free.

Suddenly I was blinded, my hand flying to my squinting eyes.

let until As I struggled to adjust my eyes to the bright lights that had appeared. Keepof nowhere to flood the outdoor area, I heard Marco's cold voice ring
"Going somewhere?"

I whirled around. We were surrounded by Marco and Alessio, as well as a large number of their soldiers.

I froze. I knew this was over.

There would be no escape for me.

Nor for Jacob or Cornelio.

There was nothing the Società soldiers waiting outside the perimeter of the do for us now—it would be a suicide mission for them even to attempt help Jacob, Cornelio, and me, given the sheer number of Fratellani surrounding us. The Società would never be able to defeat the Marchioni on their home ground.

As I stood rooted to the spot, Marco slowly approached me as a predator would stalk toward its prey. "And there I was thinking that you were waiting in bed for me, beautiful."

Normally that sort of crude comment from him would cause me to react, but the horror of the situation had rendered me incapable of even that.

He roughly grabbed my arm and pulled me back toward the house. That I was outside, I wasn't giving up so easily.

I shoved at him and managed to slip his grasp. I took off at a run—as if knowing where I was going and still barefoot.

But he easily caught me, yanking me back toward him and slamming me back against his chest, the impact making me cry out. He slung his arm around my torso and started carrying me toward the house.

My arms were restrained under his but I could still kick back with my heels. But it didn't seem to do much good. My helplessness against him

red out the prospect of escape being snatched away from me, made tears
ng out. sting my eyes as I watched Jacob and Cornelio being dragged
Alessio.

ell as a When we reached the foot of the stairs he flipped me over his sh
further humiliating me by demonstrating his complete power over
easily carried me back up the staircase that I had moments ago been e
down.

He strode back to his bedroom and after entering the room he tos
r could roughly onto the bed's mattress.

empt to As soon as my back bounced on the mattress I scrambled to s
za men pushed myself up against the headboard, as far away from him as I co
anos on panting in fear and exertion.

I could see that he was furious with my rescuers. But he was also
redator with me.

ould be "What are you going to do to them? Please don't hurt them, please!"

I probably should have apologized for trying to escape. But those
o blush, wouldn't come out of my mouth—all I cared about was what was g
happen to Jacob and Cornelio.

e. Now But Marco didn't answer me.

After staring at me, he turned on his heel and left the room, lock
un, not door behind him.

I don't know how long I sat like that in the dark, worrying about wh
ing my going to happen to Jacob and Cornelio. And what was going to ha
his arm me?

with my MARCO
im, and

f anger
way by We took the intruders to our garage block. We walked them past the
and sports cars parked on the main floor, taking them through the back
cavernous area. This was our torture room. This was where we came
oulder, fun.

me. He We separated the men, putting them into different holding rooms.
scaping

As I watched Jacob being dragged into a room, he stared back at r
eyes so similar to Juliana's. And for some reason it made my fury rise
sed me—it was as if he was taunting me with his familial bond to Juliana, tel

that she belonged to him and the Società more than she belonged to me
it up. I

I stood with Alessio and Camillo. "We'll split them up and questio
uld get, to find out everything we need to know, including how they got in a

much they know about our security system." I gave a twisted smile
furious while they're here, we may as well torture details out of them ab

Società's plans and dealings." My heart raced at the thought of gett
, hands wet with blood.

words Alessio nodded. "The Società are eager to have Juliana back, irres
going to of the contract. So much so, they would risk the lives of their men."

"The fuckers—they know Juliana is mine under Mafia laws a
ing the nothing can change that now." I would never let her go. "I'll take her l
you two take the other guy," I ordered.

Then we set to work. Despite the late hour, all traces of tiredness ha
hat was banished from my mind and adrenaline was racing through my vein.
ppen to prospect of spilling blood.

e SUVs A few hours later I reconvened with Alessio and Camillo. My sleeve rolled up and blood was on my palms, fists, and forearms.

to have “We’ve got all the information we need for tonight,” I said. I’d left bruised, bloodied, and battered. He’d put up a lot of resistance, but eventually given up some information as he tired and the pain took over, although he’d not given up nearly as much as the other guy. Jacob would probably be an Underboss and his father had obviously trained him hard, probably tortured his own son to toughen him up for his future role.

3. Camillo was pouring us each a glass of whiskey.

in them We raised our glasses. “To the Kings of Chicago,” said Alessio.

nd how “Long live the Kings,” my voice and Camillo’s echoed.

3. “And It was our usual toast and something we needed after the shitshow out the evening we’d had. I knocked back my drink in one gulp and then wiping my hand across my mouth.

“Let’s assemble again tomorrow morning to finish things off.” I had information out of Jacob Bonardi had helped me get some rage out of my system, but I still had Juliana to deal with and I had plenty of rage left

nd that I made my way back into the house and up the stairs. My mind was elsewhere, I was furious with the two Società men but even more furious with Juliana.

How could she want to go back to the family that had nearly killed her sister and could easily have killed her? They had fired their gunshot at the church with no regard for her life, but still she wanted them instead of

Her betrayal burned at my insides.

I owned her and it was time she understood that and learned to obey

It was the early hours of the morning now and it was still dark outside

I had showered in the bathroom in the garage block, washing off blood, before returning to the bedroom where I found Juliana curled asleep. She was leaning against the headboard without the comforter and, instead, was hugging her arms around herself.

I could see her face stained with tears. She must have cried herself like that. I lifted her in my arms and slid her body between the covers.

She stirred, letting out a low moan. “Marco? What’s happened to Jacob—Cornelio?” she asked, trying to sit up at the same time.

“That doesn’t concern you.”

She rubbed hard at her eyes. “Please, it wasn’t their fault. Jake was to help me, please don’t hurt them,” she said in a rush. “They were following orders and—”

“Quiet!” I couldn’t talk about this now. “Lie down,” I carried on in my voice.

“Wh-What are you going to do to me?” she asked, her voice shaking. “What do you think I’m going to do? What has that pretty little r of yours dreamt up as a fitting punishment?” When she didn’t answer, she continued. “Do you think I’m going to take you tonight? Is that what I’m hoping for, that I stop showing you mercy and instead take what’s mine?” She stayed silent, her eyes wide and unblinking.

“Is your pussy creaming right now thinking about it, just like it was in the shower yesterday? Did you get wet when I kissed you thinking about what else you wanted me to do?”

She must have realized how close to the edge I was because she looked at me with those big eyes of hers, too scared to make a response.

“Lie down. Go to sleep.” I was too angry with her right now to punish her. Despite wanting, no needing, to fuck my little virgin tonight, I knew

Jacob's wouldn't be able to control myself.

up and I wouldn't hurt her in that way, especially when it was her first
over her might be a monster, but even I had my limits.

She looked unsure but knew better than to defy me in my current state
to sleep slowly slid down under the covers while keeping her eyes on me.

I stripped off my clothes and climbed into bed beside her, for once
take and taking her into my arms, and I let sleep overtake me.

She would wait until tomorrow.

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She would wait until tomorrow.

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CHAPTER 20

JULIANA

As soon as I woke in the morning, the events of last night came back into my mind.

I darted my eyes open and sat up quickly, at the same time looking the other side of the bed to see if Marco was beside me.

His side of the bed was empty.

I worried about what had happened to my brother and Cornelio, finding it difficult to breathe as the possibilities stormed through my mind and I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to still my shaking.

I couldn't even get up to shower. All I wanted was for my siblings to be safe. I just sat there on the bed, praying that Jacob and Cornelio were alright, while knowing that there was no possibility that they would be

When I thought about Marco, I couldn't believe that only yesterday I had craved this man and enjoyed kissing him—that I'd fooled myself by forgetting everything I knew about him.

He was known as the most brutal Capo in the Mafia, and I had seen firsthand just how cruel he could be. This was a man who'd directed me to shoot my sister, before brutally kidnapping me and ripping me away from my family and everything I knew—this was a man who would have no qualms about killing Jacob and Cornelio.

I knew in my heavy heart that my sibling wouldn't be spared, and I thought absolutely horrified me.

I wasn't sure how much later it was, but eventually Alessio arrived rushing to my breakfast tray. Mr. Fluffy was sitting on the bed beside me, tucked up against my side as if he knew something was wrong. He had always been good at the sense my moods; however, even he couldn't soothe my frayed nerves today.

"What's going to happen to my brother and Cornelio?" I asked Alessio as soon as he stepped through the bedroom door.

I was sure in my mind that However, he did not answer and merely put my tray down on the table and then went to leave. I rushed toward him and grabbed his arm because I couldn't leave the room.

g to be sure I could be "Please—it's my brother. They don't deserve to die because of me. They were only following orders. They would have had no choice."

y I had “They are Made Men. They knew the risks they were taking when they entered our territory. They killed four of our men at the perimeter to clear the grounds.”

had seen With that, he shook his arm free from my hold and left me standing. He ignored the tray of food and sank back onto the bed, giving in to my cry. He didn't care if my crying showed weakness.

have no Two men would die because of me, my brother would die because of me. My conscience had never felt so heavy, and my heart ached when I thought about what I would lose.

MARCO

I reconvened with Alessio and Camillo in the morning. “We'll let the Società men to fester in their own juices for the day.” That way, their imaginations would further torture them, coming up into scenarios of how they would die at our hands. Further threats were not needed from us when they could easily imagine their fates.

Today. With the mood I was in, I couldn't face Juliana today. I had woken Alessio as this morning and left her sleeping in bed. “Alessio, take Juliana's room for her today. I've got other things to take care of.”

dresser Alessio nodded and wisely did not question me over this. It was before he I did not face Juliana when I was in this state, and Alessio knew enough to understand this.

e. They Instead, I took out some of my aggression in our gym room by kicking Camillo or, more accurately, kicking his ass. Unfortunately, Camillo was not as perceptive as Alessio, and he didn't know when to keep his mouth shut.

en they With three Made Men living in the house, and Danio in training get into initiation, it made sense to install our own gym in the mansion.

When we had moved in, we'd converted part of the ground floor into a gym there. It held our fitness equipment and weights, and we also had an area for fight and knife training. We needed to train every day, and it had meant that Alessio and I could spend more time at home when my siblings were young and needed us more.

thought Camillo was the gym junkie of the family and was bigger and had more muscles than the rest of us. He was a scary fucker with his huge size neck and arms, and countless tattoos. But he was a big softie around his siblings, particularly with Debi and Danio.

Camillo would win a battle based on brute strength, but I was quiet about my feet during fights, which meant that we always had a good sparring partner against each other. Today, however, he was no match for me in my current fury.

up with "I thought that this marriage was supposed to bring some peace here not Fratellanza," huffed Camillo, breathing hard after I had knocked him to the ground once again during our fight training.

in early "We didn't get married," I snapped. I wasn't in the mood to talk about Julia to Juliana.

ter that "Yeah, but you know what I mean. What's the point of her being here if we haven't even got an alliance with the Società now?"

ne well "I own her now and I've owned her since she signed that contract. I'm not going to let them take away something of mine."

fighting "But Juliana has done the opposite of bringing peace. Ever since she arrived, either you've been in a bad mood and majorly pissed over the dog or you and Alessio have been arguing over that fucking dog."

for his “How about less chat and more training?” I growled. “If you spent a time planning your moves as you do yakking, you might be able to land more blows on me.”

area for “Have you fucked her yet?” Camillo had the subtlety of an elephant ant that “For fuck’s sake, are we girlfriends now?” I snapped. “What gave you the impression that I want to share details?”

Camillo merely shrugged. “I’m just saying, maybe that would make me less pissed off all the time?” He just didn’t know when to shut his trap. e, thick “Christ, Camillo, you’re really fucking irritating sometimes. You wound his the patience of a fucking saint.”

Camillo raised one eyebrow at me. “You being the saint, I take it?” cker on “Yeah, me being the saint,” I huffed. I knew, as did Camillo, that I g match far from a saint as any man could be.

current

to the

to the

After finishing my workout and showering, I returned to my bedroom. k about Juliana was sitting on the bed, her hair disheveled, looking distraught. entered, she looked up at me, her face creased with worry and exhaustion here if “So, your brother thought he’d be the hero and come rescue you sweet.” I gave a harsh laugh. “Did he really think he’d get in and out wasn’t estate undetected?”

“Wh-what did you do to him?” she stammered.

e she’s “What do you think? I made him talk, of course. I made him spit out that girl, delicious Società secrets—although he needed some convincing to speak

is much I was happy to give him that encouragement.”

d a few Her face blanched. She knew I had tortured him. “What’s going to to him now? And Cornelio?” she whispered.

. I was silent for a short while, before finally speaking. “That’s up to you the “You can have me—I’ll give myself to you. I’ll stop fighting you forced the words out. “Please just let them go. Please just let Jake be like you She couldn’t bear it if anything happened to her sibling.

. “So, you’ll give yourself to me in exchange for their lives?”

ould try “Yes.” She swallowed hard. “Yes, I will.”

I gave a twisted smile. “I already own your body and your life. You mine now. You don’t get to decide to give me yourself to me. I already was as it, it’s already in my hands: your body, your life, your fate.”

I watched a blanket of confusion settle over her features. “I understand. I’m giving you all that I have to give. What else do you from me?”

I didn’t take my eyes off her. “I’m not giving the choice of surrender your innocence in exchange for their lives. The choice I’m giving you you will decide who gets killed.”

ht. As I Her breath exhaled on a gasp. “Wh-what do you mean?”

ion. “The choice I’m giving you is this. Who dies—either your bodyguard your brother.” My voice was harsh and uncompromising.

i? How “I won’t condemn a man to his death.” She tried to make herself t of our strong, but she couldn’t stop the wobble in her voice.

“Choose who will die, (a) your bodyguard or (b) Jacob.”

ll some “I can’t,” she replied in horror, her knuckles white as she clenched ak, but hands around the bedsheets.

“Of course you can. It’s an easy question. I’ve even made it r

choice to make it even easier for you to answer: you just need to say happen(b),” I smirked.

“I can’t...”

you.” “If you can’t decide, I can give you a coin. You can toss it to me.” She decision.” My tone was flippant, not giving a care to her feelings okay.” emotions.

“I won’t do that,” she said in a slightly louder voice.” I won’t be involved in any decision about who to kill.”

“But you will be involved.” I was silent for a few, long seconds. You weren’t going to escape making this choice, no matter what she did. “Finally have if you don’t choose one, then they will both die.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” she cried out, the tears she had been holding back finally running down her face.

“You want you know why.” I glowered at her. “You are mine now. And the only way you need to know that. They can never have you back as long as I want to keep you. The only time they can have you back is if I decide to hand you back to them. Until then they need to learn their fucking lesson.”

“I’ll talk to them, I’ll talk to Jake, I’ll tell them that once you let them go they can never come back. Please!”

“You know begging doesn’t work on me. You have five seconds to think up your mind—Jacob or Cornelio. If you don’t give me your answer, both will die.”

“Please don’t do this,” she sobbed.

“Five...four—”

“I’m begging you, please!”

“Three...two...”

“I want to save Jake!”

y (a) or “No.” My voice was hard. She’d told me who to save. “I asked you
one *to kill.*” I wanted her to say his name so that she would always remember
which one she had condemned to death and what the consequences would be
if she ever tried to escape again.

ings or She gulped. “Cornelio,” she whispered through her tears. “I
Cornelio.”

involved Without a backward glance, I turned on my heel and strode out
room.

ds. She

because

id been

That afternoon, Alessio and I visited the grieving families of the
Società perimeter soldiers killed by the Società men last night.

to keep I turned to Alessio as we left the last home we needed to visit. “It feels
over to we’ve done this too many times lately.”

Alessio nodded. “Too many good soldiers have died lately at the hands
of the Società Mafia. They’ll fucking pay for this.”

By the end of the day, I was in a filthy mood. Torturing the two
men yesterday had done little to allay my fury, nor had training with
them until the sweat was pouring off me. Right now, I could think of nothing
that might soothe me.

After telling Alessio and Camillo to meet me in the garage block
dinner, I made for my SUV.

1 which

number

ould be

I grabbed a burger from a drive-through and, twenty minutes later, I was sitting up outside the Tocchini house.

choose

Alfonso Tocchini was one of my soldiers and his family had worked for the Fratellanza for many generations, first in Italy and then here in the United States.

of the

He lived with his mother, wife and two children in a small house in a quiet Chicago suburb.

His son also worked for us in the organization, but the person who had drawn me to the family was his fifteen-year-old daughter, Carolinne. She was the same age as Danio, and they were in the same class at school and had been best friends since they started kindergarten.

he four

Carolinne had been seven years old when she had been shot by the police in a drive-by shooting. She and her family had been entering a Fratellanza-owned hotel, attending a family celebration after the christening of a child.

els like

The bullet had hit her chest and she had required extensive surgery to

ands of

repair the internal damage. I'd only been Capo for a short while at the time. It had been my responsibility as Capo to keep the Fratellanza and its member families safe, and I had blamed myself for this little girl getting shot.

Società

I had visited the family a number of times during that period to check on

Camillo

how Carolinne was doing. One time they invited me to stay for dinner but I

ly one

declined, but Carolinne's grandmother insisted, and I accepted so as not to offend the older Italian woman.

ck after

That evening had been a bit of a revelation. It had seemed like the most normal family dinner I'd ever had and completely unlike any experience I had had with my parents during my childhood.

It was just like you would see in the movies: a mom and pop, cheeky son and angelic daughter, and their grandmother, Nonna, fused the background and heaping up the plates with second servings of homemade ravioli.

But what really got me was the love and lack of tension. Even Alfonso was a Made Man, he kept that persona out of his family home away from his loved ones. At home he was just a regular dad and husband.

My father had been the complete opposite. Every family meal included reminders of our duties to the Fratellanza and talk of vendettas and violence. My mother had cowered in fear and us older children had hated our father and his cruel ways.

The Tocchini household was how I would want my own children raised one day. Although Alessio and I were doing an okay job of raising Camillo, Danio, and Debi, I was painfully aware that they were missing out on having a mom, and I regularly felt guilt about that.

After that first dinner at the Tocchini house, I had set up cameras and listening devices in their home. I told myself that I wasn't really a stalker; it was just that watching them always made me feel calm and sort of happy. It was my bit of escapism.

I unwrapped my burger and settled back in my car to watch and listen to the Tocchinis via my laptop.

Tonight was their night for take-out. This was always my favorite.

Their Nonna cooked every night, and it was always an Italian dish. Every week, however, they had what she called 'American food': they had to have a pizza.

Nonna always chose a Hawaiian pizza, with ham and pineapple, from the take-out menu. Then every week, while she happily devoured every last

with ashe would give her regular commentary. “Mamma mia, these Americans are barbarians. They put a pineapple on a pizza, and they say that of herrubbish is ham. Huh, the Americans wouldn’t know proper ham even came up and snorted in their faces”.

though Tonight, she started on her grandson and the need to marry well and need a good Italian girl to marry so that you get proper Italian food instead of getting American pizza cooked in the microwave every night.’

included I guffawed at that particular comment—she was a real gem. I violence.burger as I listened to them talk, and it was like I was having dinner with my father again. They didn’t talk about anything important, but that was the point—it was just normal.

to be As the family finished up their meal, I checked my watch and sighed. I saw that it was time to get back. Tonight’s dinner with the Tocchinis had soothed me like it normally did.

I drove back to our estate, and as I parked up, Alessio strode over to me and was wondering where you’d gone,” he said, checking his watch.

alker. It “I’m here now, aren’t I?” I growled.

appy. It “Let me guess,” he drawled. “You’ve been having some *Tocchinis* haven’t you?” referring to the name he had given my secret visits.

listen to “So, what if I have?”

“Marco, you know it’s stalking, right?”

e night. “No, it’s not,” I shot back. “Carolinne is practically family given that she and Danio are best friends and are just about joined at the hip.”

ake-out Alessio quirked an eyebrow at me.

“Anyhow, I never watch them or listen to them except during their commercial breaks. It’s just like someone relaxing by switching on the TV to watch the next episode of their favorite show, or like watching online videos of cute k

ericans, Alessio sighed and shook his head at me. “You just keep telling y
his pinkthat.”

if a pig “Yeah, I will,” I snapped back at him.

Alessio looked long and hard at me.

l. “You “What now?” I said, getting more irritated by the second.

stead of “Do you think that maybe you’re getting too wrapped up in the
Juliana thing?”

ate my “And what do you mean by that?”

er with “She’s obviously getting to you, or at least the situation is. And the
ie pointis targeting our estate now—I don’t want the kids put in that sort of

It’s all too close to home for my liking and too close to our loved ones

d when “It goes with our world,” I said shortly. “Anyhow, you know I woul

; hadn’tlet anything happen to Debi or Danio.” My voice became quieter. ‘

down my life before I let anything happen to any one of you.”

o me. “I Alessio, sensing the seriousness in my words, nodded back at me, sa

“And after I send back Jacob Bonardi today with my little gift

Società, they definitely won’t be trying it again.”

i Time, “Let’s hope not,” replied Alessio.

“Look, are we torturing anyone tonight or not?” I said, trying to cha
subject.

“We’re ready whenever you are,” replied Alessio.

that her I walked toward the house.

My blood was still raging through my veins, and I knew what ha
done next.

linners.

he next

ittens.”

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Società

danger.

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CHAPTER 21

JULIANA

I had finished my dinner a short time ago, barely touching any of the food on my tray. Alessio had brought my food up to me again.

I hadn't seen Marco all day and the isolation in this room was making my thoughts go around my mind in an endless spin. Even Mr. Fluffy couldn't distract me today.

I heard the lock turn in the door and wondered if someone had come to take my dog outside. I stood up as the door opened and saw the one person I didn't want to see.

Marco.

He was back.

"Juliana." His voice was deep yet soft.

Somehow this felt worse than if his voice had been outright angry and his eyes were blank, but I knew he was more dangerous like this than if he was openly raging.

Without realizing it, I had taken a couple of steps backward as he stepped into the room until the backs of my calves hit the bed. I stumbled off the bed and put my palms out behind me to steady myself.

But he continued moving toward me.

As he came nearer, I could feel the heat radiating off his body, or was it rage rolling off him in waves? Either way, this wasn't a good time to be around him and unconsciously I cowered against the comforter.

He seized my arms in his iron grip, making me wince in pain as he pulled me to my feet.

I knew that he was going to kill me now.

Any reprieve I'd previously been allowed was now over. I struggled as he dragged me from the room, but I was no match for his strength and he wouldn't let me go for his anger.

"Where are we going?" I cried as he tugged me down the stairs and out of the mansion. We headed toward the large garage block.

Wouldn't he be driving me somewhere else to kill me? Maybe somewhere with running water so that my body could easily be disposed of afterward at a construction site where I could be dumped into a tank of concrete.

Terrified thoughts, one after another, were racing through my mind.

When we entered the garage, we walked past all the SUVs and sports cars instead of reaching a door that led to another area.

I didn't know what was in there, but I could feel the cold and heat radiating off the concrete floor and the stale air stung my nostrils. I knew if I went in there, I wouldn't be coming back out alive.

ry. His I tried to stop him from taking me through the door, but my attempt was futile.

He stood behind me and gripped my upper arms propelling me forward. We went down a corridor and he opened another door and pushed me into the room.

This was it. I'd been brought out here to be punished and killed. I thought the kill would be quick.

It was as if I couldn't stop my limbs from shaking and the tears from slipping down my face to my cheeks.

Once we were inside the room, he let me go and I whirled around and found myself facing him and could see what he was doing. At the same time, I took a few steps back as if that could help me escape his clutches.

He regarded me with a twisted smile and raised one eyebrow. "You don't look as afraid of me," he said as he prowled toward me.

I took a step back with each step he took forward until my back hit the wall and I could move no further.

Then I had no choice but to be pressed up against the hard wall and I could only watch him as he moved nearer to me until he was standing right in front of me.

He raised his hand to my face, and I flinched, expecting the worst, but he ran the back of his fingers against my tear-stained cheek with the gentlest of caresses.

"You don't need to be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you."

"You aren't?"

"No...not yet."

"Then why have you brought me out here?" My voice was quivering.

"You'll see."

"You're not going to kill me yet?"

"Where would be the fun in that? But you will receive a punishment."

ts weretonight.”

I didn't know what he meant or what he was planning, but I forward.terrified as I had ever been. When he took hold of my arms I screamed e into a But he merely turned me around to a blank window along one w pressed a switch that looked like a light switch and in that instai prayedwindow changed so that it was no longer blank and instead we could : what must have been the room next to ours.

g down In that room I saw Cornelio covered in blood and with his body be in evident agony. I rushed toward the window and hammered my fists o that Iit, calling out Cornelio's name. “Cornelio! Cornelio!”

I took a “He can't hear you. The room he's in is soundproof. He also can't s but lucky for us we can see him.”

u seem I didn't know what he had planned, but I knew that it was nothing g

The room Cornelio was in contained a table and two chairs. On o he coldwas a large closet but I turned my eyes away from it, not wanting to contents. I could imagine what it contained: weapons and implem I couldtorture.

in front My whole body was cold like ice, yet I felt sweat drip down my b: rst. between my breasts. I didn't know how I could feel those things when : in thebarely breathe to get enough oxygen into my lungs.

t you.” Marco switched on what must have been an intercom and spoke soldiers who were in the same room as Cornelio. “Go ahead. We're re:

I turned back to the viewing window, my eyes wide and hold g. breath. I could no longer breathe.

Cornelio was trying to hide it, but I saw a flicker of fear on his fi might be a seasoned soldier who had worked for my father for many shmentbut he knew he was staring death in the face. He was trapp

outnumbered at the hands of a cruel enemy who wanted revenge against me. I was as *Società*.

out. Marco stared at me. "I own you now, I thought you understood that. There is no escape for you, and you will never return to your family. Each time they try, more people will die because of your actions."

see into "Please don't do this. I won't try to escape again. No one else has died because of me. Please!"

went over "I already warned you when you tried to escape from your room that night. Alas, I don't think you learned your lesson then. I was too soft on you. I had hoped that something like this was not necessary. I was obviously wrong."

"I understand now—I'll do anything you ask, I promise, please. My words were tumbling out more frantically now.

one side I felt bile rise up my throat. I tried to take a deep breath to quell it and see the panic away. But it felt like trying to hold fine grains of sand in my hands. The tighter you grip, the more that keeps on spilling through the cracks of your fingers. My body was cracked now, it was no longer strong enough to keep the panic locked away in its box. The panic was tumbling out in my heaving breaths and trembling limbs.

Marco grabbed my shoulders. I tried to pull away from him. I didn't want to watch what was going to happen next, what was going to happen to me. But he forced me to turn toward the large window.

ing my What I didn't realize, however, was that the cries of pain I would hear would be even worse than what I would see.

ace. He Marco was making me watch to punish me. I understood that now. I might not beat him, but he could inflict pain on me in other ways.

ed and I heard Cornelio cry out in anguish. One of the soldiers broke each

inst the fingers in turn. Then the other soldier wrenched his arm. I heard a
sound, and I knew he'd broken it.

. There I shuddered with each blow, the suffering I could hear assaulting r
me you ears and my own nerves. It felt like my body was collapsing, as if eac
on Cornelio's body was attacking my own body too.

s to die Cornelio fell to the ground, and I hoped they would leave him no
can't take any more. I've learned my lesson, I promise I have. Please
he first go!"

n you. I But Marco ignored me. I watched the soldier pull Cornelio up and
viously him repeatedly in the abdomen causing him to scream out.

I could feel not just Cornelio's pain but also his isolation—knowi
..." Myno one was coming to save him.

And I was just as isolated. No one would be coming to save me
and keep "Please! You own me! I understand that now."

hand— "I wish I could believe that."

acks of The soldiers continued inflicting punishing blows on Cornelio's fi
ough to body. I heard screaming. It seemed to be coming from a distance.

nto my I realized then it was coming from me.

It was as if the screams were taking all my energy. My legs co
l't want longer hold me up. But Marco refused to let me sink to the floor. Inst
because held me up in his arms so that I had to watch the horror that was unfol
the next room.

ld hear I tried to turn my head away. But he grabbed my hair and yanked n
back to the window. His grip on my hair was hurting me but I barely r
ow. He Soon I couldn't see. So many tears were blurring my vision. But I co
hear the relentless blows and Cornelio's tormented cries.

n of his I could no longer even scream. I could barely talk. But I found the w

horrificbeg Marco. I didn't think I would ever beg him for anything. But I
him to stop this.

ny own My hushed voice came out in gasps. "Please, no more. No more
h strikeyou."

But my pleas fell on deaf ears. He wasn't even affected by what wa
w. "Heon in the next room. He continued holding me tightly in his arms, forc
let himto watch.

As a girl I had never had to go through real physical pain. But I ha
l punchbeen subjected to mental torture like this either. I tried to shut my br

But it wouldn't let me, as if it had a morbid interest in what was g
ng thathappen next.

A couple of minutes later, I realized that he was speaking into the ir
either.again. And suddenly he flicked the switch again and the large v
window turned blank.

I turned my head toward him. "Is...is it over?"
ace and "Yes. It's over."

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beg Marco. I didn't think I would ever beg him for anything. But I begged him to stop this.

My hushed voice came out in gasps. "Please, no more. No more, I beg you."

But my pleas fell on deaf ears. He wasn't even affected by what was going on in the next room. He continued holding me tightly in his arms, forcing me to watch.

As a girl I had never had to go through real physical pain. But I had never been subjected to mental torture like this either. I tried to shut my brain off. But it wouldn't let me, as if it had a morbid interest in what was going to happen next.

A couple of minutes later, I realized that he was speaking into the intercom again. And suddenly he flicked the switch again and the large viewing window turned blank.

I turned my head toward him. "Is...is it over?"

"Yes. It's over."

CHAPTER 22

MARCO

It was over for her now, but not for the guy in the other room.

But she didn't need to see the rest of it. She'd seen enough for t
She'd seen enough over the last week to last her a lifetime.

I was not showing her mercy. I was treating her as a Made Man
treat a woman in this world. They hadn't been brought up to witness
but she had already seen her sister get shot at her own wedding and ot
killed on the same day.

Her legs gave way under her when I let go of her and she slump
knees hitting the floor. Crying was a waste of time in our world. We e
our jobs to do, and we got on with it.

After taking Juliana back to my bedroom, I returned to the garage
taking over the torture of Cornelio and letting all my anger out. Each

from him made my blood pump faster, each scream from him was in my ears, and each cut to his skin was like a new triumph being bestowed upon me.

JULIANA

The next morning, I woke up in Marco's bedroom.

As usual, Marco was already up and gone.

It had been getting dark when we entered the garage yesterday morning now, judging by the light coming through the window memories of the previous evening felt hazy as I thought back to what happened after the viewing window went blank...

As the window went blank and Cornelio disappeared from my sight, I should try to run to him, should try one last attempt at saving him, tonight. legs no longer were able to hold me up.

I felt the frozen concrete floor against my calves as my legs gave way, should wetness from my tears hit the back of my hands. Marco's death, After I could cry no more, Marco picked me up. I cowered from him, I don't know what he might do next.

But his touch was gentle, and he cradled me in his arms and whispered to my ear that everything was going to be alright now. As if anything could happen, each had be okay again.

But I didn't have the strength to argue with him. I didn't have the strength to block, to fight him anymore. I didn't have the strength to even cry anymore. I just moan

music to I let him carry me back to the bedroom, his arms around me st
stowed making me feel safe.

“What happens to Jake now?” I whispered. I had to know.

He put me down by the bed, and as I stood, he undressed me, pul
top over my arms and head. “We send him back to L.A.”

My breath came out in a rush of relief. He took off the rest of my clo

He gently pushed at my shoulders to make me sit down on the sid
bed. He held out to me a glass of water and a small white tablet res
the palm of his hand.

It was “Wh-What is it?” I asked him, fearing that he wanted to drug me.

vs. My “A sedative. It will help you sleep.”

hat had I shook my head very slightly at him. “I don’t want it. Please don
me take it,” I whispered.

He looked at me for a few long seconds and then left the bedroom
I knew minute before coming back holding out to me a crystal glass cor
but my amber liquid. “If you won’t take the sedative, drink this instead.”

“I’m not sure...” My voice trailed off in confusion. My mind was a r
ay. The “It’s whiskey. It will calm your nerves.” His voice was firm, warr
not to argue with him.

, afraid I hesitantly took the glass, the ice clinking against the sides as my
trembled. I took a cautious sip, never having drunk hard liquor be
vered in burned the back of my throat, making me splutter. That small sip was
ild ever for me, and I held the glass back out to him.

He wrapped his fingers around mine and pushed the glass back tow
t strength “Drink it all.” His voice was as hard as steel.

I looked up at him warily. I knew, however, that he wouldn’t le
alone until I complied with his command. I slowly drank the rest of it

uddenly not to taste it and wincing as it burned. It warmed up my insides, but cold despair deep within my body.

Once the glass was empty, he reached for it and removed it from my hand. "Good girl," he murmured.

He gently pushed me back onto the mattress and put me to bed. The sheets felt cold on my frozen skin. He climbed into bed next to me and wrapped his warm body around mine, making me cling to him, desperate for his comfort.

He held my head against his shoulder and stroked my hair back from my forehead, softly whispering to me and comforting me.

I couldn't recall much more than that. I didn't remember what he had said and I didn't remember finally falling asleep.

Yesterday evening did, however, make something very clear to me: I had no power in this relationship.

He held all the power, and he had full control of me. He owned me.

ing me

fingers

fore. It

enough

ard me.

ave me

; trying

There were no meals downstairs or dog walks in the gardens today.

Alessio brought up my meal trays and at the same time he took Mr

outside, although I could see that he would probably rather cut off his hand than be on dog-sitter duty.

"What the hell is this dog still even doing here?" he asked, not even trying to mask his annoyance.

not the I turned away and didn't answer him. I couldn't think about anything now except what Cornelio and Jacob had suffered.

y hand. I knew what had happened to Cornelio, even if I hadn't been a witness to it. He was dead.

And I couldn't feel anything except profound guilt for the role I had played in the death of a man. They said that women in the Mafia were sheltered for innocent, but yesterday I had killed a man.

I had chosen him and uttered his name to condemn him to a painful end. That my choice had saved Jacob couldn't even soothe me now.

After picking at my breakfast and barely eating any of it, I closed my eyes and said, again and let the sweet oblivion of sleep take over my mind. That was the only way I could stop thinking about what had happened yesterday.

a. I had After lunch I heard a knock and then something slid under the door. I paused and then walked over to retrieve it. But Mr. Fluffy beat me to the door and grabbed the item in his mouth. He brought it over to me. I patted his head. "Good boy."

It was a DVD and looked to be a movie about a princess falling in love with Mr. Wonderful. On it was stuck a note saying, 'Love Debi x'. I would have been old for this sort of movie now, but it was a good way to while away time and at least it distracted me from my other thoughts.

. Fluffy There was a T.V. in the room but it wasn't hooked up to receive television programs. I crossed my fingers that the DVD player worked and gave me a sense of satisfaction as I pressed play and it whirred into action.

1 trying It made me think about when Jess and I had binge-watched these old movies. It was always the same kind of story—girl meets boy, girl and boy fall in love, and then after a few hiccups along the way they lived

ing rightever after. I remember Jess and I talking about falling in love and wondering if it would ever happen to us. I can't believe how naïve I had been. I made to That evening, I didn't bother waiting for Marco and instead got under the covers for bed and got in between the sheets, pulling the comforter up around me. I playedears.

red and

MARCO

violent,

ne right

As I stepped into the bedroom that evening, I saw Juliana's body. She had her back to me and ignored my presence, but I knew she was awake. I felt my hackles rise.

was the

I got undressed and slid into bed behind her. When Juliana didn't notice me, I even acknowledge my presence, I swung my arm around her waist and pulled her back into my chest like I usually did at night. I had developed a habit of spooning her at night, to feel her small body protected by my larger one. She didn't fight against me to my surprise, although her body felt unnatural and tense.

in love

I felt her skin against mine and I buried my face against her back, inhaling the flowery scent. It was as if her warmth could touch the blooded killer in me. And her sweet scent could displace the coppery blood which was etched on my senses.

ive any

We lay like that for a couple of minutes without talking, and then I heard a sigh as silent tears drop onto my arm.

Those tears, all soft and fragile in their fluidity, were in marked contrast to my hard, solid forearm that they fell against. I wasn't usually a sensitive boy.

happily

nderingbut her tears tonight undid me in a way that hadn't happened in a ve
time.

dressed "Juliana?" She didn't answer.

und my I hesitated but then turned her around in my arms.

She didn't resist my hold. Taking one look at her face, I pulled he
chest, allowing her to sob against me and grieve.

I didn't know if she was grieving her brother's injuries and the d
Cornelio, whom she must have known was dead by now, or whether s
also grieving the loss of her previous life—because she knew now th
freeze.
was no escape from me, not ever.

vas still There was nothing she could have said that would have chang
actions last night. There was no way that I would let her return to her
nove or To the monsters who'd shot their guns around her at her wedding an
I pulled easily have killed her. The monsters who had shot her very sister.
need to

The Società were monsters of a different kind. They didn't care
ne. She Juliana or her sister. They would have killed them if it had meant succ
lly stiff

I would never put any of my family in harm's way like that. My f
lives were worth more to me than any amount of money, territory or pe
rk hair,

I might have been a monster, but I was a monster who protected his
e cold- I would tear down the world to protect those I loved.
tang of

felt her MARCO

trast to When Juliana's sobbing had quietened down, I got up and went
ve guy,bathroom to get a damp washcloth.

ry long When I returned to the bed, I gently cleaned Juliana's face. Her eye
red and her lip was trembling, but she still looked beautiful. After I f
cleaning her face, I tossed the washcloth on the nightstand and I to
back into my arms, positioning her so that her head was resting agai
r to my shoulder. After a while, I looked at her. "Are you okay?"

She didn't reply at first, as if she was thinking things over. "I have
leath of don't I?"

she was She remained silent after that. She didn't want to argue about w
at there happened, and neither did I. "I don't want you to be unhappy here,"
stroking her arm.

ged my After a minute, Juliana tilted her face toward mine and whispe
family. wasn't unhappy yesterday when you kissed me."

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When I returned to the bed, I gently cleaned Juliana's face. Her eyes were red and her lip was trembling, but she still looked beautiful. After I finished cleaning her face, I tossed the washcloth on the nightstand and I took her back into my arms, positioning her so that her head was resting against my shoulder. After a while, I looked at her. "Are you okay?"

She didn't reply at first, as if she was thinking things over. "I have to be, don't I?"

She remained silent after that. She didn't want to argue about what had happened, and neither did I. "I don't want you to be unhappy here," I said, stroking her arm.

After a minute, Juliana tilted her face toward mine and whispered, "I wasn't unhappy yesterday when you kissed me."

CHAPTER 23

MARCO

I stilled.

But Juliana reached up and stroked my lips with her soft fingers pressing her mouth gently against mine.

I hesitated for a second, not sure if I should be doing this, but then her head between my hands and deepened the kiss, pressing more against her lips and caressing them gently with the tip of my tongue.

I pushed her back against the mattress and held myself above her forearms while continuing to tease her mouth. I stroked her lips with my tongue, coaxing them open finally as she sighed in pleasure.

As my tongue met hers, she put her small hands on my broad shoulders and grasped tightly.

I shifted my weight onto one arm and with the other, I ran my fingers over her camisole top, over her stomach and up over her breasts, feeling her nipples hardening against the silk and hearing her gasp as she felt my fingers skim over her.

She ran her hands down my bare chest. I had to feel more of her. I tilted my head down and kissed the side of her throat, running small kisses down her collarbone, making her arch her neck up toward me. But that still wasn't enough for me.

I continued my kisses down to her breasts, running my tongue down and sucking the silk-covered nipple into my mouth, making her cry out while she held my head between her hands.

“Fuck, Juliana, what are you doing to me?” I said in a voice hoarse with need. I moved back up to look into her eyes. “You should tell me to stop because if we go any further, I won't be able to hold myself back,” I warned.

“I don't want you to stop,” she said quietly. I waited, but when she didn't change her mind, that was all I needed.

before I wasn't a good man. I shouldn't be touching a woman in our world on our wedding day, even if she had signed a contract. But she was as tempting as a siren, and I wanted to make her mine.

firmly I kissed her lips again, this time with fierce need, hearing her moan in my mouth as I ran my hands under her top, finally stroking her bare skin and caressing her nipples. I couldn't wait any longer.

with my I pulled her top off over her head, and after gazing at those perfect tits for a moment, my eyes were drawn to the dark erect points which were calling to me from my mouth.

I dipped my head down, capturing one of her nipples in my mouth and sucking it so that she arched her back in ecstasy. With my other hand

æ handher other luscious nipple between my finger and thumb, making
ling herharder and longer.

y hands Her eyes were closed, and her breath was coming in small pants. I re
her sleep shorts, running my hands over her legs.

dipped I kissed a trail down over her ribcage and stomach, inhaling her
lown toscent until my lips met the silky dark hair of her slit.

wasn't I pushed her legs apart roughly, being driven by the scent of he
juices.

wn and As her thighs parted, I was teased by the sight of her pussy lips er
ut loudwith arousal and wet in preparation for me. But she would have to v
that. I would have to get her ready first.

se with I parted her labia with my fingers and took a sharp intake of breath
op nowsaw her swollen clit offering itself to me.

arned. I couldn't stop myself from dipping my mouth to her clit and lick
e didn'tsilky folds while I tasted her sweet nectar. As my tongue connected v

clit, she cried out at the sensation and grabbed at the sheets beneath he
l before I started sucking at her clit, while my hands reached up to play w

romptingnipples and soon I was rewarded with her screams as she orgasmed
tongue. Fuck, I was rock hard and aching to feel her tight sheath gripp

an into but I needed to prepare her some more for her first time.

breasts As she came down from her climax, she tried to push my mouth awa
her sensitive clit, but I wouldn't let her and held her down firmly
its for asquirmed underneath me.

lling to "Please, it's too much," she cried as I continued to work my
between her slit.

lth and But I didn't let up and as she continued to struggle, I reached up aga
I rolledmy hands and played with her tits and soon she submitted to my

it evenwillingly as her need increased, until she was pleading with me again.

“I need to come, Marco, please!”

removed Her voice saying my name in carnal pleasure made me even harder gasps and cries had made my desire unbearable.

unique I worked my way up her body, kissing her sides and gently bit nipples until I reached her pretty mouth which was parted in pleasure pussykissed her deeply.

“I want to make you come with my cock.” It was a question and I gorged deeply into her eyes and saw her give a small nod.

wait for I felt a surge of triumph run through me. I wanted to fuck her hard held myself back. I pushed her thighs apart wider and lined my cock up when I her entrance and pushed gently against it with shallow thrusts while her lips and neck.

ing her As she relaxed, I reached down with one hand and played with her clit with her bringing her to climax and as she cried out, I thrust my hard rod into her spasming channel, making her cry out again and push back against me with her tensely as she felt the pain of my breaching her virginal barrier.

on my “It’s okay, that was the worst part,” I said as I held myself still to allow her to get used to me inside her.

Her eyes were wide in pain and her breathing quick and I reached down to kiss her gently and stroke her arms until she began to relax.

as she When her breathing had slowed down, I asked hoarsely, “Is it okay to move now?”

tongue “Yes,” she whispered, and I rocked gently against her pelvis, penetrating by just one more inch at a time.

in with I felt her inner muscles straining to accommodate my thick cock and her small whimpers, and I reached down to fondle her clit again.

Gradually I worked my way into her until I was all the way in and n were pushed up against her sex. I moved in and out of her tightne and herslowly, allowing her time to get used to my thickness before I took wanted.

ing her After a while I sensed her breathing changing again as she becam asure. Iaroused.

Her pussy was so wet, coating my cock with her slick juices, mak lookedinsides feel exquisite against my bare hardness.

I started to move faster, the friction of my movements stimulat d, but Isensitive inner nerve endings and making her moan. I looked down up witheyes which were closed.

kissing “Look at me,” I ordered. “I want to see your face when I come.”

She opened her eyes to reveal the deep blue of her irises. I picked ner clit,rhythm, no longer able to hold back, thrusting deeply in her and driv nto herinto the mattress.

nst me The sound of her wetness as I pounded her and the noise of m slapping against her sex was almost my undoing.

low her As I felt my climax mounting, I felt her muscles contract around n and heard her scream out again as one final orgasm overcame her. She lown toher back as she climaxed, gripping at my forearms, and I reveled expression and screams.

for me The pressure of her pussy muscles squeezing my shaft was too n hold out against. Her tightness pushed me over the edge, making m etratingwith loud grunts as I spilled my seed inside her as her muscles conti milk my cock.

d heard As my breathing slowed, I pulled out of her carefully and saw her v gathered her up in my arms and pulled her onto my chest.

my balls We lay like that for a couple of minutes, our breathing hoarse and
as everybody's slick with our mingled sweat. Her breasts glistened under the
what I from the nightstand lamps, her nipples hardening again as the sweat
down her skin. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

ie more I looked down at her. "Are you alright?"

She blushed, her pretty cheeks tinged with pink, and gave a small
ing her response.

I kissed her deeply on the lips. "Wait here," I ordered.

ing her I went to the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth and returned
at her bedroom. She looked embarrassed as I parted her thighs to clean her, and
tried to take the cloth from me to do it herself. "No. I'll do it," I growled.

After I had cleaned her up, I got her some Tylenol from the bathroom
up my made her take it with a glass of water. Then I wrapped her in my arms
ing her she lay there against my chest as I stroked her back. "You're beautiful,"
said into her hair. And it was true—I'd never seen a woman as beautiful
as her.

Tonight, I had made her body mine.

my girth But that wasn't enough for me.

arched After a few minutes, I turned to her. "Tomorrow we are getting married."
in her

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vince. I

We lay like that for a couple of minutes, our breathing hoarse and our bodies slick with our mingled sweat. Her breasts glistened under the lights from the nightstand lamps, her nipples hardening again as the sweat cooled down her skin. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

I looked down at her. "Are you alright?"

She blushed, her pretty cheeks tinged with pink, and gave a small nod in response.

I kissed her deeply on the lips. "Wait here," I ordered.

I went to the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth and returned to the bedroom. She looked embarrassed as I parted her thighs to clean her, and she tried to take the cloth from me to do it herself. "No. I'll do it," I growled.

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Tonight, I had made her body mine.

But that wasn't enough for me.

After a few minutes, I turned to her. "Tomorrow we are getting married."

CHAPTER 24

MARCO

Last night, when I told her that we would get married the next day, she hadn't argued with me.

She knew she had lost this battle already.

I wasn't willing to risk losing her again. If the Società ever tried to take her away again, there would be hell to pay. Even in the Mafia world, a wife could not be taken from her husband. I already owned her via the contract, but I was going to make that relationship iron-clad.

When she woke up next to me, I saw her wince as she turned over. "Are you feeling? Do you need a painkiller?" I knew she must be so sore. "What had happened between us last night."

"I'm fine," she said, avoiding my eyes.

It annoyed me that she was lying to me. I got up and went to the bathroom to grab some more Tylenol and a glass of water.

“Here, take this.” I handed her the pill and water and watched as she swallowed them. She didn’t argue for once.

“I need a shower,” she said after she had swallowed the pill with a glass of water. She threw off the covers and grabbed her robe before making her way to the bathroom.

The glimpse of her naked body before she got her robe on had me thinking about last night. It was tempting to join her in the shower, but I thought it best to give her some space this morning, especially in view of what was going to happen later today.

A little while later I took her breakfast tray up to her. It was better to have her eat breakfast in our room. I didn’t want her to make any last-ditch attempts at escaping.

When I went back up to retrieve the breakfast tray, I saw that it remained untouched. Juliana was sitting on the side of the bed gazing out the windows. It was a sunny midsummer day, though I didn’t think she would be that.

“You haven’t eaten your breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.” She didn’t turn her gaze from the window.

I didn’t really care whether she ate breakfast or not. I grabbed the tray and took the dog downstairs so that Danio could take it out into the garden. “How everything that had happened, I was sort of glad that she at least had a dog as an animal to keep her happy, although Alessio was still on my case about the wedding.”

A little while later, I returned to the bedroom with her wedding gown, which I had purchased yesterday. It was a gorgeous gown and the alterations needed were done overnight. Anything was possible with enough money.

throomgave them Juliana’s previous wedding dress to get the measurements r
I knew it would be a perfect fit.

he took I walked into the bedroom with Debi on my heels. Debi had asked
could help Juliana get ready today. She had brought with her an en
a sip of number of cosmetics and what looked like possible torture impl
ier way although Debi reliably informed me that they were hair straighten
curling tongs.

reliving

letter to JULIANA

oing to

that she In the cold light of day, I couldn’t believe that I had let last night ha
empt at Today I was being made to marry Marco, but last night was far w
my mind—I had given myself to him willingly. I had wanted him to k
had wanted him to touch me.

mained

of the I didn’t understand what was happening to me. My mind was in
noticed and shame flooded me every time I thought about what he had done
what I had allowed him to do.

ray and I closed my eyes briefly, willing my mind to block out these thoug
s. After banish from my memory the sounds and the images of what had ha
of me for sleeping with the enemy? I shouldn’t care, but I did.

ad that I sunk my face into my hands, exhaling painfully. I hated my captor
it. But even worse, I hated myself.

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ight, so

Late morning, I heard a knock at the bedroom door and watched as Debi came in with Debi.

Debi came over to me and gave me a hug. “We’ve brought you a dress. You’re going to look so pretty,” she said excitedly. The dress was white and had a strapless bodice flowing into a narrow skirt. White was the appropriate choice given last night, I thought, as I felt my cheeks heat.

I looked at the dress and tried to hide my lack of enthusiasm. I don’t know what made me give in to Marco last night, the day after he had killed his father’s men who had tried to rescue me.

Was it that I had known deep down that there was no escape and that I would have to open myself as well submit to what he and I both wanted, or was it some sort of attraction to Marco’s power over me? I didn’t know and my emotions had been going around in circles all morning. At least this sham of a wedding would keep me distracted for the rest of the day.

Debi was standing at my side, and she looked up at me shyly. “Just to me, please could I be your bridesmaid, you know...if you think you might be the one?”

Marco looked surprised as if he hadn’t expected Debi to ask that.

I gave a shaky smile. “I would love that, thank you. My sister, Jenna, was supposed to be my bridesmaid, but you’ll do just as good a job if not better.”

“We will be like sisters after today, won’t we?” said Debi eagerly.

“Yes, sisters,” I echoed back.

“I’m really looking forward to having a sister,” carried on Debi. “I don’t love having four brothers, but they don’t really want to talk about clothing or make-up or stuff like that.” I hugged her and wiped tears from my eyes.

Marco was watching us closely. “Why are you crying?” asked Debi, a little alarmed.

“Tears of happiness,” I lied. I couldn’t shatter this young girl’s inner dress. The Mafia life would do that all on its own soon enough.

Marco gave me a small nod as if grateful to me for protecting Debi.

Debi and I set to work on getting ourselves ready. She gushed over her wedding dress. I barely noticed it. But she was a young girl who thought weddings as fairytales and the groom as Prince Charming. It was better to know she thought that for as long as possible.

Debi helped me with my makeup, bubbling with excitement. At least I may of us was excited for today.

Mr. Fluffy did not look happy that he was not getting much attention this morning. Maybe his whines were because he disapproved of my wedding union as much as I did. He was pretty perceptive for a dog, and he probably sense my unease.

There was no veil today, nothing to hide behind, nothing to shield me from the curious stares—and I knew I would be a curiosity today. After my first wedding had been a bloody wedding.

Everyone would be looking at me, wondering whether it had broken me, but I wouldn’t give the Fratellanza the satisfaction of seeing me broken, no matter how broken I was inside.

Debi had a pale mint green dress and wore her dark hair in a ponytail back with a ribbon. She was going to be a heartbreaker when she was mean, I She was still shy, despite knowing that she had four older brothers or would tear down the world to protect her.

Later Marco came up with a bouquet of flowers for me and told us it was time to leave for the ceremony.

looking “Hey, shortcake, Danio is waiting downstairs to drive you in his c
gave Debi a kiss on her forehead, and she gave me a little wave as she
ocence downstairs to Danio.

“How are you feeling now? Do you need any more Tylenol?”

“I’m fine,” I snapped. “Anyway, I thought you would be happy to
ver mysuffering.” He gave me a strange look.

ught of I really didn’t want to talk about last night right now. I had given av
ter thathonor before my wedding day. Even though it had been to the ma
signed a contract with, I knew it was wrong and unjustifiable tha
ast onebroken this unwritten rule.

I hadn’t obeyed the rules of our world, and I hadn’t done my du
on fromfamily would be horrified if they found out. They and the rest of the
of thiswould call me a slut, and they would whisper that I was *una*
e couldsvergognata—a shameless woman.

Approaching slowly, Marco gripped my hand and tugged me ove
ie fromfull-length mirror. I let him pull me along, my body not knowing
all, myoppose his body and its underlying threat.

He stood me in front of the mirror, towering behind me, watch
n me. Irelections. He moved my hair over one bare shoulder. I flinched as I
mattercool fingers connect with my neck.

“Easy,” he breathed. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

ail held He slowly removed the diamond pendant I had put on with the c
s older.was the necklace I had worn on my first wedding day, the necklace t
rs whobeen a gift from my parents on my eighteenth birthday.

I watched as he reached into his tuxedo jacket and withdrew a long
s that itvelvet box. He opened it, revealing a new necklace which he took c

ar.” Hedraped around my neck. His touch was gentle, somehow incongruous
headed his large brutal hands.

He placed the chain along my throat, moving his hands slowly with
eyes were locked on mine.

see me I felt the cold metal of the chain come in contact with my skin. I held

breath as he fastened the clasp at the nape of my neck, his fingers
my sensitive place sending a shock through my whole body.

When I had He then reached around, adjusting where the stone fell at the top
of my breasts, letting his hand linger there, burning his touch into my skin.

The stone was a shimmering pale blue stone.

My “A rare sapphire, as blue and clear as your eyes. Perfect, just like you
Società declared in a voice full of foreboding.

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draped around my neck. His touch was gentle, somehow incongruous with his large brutal hands.

He placed the chain along my throat, moving his hands slowly while his eyes were locked on mine.

I felt the cold metal of the chain come in contact with my skin. I held my breath as he fastened the clasp at the nape of my neck, his fingers in that sensitive place sending a shock through my whole body.

He then reached around, adjusting where the stone fell at the top of my breasts, letting his hand linger there, burning his touch into my skin. The stone was a shimmering pale blue stone.

“A rare sapphire, as blue and clear as your eyes. Perfect, just like you,” he declared in a voice full of foreboding.

CHAPTER 25

JULIANA

The necklace was beautiful, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything. Instead, I just looked back at Marco's eyes through the reflection in the mirror, noting their intense and determined gaze. When I didn't say anything more, Marco took my hand and led me down the stairs.

The narrow skirt of my dress constrained my legs, making it difficult to walk and impossible to escape—maybe that was why he had chosen it. I had to wear it and I traveled together in his car. He was obviously not going to let me go out of his sight.

Today we would be getting married at a hotel in Chicago owned by the Fratellanza. Marco told me its location and setup would provide more security than a church. To be honest, I didn't care whether this wedding

in a hotel or a church. Neither would seem real to me. Although it didn't seem real when Marco claimed his marital rights again tonight.

When the car pulled up at the hotel, I could see that Marco's soldiers were everywhere, looking serious and alert. Although I could see no weakness, I knew that every man's suit jacket concealed a gun and knife holster. Was I kidding? Even the groom would have a gun or two tucked under his wedding tuxedo.

The drive had been my first trip out of the Marchiano estate since the kidnap. I had been desperate to get off the estate, but now I wanted nothing to be back there in the safety of Marco's bedroom.

We had passed through the center of the city, but I was too distracted to take in the view, nor did it seem like Marco was in the mood to be my guide and point out the sights.

Before getting out of the car, Marco faced me and leaned across, trapping me in with his arms on either side of my lap. He bent his head toward me, and his lips brushed my ear. "You will behave today. Or there will be consequences. Understand?"

I didn't reply, I couldn't. I dropped my gaze, not being able to look up at his intense gaze.

He pulled my chin up with rough fingers. "Answer me," he demanded in a foreboding tone.

I gave the smallest nod, not being able to force any words past my lips.

He got out of the car and came around to my door, opening it and holding out his hand to me.

When I did not make a move to leave the car, he narrowed his eyes. "Come, Juliana."

It was as if his voice startled me out of my daze. I automatically reached for my door handle.

t might this authoritative tone, my brain submitting to his words and my
moving. He put his hand under my elbow and helped me as I exited the
rs weren't push him away—I wasn't capable of even that right now.

pon, I Some guests were milling around the entrance of the hotel, waiting to
r. Whoa glimpse of us. Alessio approached Marco and they discussed a few s
ider his details between themselves as I was ushered inside. I noticed a
glances coming from some of the guests, but nothing could make
nce my special today. It felt as though I was walking to my execution.

ould do I felt Marco put his hand at the small of my back, making a shud
through my body. He led me forward into the foyer to meet some
icted to Underbosses and their wives. The wives cooed at my dress and sa
ny tour gorgeous it was while their husbands discussed business with
Everything was about business in our world—business and power.

caging I looked around me. The hotel was imposing and impressive, with
ard me, staircase and marble floors in the hotel lobby, together with plush
e'll be couches and pale armchairs interspersed with sophisticated
arrangements. A hotel as stunning as this would be in great demand
into his wedding venue, especially on a weekend in the summer months, and it
be booked up months if not years in advance.

led in a I wondered what had happened to the other bride and groom who
booked their wedding ceremony to take place in this hotel today.
ry lips. impossible that the hotel had been free for our wedding at such short
holding but it was clear that we were the only wedding party here today.

I shuddered, hoping that Marco had offered the other wedding
s eyes. generous financial incentive to go elsewhere rather than just killing the

I let my mind wander as the conversations carried on around me. I c
gistered help thinking about Jessica and wondering if she was okay and wishi

My body she could be here today like she should have been. She should have been in the car. In my side on my wedding day. But maybe it was better that she was not near these violent monsters.

To catch A few minutes later, the guests were being ushered into the hall where the security ceremony would take place. I watched them as they moved away from admiring I felt a tight squeeze on my hand and realized that Marco was looking at me.

“Marco?” I wasn’t sure what I was asking him.

Understand “Here’s Danio now. I’ll be waiting for you inside. Don’t disappoint me.” After a long look at me, he placed my hand in Danio’s and made his way into the ceremony hall for the start of the service.

Marco. There was no one from my family to give me away, so Danio was supposed to escort me down the aisle of the ceremony room. Out of all the Marchiano brothers, Danio seemed the nicest. Or maybe it was because he was still young and hadn’t yet become as hardened and callous as his other brothers.

And as a The strapless dress and lack of a veil made me feel exposed and vulnerable. And being given away by a practical stranger brought home how alone I was now. The isolation swooped down on me, consuming my mind and thoughts.

It was I heard the music begin. It was some sort of wedding music, probably chosen by the hotel staff since I didn’t think Marco would have been interested in those sorts of details.

Party a The doors opened, revealing Marco at the other end of the grand ceremony hall, together with the officiant who would be performing the ceremony. I couldn’t see Alessio and Camillo who were Marco’s groomsmen.

Knowing that When I didn’t walk forward, I heard Danio say in a gentle voice, “/”

been atokay Juliana? I said it's time to go in." I couldn't say anything or mo
owhereinstead I just stared at him.

His voice sounded far away, and everything seemed to blur.

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okay Juliana? I said it's time to go in." I couldn't say anything or move, and instead I just stared at him.

His voice sounded far away, and everything seemed to blur.

And then tears fell from my eyes.

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CHAPTER 26

JULIANA

I'm not sure what happened next.

I remember feeling frozen by the stares of all the guests on me, but more by the dark eyes of my groom who was watching me carefully.

His face was carefully blank, but I could see the darkness in his eyes, the darkness looking like it was ready to pounce on me like a panther and its prey.

When I didn't move, Marco came marching down the ceremony aisle toward me.

The sound of his shoes echoed ominously against the tiled floor, louder as he neared me. He grabbed my hand and roughly led me away to the lobby where we had been standing previously.

"Sit," he commanded, nodding to a plush armchair. "You're shaking

I gratefully sank down into the chair, realizing that my legs and arms feel shaky.

Marco turned to me. "I know you didn't eat breakfast this morning and you drunk any water today, apart from when I gave you the Tylenol?"

"I had a couple of espressos instead."

"How many cups of espresso?"

"Um, four." What was this, the Spanish inquisition?

He looked at me carefully. "Single or doubles?"

"What?" I tried to avoid the question.

"Answer me."

"Three doubles and one single. Satisfied?"

"For fuck's sake, Juliana. No wonder you're so jittery. You're in a state you may as well have knocked back a few shots of tequila."

"I'm not old enough to drink, remember? I'm only old enough to be kidnapped and forced to marry," I snapped back, fed up with his lecture tone. I was expected to be an adult and honor the contract, but I was not even like a child and kept locked in a room.

I heard Marco order someone to bring a glass of water, and a minute later, the one appeared in front of me. "Drink," he ordered me.

I just looked at the water with disinterest. I wasn't really thirsty, but honestly, my nerves were making me feel nauseous.

"Juliana, for the love of God, drink the fucking water."

I looked again at the water in my hand and decided that it might help me feel better, so I took a cautious sip and then slowly drank most of the water, back it.

"You're feeling shaky and jittery after all that caffeine you've knocked back on an empty stomach."

arms did “Are you kidding me? Maybe I’m feeling jittery because I’m being to marry a brutal killer.”

g. Have He clenched his jaw and didn’t answer me. Seeing that I was done, the glass from my hands, brushing his fingertips against mine, and t the glass down on a side table.

He crouched down in front of me, so that he was at eye level w “You know that you already agreed to all this when you signed the c and that this is just a formalization of the agreement?”

“Yes, I know,” I whispered.

“So, what’s the problem?”

I didn’t reply. There was nothing to say.

such a He sighed. “This wedding was always going to take place eventual way or another. It doesn’t matter whether it’s taking place this week 1 to be week. The outcome is the same. You belong to me now.”

cturing I reluctantly met his eyes. “I know. It’s just this isn’t how I imag treated would be.”

“Don’t tell me that you imagined a fairytale wedding?” he mocked r te later, “No, of course not,” I whispered.

“In our world, we don’t get a choice in who we marry. We ma ; in all alliances, to strengthen the ties of our families. What does it matter v you marry me, or it was someone else that you were promised to? In case, you would have had no choice. It was always going to be a b help medal.”

rest of “But I didn’t think I would have to marry someone who nearly kil sister and tortured my brother!” I still couldn’t get over what had happ nocked my sister and my brother, all because of some stupid alliance the Frat and Societ  had planned. I still hadn’t been able to talk to my fam

forced those worries kept playing on my mind, kept niggling away
background, unsettling me and wreaking havoc with my emotions.
he took many more people I loved would get hurt because of this man?
hen set He stood back up, his stance tense and rigid. “Your brother knows
consequences of entering our territory uninvited. And it’s your own
with me that nearly killed Jessica. It was their bullet that shot her. I’m protecting
contract from your family.” His voice was a rough growl. “They had no regard
your safety. When will you understand that? You are merely a pawn in
twisted plans.”

“What does it matter? You’re all the same,” I spat back at him.

“We’ve been through all this already. This is the end of the conversation.
ly. One he said, his tone harsh with its finality. He held out his hand. “You
or last choice then, and you have no choice now.”

And I looked at him for a long moment, before reluctantly putting my
signed it in his and letting him lead me back to the ceremony.

ne. JULIANA

worry for Marco handed me back to Danio and made his way to the front of the
whether Everyone was waiting for us, but the guests knew better than to stare
in either Capo and his reluctant bride.

business Instead, they contrived to talk among themselves, pretending they
noticed that the bride was not ecstatic to be marrying into the Fratelli
lled my Most of the men were trying not to show their boredom, while they
ened to looked at me with either sympathy or curiosity.

cellanza
ily and

in the Several of the guests looked at me with barely concealed hatred, no
s. Howholding me accountable for the sins of the Società and the deaths
Fratellanza soldiers on my first wedding day.

ew the The music started up again, and this time Danio and I walked t
familydown the aisle. I was on autopilot and just kept walking until we r
ing youMarco.

gard for I noticed that the room was exquisitely decorated with masses c
in theirflowers. But somehow, I found their scent overwhelming, and the fee
nausea came creeping back when I heard Marco make his vows in a
hard voice.

sation,” When it was my turn, I repeated after the officiant. “I do solemnly
had nothat I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Juliana Bonardi, may
joined in matrimony to Marco Marchiano.”

ry hand Well, I suppose being kidnapped and forced into marriage c
constitute a lawful impediment in the Mafia world.

The officiant then asked me to complete my vows. “I call upo
persons here present to witness that I, Juliana Bonardi, do take
Marchiano to be my lawfully wedded husband.”

he hall. Marco slipped the wedding ring onto the fourth finger of my left l
at their join the diamond engagement ring that was already there. The band v
another sign of his ownership of me.

hadn't The ceremony was over before I knew it, and somehow it did not fee

ellanza. However, at the conclusion of the wedding ceremony, I knew tha
r wives now the wife of Marco Marchiano. Not only under the contract dr
under Mafia laws, but now also under the laws of the United St
America.

o doubt MARCO
of the

Today we finally managed to make our vows and exchange rings together
reached any interruption.

Juliana had made her vows in a quiet voice. I knew she didn't want
of fresh marry me today, but her wants were irrelevant. Inside, I was raging
pling of earlier refusal to walk down the aisle. Her blatant rejection of me was
strong, match to the inferno that had been raging within me since the Società's
on our estate.

Her actions shouldn't have bothered me as much as they did, but for
declare reason my feelings toward this woman bordered on the obsessive.
not be

What I'd made her witness in the garage block had been for her own
lid not — so that she would never try to escape again and so that she would
think again about returning to a family who didn't value her safety or life.

Because I couldn't let anyone ever harm her. She was too important to
n these let that happen.

Marco But her continued defiance today made my lungs tighten and throb
inside me rage.

hand to Once she stopped fighting me and accepted her life with me, things
was yet improve between us. Nothing could make me regret my initial act
el real. taking her against her will. There was no way that I would have ever
t I was behind. I would not allow anyone or anything to take this woman away
awn up me.

Although she was strong and stubborn, she was vulnerable too. And
ates of she might at times show indifference or anger toward me, I knew that she
developing feelings for me. I had felt her pussy quiver in ecstasy around

cock, and I had seen the way she looked at me sometimes. Things had to a bad start, but she was always going to be mine one way or another now she was.

without

My need for her was intense. It went beyond a physical need or ra

want to

And although at times I wanted to punish her while I fucked her, I had kept that dark side in its box.

at her

s like a

s attack

The reality of our situation was crueler than I'd intended, but this was the way of our world. And I would never be sorry for taking her, nor for losing her.

or some

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the officiant pronounced us husband and wife and declared that I could kiss my bride.

n good

n't ever

er life.

Juliana showed surprise on her face and her eyes quickly flickered from me. She'd obviously forgotten about this part of the ceremony she hadn't.

o me to

The side of my mouth lifted in a smile, and I pulled her toward me, giving her no choice in the matter.

e beast

Her mouth remained resolutely closed during the kiss. No matter how long it would be plenty of time later for me to rectify that.

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cock, and I had seen the way she looked at me sometimes. Things had got off to a bad start, but she was always going to be mine one way or another. And now she was.

My need for her was intense. It went beyond a physical need or raw lust. And although at times I wanted to punish her while I fucked her, I had so far kept that dark side in its box.

The reality of our situation was crueler than I'd intended, but this was the way of our world. And I would never be sorry for taking her, nor for keeping her.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the officiant pronounced us to be husband and wife and declared that I could kiss my bride.

Juliana showed surprise on her face and her eyes quickly flicked away from me. She'd obviously forgotten about this part of the ceremony, but I hadn't.

The side of my mouth lifted in a smile, and I pulled her toward me, giving her no choice in the matter.

Her mouth remained resolutely closed during the kiss. No matter, there would be plenty of time later for me to rectify that.

And I was looking forward to making her submit to me tonight.

CHAPTER 27

JULIANA

A small reception followed at the hotel.

In the banquet hall, I knocked back my glass of champagne and it was good. I swiftly picked up a second glass.

When it was time for the first dance, I let Marco lead me onto the floor and did not resist when he took me into his arms and held me against his chest. I yielded and rested my head against his hard, muscled torso. At least that way, I didn't have to look into his eyes and see his smug grin crowed over his ownership of me.

I was relieved when it was time to go home. It was still early, he being only mid-afternoon, giving me some respite before I would be expected to perform my wifely duties tonight.

As soon as we reached the mansion, I swiftly headed upstairs, and shed myself of this dress. As soon as I was in the bedroom, I tugged the dress and left it in a heap on the floor. I grabbed a robe and wrapped it around me. Then I scooped up my pooch and held him to me and stroked him more to soothe me than him.

Despite all my earlier coffee, all the champagne must have made me sleepy because the next thing I knew I was waking up. I could tell by the light filtering through the windows that it must be early evening now.

A short time later, Marco came upstairs to collect me for dinner. I told him that I wasn't hungry and that I wouldn't be coming down. He didn't seem pleased about this, but he didn't push me. Perhaps he realized just how much today had been for me.

He asked if I wanted to take Mr. Fluffy for a walk around the garden. However, despite my earlier nap, I was exhausted and asked if Danio could take over the walk this evening.

Marco merely nodded and took my dog downstairs with him. Mr. Fluffy gave me a forlorn look and whined, probably wondering why I wasn't coming and why he was being taken out by the monster.

That night when Marco came up to bed, I tried to ignore him. I lay on my back, facing away from him as he undressed.

"I know you're not sleeping."

I still didn't pay him any attention.

"At least you should be well rested after your nap this afternoon."

I stayed with my back to him and felt the mattress dip as he climbed into bed. He slid over to my side of the bed and ran his fingers gently up my arm and I felt a shiver run through me.

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around

his fur,

I lightly ran my hand up her bare arm.

She was wearing panties and a strappy vest top, hardly wedding attire, but she still looked as sexy as hell.

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Moving my hand slowly down from her shoulder to her wrist, I tilted my hand back up her hip and side, caressing that sensitive spot for a moment. I inched my fingers under her top, connecting my fingers with her bare skin and hearing her sigh.

She might be trying to ignore me, but I knew that her body wasn't ignoring me. I ran my palm across her smooth belly and up toward her delicate breasts. As I reached my target her breaths became deeper. I cupped her breasts and she pushed herself out into my palms, seeking their touch.

With my rough, calloused fingers, I caressed her nipples and twisted them, hearing her gasp as I did so. She loved it when I played with her tits. I continued to fondle them, making them harder as they tightened into hard peaks of arousal in response to my teasing fingers.

I rolled each one between my thumbs and forefingers, both at the same time, distending them even more. I reached my hand down her belly to that tantalizing place, finding it drenched with her arousal. She wanted as much as I did.

I turned her around in my arms and sank my lips toward her neck, kissing that delicate spot at the base of her throat. As she arched her head, she was pushing herself toward my lips. I ran my mouth down her neck, nipping and licking to the space between her breasts before latching onto her dark nipple with my eager lips.

While sucking that hard nub, one hand played with the other nipple
second hand snaked down to the silky dark strip between her legs.

I softly fingered her labia and clit, resisting her attempts to push i
g night hand and increase the pressure. I wasn't going to let her off that eas
when I wanted to hear her pleading and crying my name.

I continued sucking her nipple and pulling at the other nipple, feel
hen ran get wetter and wetter. She was pressed up to me and was so close to c
r her. I but I wasn't allowing that yet.

I pulled back, hearing her mewl in protest. I ran my hands back
ire skin body, grasping her head between my hands and kissing her lips.

I felt her frustration as she squirmed against me and eagerly grabl
immune delicious hardness. She would be too sore after last night and I wouldn't hurt
ed her penetrating her tonight.

I could see impatience in her startling blue eyes, which she droppe
lightly to look at my erection while licking her lips with her delicate pink
ed with Fuck. This girl was killing me.

She surprised me by moving down my body and tentatively licking
ghtened of my cock with her soft tongue. She obviously had never done this
e same man before and was uncertain as to what she should do, but I could
o reach curiosity in her eyes.

She opened her mouth wider and licked my erection all the way fi
l this as base to the tip, frowning slightly when she tasted the drop of salty pre-

kissing "Take me into your mouth," I instructed. She did so obediently.
d back, girl," I said in a gruff voice.

ing and She struggled to fit my girth into her small mouth, so I wrapped h
c nipple around the base so that she would be stroking my whole length with b
hand and mouth. I wrapped my large hand tightly around her small

and my showing her how hard I liked my dick to be held, and then moved in with hers to show her how to pump my cock.

And at the same time, she instinctively moved her head back and forth, not moving my length in and out of her mouth.

“Suck harder,” I ordered, and she obeyed my command. It felt like being in heaven. I thought it couldn’t get any better until she swirled her tongue around the head, almost making me come there and then.

I pulled back and looked deep into her eyes and I could see the arousal on her expression just from having me in her mouth.

Then I pushed her back onto the mattress. She gasped in surprise as I roughly forced her thighs apart and pushed my tongue deep into her. She lapped at her juices and tasted her arousal, making me want her even more.

She squirmed under my tongue, grabbing at my hair while moans of pleasure escaped her lips. Her moans were the sexiest thing I had ever heard, and they ignited a primal urge within me to make her mine in every way possible.

When she approached her climax, I backed off, ignoring her whimpers with a “Please, Marco. I need to come. Please.”

But instead, I licked and nipped at the tender skin of her inner thigh before running my tongue along the sensitive skin at the back of her leg. I then flipped her over again so she was on her stomach, and I straddled her. I buried my nose in her inky tresses, inhaling her erotic scent.

“Good,” I moved my lips over her sensitive shoulders and ran my tongue down her back toward the perfect globes of her ass. She tensed as she was near her palm what I was planning.

“Get up on all fours. Spread your legs wide open for me. Show me your one, mine. Show me what I own.”

my hand She obeyed and submitted to my orders, making my cock grow harder. I parted her folds and then slid my tongue from her ass all the way forward, down to her clit, before capturing her labia between my lips and tugging on them. Then I feasted on her clit relentlessly until she was on the edge and was pushed over the edge and screamed in the throes of her orgasm. But I didn't let go then and instead carried on sucking at her overstimulated erect nub, despite her trying to push my mouth away. Soon however arousal was building again into that intense peak until she succumbed to a second shattering climax.

As she lay panting against the sheets, I knelt beside her and looked at her slit. Her limbs glistening with sweat and her thighs streaked with her pussy juice. cum.

I smelled her unique fragrance which was mingled with the scent of arousal. Kneeling above her, I fistfisted my cock and pumped it while she still taste her on my tongue until I could hold back no longer.

My balls contracted and my cock expanded, shooting its load to impregnate her tits. I continued milking my cock with my thigh grunting with each spurt, until I had wrung out every last drop of my cum over her perfect body,

For a few moments I just looked at how I had marked my property on her ass. In most primal of ways while she looked at me with her softly parted lips and flushed cheeks. Then I massaged my thick white cum into her breasts so that she would know that she was mine.

Then I took her lips with mine. "You're incredible. And now you're mine forever."

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CHAPTER 28

MARCO

The next few weeks were the hardest for Juliana.

Slowly she started to accept her new life with me. She now had meals with the family and was free to walk around the grounds whenever she wanted, although someone always accompanied her if she wanted to leave the estate.

My anger toward her had abated after she had submitted to me on our wedding night. It was as if she understood now that she was mine, and she pleased me immensely. She could no longer deny her attraction to me. She knew, however, that she missed her family.

All along, I'd told myself that my actions and feelings toward her were justified because I owned her via the contract and didn't want someone taking her away.

was mine. But I'd finally admitted to myself that what I felt for her ownership—it was an intense need to care for her and to protect her.

While Juliana was still wary around Alessio and Camillo, I could opening up more around Danio and, particularly, Debi. It was good to have an older female around. Debi had been five when our mom she had been raised mostly by Alessio and me.

I overheard Juliana and Debi talking one day in the kitchen were baking a cake. “I really like him, but he just doesn’t notice me. I I’m invisible to him and I don’t know how to change it,” complained Juliana.

“Debi, it’s not that he doesn’t notice you. You’re gorgeous and sw funny. But he knows who your brothers are, and he knows that one d family will decide who you will marry.”

“But I don’t see why I can’t date other boys, even if eventually I have an arranged marriage. It would just be nice, you know, to hold and stuff.”

Alessio came into the kitchen at that point. “Shortcake, he won’t all her just hold your hand—trust me.”

Debi gave an exaggerated sigh. I knew that most people wouldn’t go to leave with that sort of attitude with Alessio, but with his younger siblings on our just a big softy.

“And if he tries to hold your hand, let’s just say that he won’t have ind that his fingers or hands for much longer,” said Alessio, narrowing his eyes to me; I

Debi huffed, but Juliana changed the subject and suggested they go ar were shopping tomorrow as there was a sale going on at one of Debi’s ig what stores. That seemed to cheer her up.

I was glad that Debi had another girl to talk to now and I was grate

wasn't Juliana was making an effort with my siblings.

see her JULIANA

or Debi

lied, so

Now I was Marco's wife, things became somewhat clearer.

He'd been right when he'd said that I'd already been promised to him. I was bound to marry him. I had to try and accept it. I wouldn't risk anything as if people being hurt trying to save me...especially not when a part of me yearned to be here with him.

I couldn't understand these thoughts my mind was having, and I couldn't understand my attraction to this man.

ay your

But while a part of me wanted to be here with him, I still couldn't get

have to

what he'd done to Jess and Jacob. My mind was in turmoil—how could I love a man but desire him at the same time?

l hands

One day, when I went downstairs for lunch, I found Debi talking to

want to

hadn't seen before.

et away

The girl looked to be around my age, or possibly a few years older, and

he was

had beautiful white-blonde hair cut into a stylish bob that skimmed the top

with pale blue pawprints.

She was wearing a denim skirt plus a yellow sweater decorated with pale blue pawprints.

use of

"Hey," the blonde girl said to me.

live nearby."

"Juliana, this is Anni. She's married to Marco's cousin, Lorenzo, and she

clothes

live nearby."

favorite

"Hi Anni," I said cautiously.

"So, you're the girl who's snared the Capo," she grinned.

ful that

I gave her a small smile back. "Well, technically, he snared me."

A laugh escaped her lips. “Yeah, these Marchiano guys are hard to deal with when they get an idea into their head.”

“You were forced into a marriage too?”

“It was an arranged marriage, but that’s basically the same thing in the real world, isn’t it?” She flicked a stray strand of blonde hair off her face. “

My parents were Veneti before my marriage. Lorenzo and I started off on the wrong foot when we met, so a marriage was arranged to stop the Venetis and Marchianos from falling out and murdering each other.”

I liked this girl. She said what she thought and didn’t look like she was being browbeaten by any guy. “Why don’t you stay and have lunch with Debi and me?”

Anni readily agreed and we ate lunch around the kitchen island and got to know each other. “I don’t hate you.”

“What does Lorenzo do in the Fratellanza?” I asked, taking a bite of my sandwich.

“He’s the Underboss for Chicago, so he works pretty closely with me and Alessio. Us living so close by is really convenient for his work.”

“And how are you finding married life?” I was eager to know if she had found happiness with a Marchiano; if she had, then maybe there was some hope for me.

“Married life? I’d say it’s pretty busy and full-on, but in a good way.”

“Lorenzo and Anni have two children—Clara and Clemente,” chimed in Debi. “They’re four and two, and they’re just adorable.”

“You have two kids—already?” I was shocked by this. She looked so young to already have two children.

Anni chuckled. “Lorenzo was married before and had two children, but his wife died. So, I’m not their birth mom, but I love them as if they were mine.”

o argue own.”

“Wow, Anni, I thought an arranged marriage was difficult, but ha
take on two kids as well must have been a huge adjustment for you.”

in our “We made it work, although there were a few teething issues to star
I was ashe said seriously. “You’ll probably find that with Marco too. I kn
ot when Marchianos have a reputation for their cruelty and brutality, but und
chiano they’re decent guys.”

“How are the children doing?” Debi asked.

ne’d let “They’re great. Lorenzo’s just the most amazing dad. Clara is
ebi and daddy’s girl. She idolizes Lorenzo. He works a lot more from home n
she loves to be with him whenever she can. Obviously not when he’s
I got to about business, but if he’s just on his laptop, she’ll be in his study w
so that she can be near him. The other day I went into the study and I
of my was supposed to be working, but I found Clara curled up in his lap
was reading a story to her.”

Marco “My dad would never have taken time out of his working day to
with my siblings or me,” I commented.

she had Debi nodded in agreement.

ould be I looked down at Anni’s clothes. “Do I take it by your sweater that y
animals?”

.” “Definitely. A house isn’t a home unless you have at least o
pped in Although Lorenzo isn’t always on the same page as me when it co
having pets.”

d quite A small frown furrowed my brow. “I don’t know what it is about
Marchiano men, but they really don’t like animals, do they?”

but his “Maybe it’s part of the Fratellanza initiation process that they swear
ere my animals,” giggled Anni. “There’s an animal shelter near here; we shc

the guys to come there and then hold them at gunpoint until they give
ving tobond with the animals.”

“Maybe after being forced to spend some time with some cute
t with,” animals, they’ll fall in love with them just like we always do,” su
ow theDebi.

ler it all “And pigs might fly,” I giggled, feeling a lightness that I hadn’t f
while.

After Anni had told me some more about herself and Lorenzo, as
a realfilling me in on some of the issues at the start of their marriage and Lo
ow, andaversion to pets, I asked her about her family. “The Venetis are from
talkingIsland, right?”

ith him “That’s right. Have you ever been?”

.orenzo “No. I would love to go there and see the sights in New York. E
and heknow how it is.”

“Yeah, you’re not safe in a place if your family doesn’t run the city
o spendDebi with a sigh. “I mean, I love Chicago, but it would be nice to spr
wings a bit. I didn’t even get to see much of L.A. when we were th
Juliana’s wedding as that got cut short...”

ou like “Well, as the Venetis and Marchianos have their alliance now, se
me being thrown under the bus and being arranged in marriage to L
ne pet.you guys would be safe if you visited my hometown.” Anni’s green

omes toup as an idea came to her. “Hey, we should do a girls’ road trip to
Island—it would be so much fun. Especially since Lorenzo always
it theseexcuse as to why he hasn’t got time to come and see my family with m

“He doesn’t like your family?” I asked.

to hate “He says they’re batshit crazy.” Anni’s tone was very matter-of-a-fa
ould get My jaw dropped a little. “And you don’t mind him talking abo

in and family like that?"

Anni shrugged. "I don't let the small shit bother me."

fluffy "A girls' trip would be so cool," enthused Debi. She turned her head toward me. "Do you think Marco would agree?"

"Marco would definitely not agree, nor would Lorenzo," we heard him yell in a way behind us. I whipped my head around to see Marco walking into the kitchen.

well as "Aw, come on, Marco," wheedled Anni. "I was just telling Juliana that Lorenzo's aren't that bad, so why don't you prove my point by letting her and I go to Staten with me on one of my trips home?"

"Nice try, Oakley. But the answer's still no."

"Oakley?" I asked in confusion.

But you "That's Anni's nickname," explained Debi.

Marco looked at me. "Trust me, Juliana, you don't want to mess with them," said Venetis.

lead my "They can't be that bad," I argued.

here for "Yes, they can," he replied with a scowl. "They're complete loons."

My eyes widened at his choice of words. Anni, however, wasn't perturbed by what he'd said. It was like water off a duck's back, and I had to admire Lorenzo, for her relaxed attitude.

eyes lit Marco grabbed a coffee and then headed for the office, leaving us to finish our lunch.

has an As we finished eating, Mr. Fluffy came into the kitchen. He'd just woken up from his nap and started snuffling around for food. He'd finished the pack of dog biscuits yesterday, so I excused myself and headed to the storeroom to collect a new pack.

ut your On my way back to the kitchen, a man I hadn't met was standing

hallway, typing something on his phone.

He looked up, his calculating gaze assessing me. After a long moment he spoke. “You must be Juliana—the girl who’s caused all the trouble.”

“And you must be the cat-hater,” I responded. Anni had shown me a voice on her phone of this man: he was her husband, Lorenzo.

His eyes flickered for the briefest moment at my comment. I knew he wouldn’t normally give anything away, but his guard was down while he was inside his cousin’s home. “I see my reputation precedes me,” he drawled. “I also hate anyone from the Società.”

“Well, I’m no longer Società. Marco saw to that when he forced me to become his wife.”

He continued staring at me. He was really intense, and I could only think that he was also a little scary.

I turned around and headed back to the kitchen, but I could sense him following me.

When we entered the kitchen, he spoke to Anni. “I’ve finished with the things I needed to discuss with Alessio. Do you want a lift back to the house?” His voice was much softer with his wife, and I could sense the affection between them. It made me wonder if my marriage would ever be like that?

“Thanks, Lorenzo, that would be great. I need to collect my car and pick up the kids from your mother’s house soon.”

We said our goodbyes, and Anni promised to arrange another meeting. I was glad to have made another friend here, and I could see us becoming close.

Room to

in the

ment, he As the weeks went on, our days settled into a sort of routine, and spending more time with the family and getting to know them better.

a photo However, the one person who I was still wary of was Alessio. He never really accepted me, and he definitely hadn't accepted Mr. Fluffy.

new he One evening, Marco was accompanying me on my evening walk with he was F. Even I had started sometimes calling my pooch 'Mr. F' as a nickname.

led. "I While we walked, I decided to ask Marco about Alessio. "Why is he afraid of dogs?"

I me to "It's not a case of being afraid. He just doesn't like dogs."
"He's a big bad Mafia man and he can't handle one small dog?"

it help Marco sighed. "It's not like that."
"What is it like then? Danio and Debi say they have always wanted

use him own dog, but Alessio's aversion has meant that they never got one."
"It just doesn't work with our lifestyle. Look, not everyone's a fan

what I like you."
e?" His "Not everyone's a fan of Made Men, but here I am stuck with you,

between back.
"Yep, you are stuck with me. Now can we move on and talk

nd pick something other than your dog?"

et-up. I JULIANA
coming

The next afternoon I was sitting on a sun lounger in the garden, reading a book and enjoying the sunshine. I was finding it hard to concentrate on the book and my mind kept wandering.

Marco seemed different lately, more human somehow and less monster. I was

I felt different when I was with him. His gray eyes seemed less cruel when they were on me, and a thrill would rush through me when he had a thumb over my hip or put his hand against the small of my back.

With Mr. Alessio I found it hard to keep away from him, although I tried telling my name. It was just my body's physical reaction to his skilled touch.

But, sometimes, I knew it was more than that. I wanted to be with him to him and hear his thoughts. He was like me in some ways—he cared intensely about his siblings, and they meant the world to him. Being in this world, the Mafia world, didn't mean that a man couldn't have a heart. And when it came to his sister and brothers, I knew he was a man and their heart was capable of great love.

Maybe I didn't hate him anymore? Or was it more than that?

I wondered if maybe the separation from my family was getting more than I realized.

Here I was, having all these thoughts—yet he was still the same man. I was still his prisoner. He guarded every moment of my life, and I couldn't really have any free choice.

However, whenever I was with him, I was distracted by the color of his eyes, the curve of his mouth and the strength of his muscles. My mind was flitting from being ashamed of my desire for my captor to feeling a desire to have his body against mine.

But whatever was happening between us emotionally, I still couldn't accept his refusal to allow me contact with my family. And I knew on my own something that was an insurmountable obstacle between us. Even if I had fallen for my captor, I would never give up my siblings and my family.

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As the weeks went on, I could see that the wedding had been the decision. Although Juliana still had some anger toward me, she also knew she had no choice now, and that made things easier for her. Where there was no choice, there was less point in resistance. And when she wasn't resisting the situation, she gave in more willingly to her obvious attraction to me.

We still had some days where Juliana actively tried to avoid me. I couldn't get away from me at night, nor did she want to.

It only took one touch, one lingering look or one whisper for her to willingly come to me.

One night after we had both orgasmed, she was lying in my arms. Afterward, her cheeks flushed a delicate shade of peach. I looked down at her arm, where the gash from the church had healed but left behind a jagged scar. It looked wrong on her perfect skin, a sin marring her innocence, and it bothered me.

The Società was responsible for that, and I was responsible for protecting her from them. She had been mine to not only own but to protect.

I no longer felt just possessive of her, I also felt protective of her. Every time I thought about her during the day, I felt not only desire in my loins but a fierce protectiveness in my chest.

Juliana seemed to be weighing up in her mind whether to say something or not. "I'm not a mind reader. If something's on your mind, just say it."

She licked her lips in a nervous gesture. "My birthday is next week."

“I know. Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten that you’ll be turning two
“I’ve been thinking about a present that I would like.”

She said nothing further. “Go on.”

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Biting her lower lip, she paused, but then her words rushed out. “I
call Jessica.”

We looked at each other and neither of us said anything. I could
was uneasy. When I made no response, she rushed on. “I could call
her cell phone and make sure to tell her that she can’t mention the cal
family or anyone else. I’m sure that she would agree to that, if it me
we could speak to each other. Please.”

Having got that off her chest, she exhaled a breath and lay back aga
pillow, waiting for an answer. I could see the tension in her shoulders
waited.

I regarded her closely. She had come a long way these past few wee
was no longer fighting me at every turn and that was refreshing, gi
rocky start. “In some ways it’s better that you do not have conta
anyone from your old life.”

“But we’re not just talking about anyone. We’re talking about my si
“All the more reason why it will be upsetting for you. It will bring l
the memories that I’m trying to move you on from, like your sister
shot.”

“But I’ve been trying. I’ve really been trying. I’m not dwelling
kidnap or you forcibly keeping me here or that you made me go throu
the marriage.” She was getting worked up.

My jaw tightened. “The way you describe it makes me think that
still dwelling on it. You still resent the Fratellanza. You still resent me
“I’ll resent you more for not letting me speak to my family!”

nty.” “You have my answer. It’s no. No good will come from speaking
sister. You need to move on and put that all behind you. I know you
believe me but I'm protecting you from any further harm coming
want to Your father's plan on our original wedding day could have ended up with
being dead. You're too important to me to let anything like that ever
see she again. You're mine now, and I protect what's mine.”

her on “How can I move on? I’ve never been allowed to have any close
I to my wasn’t even given the chance to say goodbye to my family. I’m young
ant that now and we are legally married. I can’t go back to them, so why can’t
just let me have this one small thing?”

inst her “We’re not talking about this anymore.” And then I turned toward
as she nightstand to switch off the lamp.

When I tried to pull her into my arms, she struggled and went as for
kicks. She elbow me in the abdomen.

even our I caught her by her hair and pulled her head back. “Careful, be
ct with Don’t push me on this,” I warned.

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“You have my answer. It’s no. No good will come from speaking to your sister. You need to move on and put that all behind you. I know you don't believe me but I'm protecting you from any further harm coming to you. Your father's plan on our original wedding day could have ended up with you being dead. You're too important to me to let anything like that ever happen again. You're mine now, and I protect what's mine.”

“How can I move on? I’ve never been allowed to have any closure. I wasn’t even given the chance to say goodbye to my family. I’m your wife now and we are legally married. I can’t go back to them, so why can’t you just let me have this one small thing?”

“We’re not talking about this anymore.” And then I turned toward the nightstand to switch off the lamp.

When I tried to pull her into my arms, she struggled and went as far as to elbow me in the abdomen.

I caught her by her hair and pulled her head back. “Careful, beautiful. Don’t push me on this,” I warned.

CHAPTER 29

MARCO

In the days leading up to her birthday, I had to admire Juliana for trying not to dwell on my refusal to let her phone her sister. She didn't sulk as I she would.

It was a couple of days before her birthday. In the evening, I was cooking dinner in the kitchen while Juliana watched me. I was making a Thai chicken and basil stir-fry with jasmine rice.

Juliana had admitted to me that she had no idea how to cook and that her mother had a housekeeper who had prepared all their meals. "Where did you learn to cook? Did your mom teach you?" she asked while watching me chop up vegetables to add to the chicken which I was stir-frying.

We hadn't really talked about my parents. Whenever Juliana had previously asked about them, I'd changed the subject, making it clear

that I did not want to talk about them. “When our parents died, we moved into this house. With our parents gone, me and Alessio were in charge. Camillo was nine, Danio was six, and Debi was only five. Man, Debi was such a little kid. Still is.”

“So, you started cooking when you all moved in here together?”

“Yeah, it meant that either Alessio or I would have to be home during mealtimes. We wanted the kids to have that, you know, a bit like a normal upbringing. If we had gotten live-in staff, it would have been too easy to get meals with the kids and just leave the staff to deal with them.”

Alessio and Camillo came into the kitchen to check when dinner was to be ready. The smell of food always attracted the guys. Camillo joined our conversation. “Marco and Alessio were like the mom and pop family. Although I still remember how bad their first attempts at cooking were.”

Alessio frowned at that comment. “Hey, smart-ass, we got there in time trying to Anyway, we keep telling you that you have to learn how to cook now, I feared you can take over your fair share of the cooking duties,” Alessio replied to Camillo.

Camillo just grinned. “You know, Alessio, that Debi likes your cooking chicken best and that I could never compete with you in that regard.” Alessio was pleased at that comment. Camillo was smart, sucking up to Alessio in that her spot: Debi. Debi was a soft spot for all her brothers.

Debi came by then and looked at her brothers earnestly. “I don’t know if you’re chopping learning to cook so that I can help out more?”

Alessio looked down affectionately at her. “No. You need to concentrate on school and homework right now. There’s plenty of time for learning to cook later on. I’ll be there to help you when you’re ready.”

oved to cook later.” And with that, he gave her a kiss on the top of her head and Camillo moved to set the table for dinner.

is a cute

ere for

normal On the morning of Juliana’s birthday, I woke her up by licking her
to skip making her come as I feasted on her pussy, before thrusting in
quivering channel and making her orgasm again as I reached my own
s going “Happy birthday, beautiful,” I said afterward as she lay sated in m
ined in running her fingers over the tattoos on my arm. After cuddling for a
of the decided to get up. “Come on, let’s get showered and then I’ll make
ooking special breakfast before the kids head off to school.”

After getting dressed, we headed down the stairs. “What’s for breakfast?”
he end. asked Juliana.

so then “Your favorite.”

minded “Pancakes with strawberries, blueberries, and cream?”

“Absolutely. Today I’m going to spoil you.”

ooking “Happy Birthday!” As we entered the kitchen, Debi rushed over
looked Juliana a hug.

o’s soft Danio gave Juliana a big smile. “Happy 20th Birthday, Juliana.”

“Oh wow, you did this for me?” Juliana looked genuinely surprised
’t mind and Danio had decorated the kitchen with balloons and there were cakes
gifts waiting for her.

concentrate “Yeah, we got up a little earlier than normal,” replied Danio.

ning to

nd then “And that would have been really hard for Danio. You don’t even know how hard it is to get his ass out of bed in the mornings,” I chuckled.

Camillo and Alessio had already left as they had work to do, so the us settled down to breakfast. While we ate, Juliana opened birthday ca gifts from my siblings. Even Camillo and Alessio had left a card for he

Debi and Danio had gotten Juliana a pretty bracelet. “Oh, this is go clit and I love it, thank you.”

to her At the end there was one card left to be opened. When Juliana op climax. she giggled. “A card from Mr. Fluffy.” The card depicted a dog who y arms, remarkably similar to her dog. Juliana read the message and, knowing while, I from Debi and Danio, she got up and gave them both a hug. “Thanks e you a this, guys. It really means a lot to me.”

I checked my watch. “Okay, come on kids, you better get a move kfast?” you’ll be late for school.”

Once they had left, Juliana and I headed out into the estate’s woo Mr. F for his morning run around. I should have been working, bu taken to accompanying Juliana on her dog walks when I had tim always seemed one of the times when she was at her most peaceful.

to give We sat down together at the fallen log next to Danio and Det treehouse. The treehouse still had its weather-beaten flag with the logo ‘Debi & Danio’ around a teddy bear face. I’d thought that helping Al d. Debi build the kids the playhouse would help my guilt about them losir rds and parents at such a young age—but I’d found that nothing could stop th from crushing me, not then and not in the years that came after.

The dog was happily running around in circles, chasing his own never seemed to tire of doing that. We sat in silence for a while, watch dog run around. Eventually he ran up to Juliana, waking her out of h

want to thoughts. She bent down toward him and ruffled his fur, just as he liled. was out of breath and panting and sat down at Juliana's feet for a break four of As he leaned against her legs, she absently rubbed his ears. I don't rds and whether it was to comfort the dog or to comfort herself. She seer r. away, and I saw a brief glimpse of emotion—of pain—cross her featur rgeous. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She answered quickly. A little too quickly. ened it, Damn. I knew that she was thinking about her family, but she didn looked to say anything to me about them. g it was After a pause, I held out my cell phone to her. s for all She just looked at my outstretched hand, and she completely froze as though she thought that it might be a trick and that if she moved to t e on, or phone, I would pull it away.

ds with JULIANA

it I had

e. This

I reached for the cell phone with shaking fingers. I felt the cold against my palm. I just looked down at the phone for a few seconds.

ni's old

"You can call your sister."

y saying

I went to enter Jessica's number; however, the phone needed a pin essio to locked."

ig their

Marco reached across me and typed in his pin number. His fingers b at guilt against mine. It sent a shockwave through me; all my sense heightened.

tail. He

I entered Jess's phone number. I keyed it in automatically, not ha ing the think about the number after having dialed it so many times in the past er deep

ked. He “Remember, she’s to tell no one about the call. And keep it on speak
κ. I nodded as I listened to the ringing tone. But the phone kept ringin
t knowfelt a pit of disappointment in my stomach as I realized that she wasn’t
ned farto pick up.

es. As I went to hang up, Jess’s voice came onto the line. “Hello?”
For a second, I couldn’t say anything, feeling tears stinging the back
eyes. “Jess?” I croaked out. “It’s me. Please don’t tell anyone I’m
l’t wantCan you talk?”

“I can talk. Is that really you, Juliana? God, how are you?”

“I’m fine, but I’ve been so worried about you after you got shot. /
. It wasokay? They told me that you were treated quickly at the church an
ake thetaken to hospital.”

“It’s nearly healed now but I’ve never felt so much pain in my life
said I was lucky that it didn’t hit any major blood vessels.”

“Oh Jess, it’s so good to hear your voice. I’ve really missed you.”

“I can’t believe the Fratellanza took you. Are you okay? Did they, d
l metal force you?”

I looked at Marco. “It wasn’t like that. I’m okay. I’m trying to m
best of things. I want to hear about you and what you have been up t
are Jake and Mother?” I said, trying to change the subject away from n
n. “It’s

“Father and Mother have been keeping me busy. I’m getting marri
orushed few weeks’ time.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “What do you mean? To whom?”

“They’re marrying me to Rafael Santino. We’ll be married next r
s were Rafael was Gabriel Santino’s younger brother.

ving to “But it’s only been a few weeks since I was supposed to get married

“I’m eighteen now and therefore Father says I’m old enough to be r

ker.” off. In the two months you’ve been gone, the Società has been in an
g and I after your kidnapping. Emanuel Santino and Father thought a union b
t going our families would send a signal of strength.”

“What’s Rafael like?” I had never really spoken to Rafael Santino.

Jess gave a hollow laugh. “Well, he’s a Santino. They’re all rut
κ of my doubt he’ll show me any mercy.”

calling. “He might be good to you, Jess. At least you will still be near Mot
Jake.” After a pause I said, “I wish I could be near you too. Jess, I m
so much. You and Jake are always in my thoughts.”

Are you There was silence on the other end of the phone and then I heard a
nd then from Jess. “Jess, don’t cry. I’m okay, really. And you will be too, I kn
wish I could be there on your wedding day.”

e. They “I wish that too.” Jess didn’t say anything else to me and there was
I could hear her crying down the phone, but it didn’t seem as though
only about what had happened to me.

id he... As the older of the two of us, I had always been able to reassure Je
was more sensitive than me and I had looked out for her. “Jess, is sor
ake the else wrong?” When Jess didn’t reply I knew there was somethin
o. How “Jess?”

ne. “You can’t help me. Nobody can. What’s done is done.”

ied in a “Jess, if you really don’t want to marry Rafael, perhaps there is a v
of it.”

I hear a humorless laugh from her. “As if Father or Emanuel
month.” would let me off the hook. Anyway, the engagement contract ha
signed, so it’s all settled and there’s no way out for me.”

l.” Marco was signaling to me to wind up the call. I knew he had worl
married but I wished I could talk to Jessica for longer. “I’m sorry but I hav

uproar now. I'll try to call again soon, Jess. Take care of yourself."

between "Happy Birthday, Juliana."

"I love you, Jess."

"I love you too, Juliana."

hless. I Then I heard the phone disconnect. I sat looking at the screen with
tears rolling down my cheeks. After a few moments, I felt Marco wiping them
away with his thumbs. "Hey, she sounded fine."

miss you "She didn't sound happy."

"I bet you didn't sound happy after signing the contract to marry me."
I sniffle "Yes, but I know her. It seemed as though there was something
troubling her."

"Don't worry. She's got all your family around to protect her."
silence. I shouldn't have felt grateful to Marco for letting me call my sister,
but it was grateful. He was a Made Man and his life was all about cruelty.

For me to talk to my sister was a show of kindness from him, a sign that he
really cared for me.

Nothing I knew that lately I had been letting my guard down around him. When
I thought about him, I no longer denied the attraction I felt toward him.

He was good looking and had an impressive body; however, beyond his physical
appearance, there was something else about him which was drawing me
in. His possessiveness toward me had frightened me previously.

It exhilarated me, sending an electric shock through me when I thought about
Santino. I knew he would always be cruel and a killer and nothing would
change that. Lately, though, he was different toward me, and I was starting to
enjoy not only his touch but also his company.

What to do,

How to go

MARCO

Later I cooked a special dinner to mark Juliana's birthday. And Deb
her a chocolate cake.

We all sang happy birthday to Juliana, and she paused while she
wish before blowing out the candles. I wondered what she had wish
She seemed in good spirits albeit a little unsettled, no doubt due to
with her sister earlier. But letting her talk to Jessica had been the right
to do.

Juliana was right when she said she had been trying to adjust to life
life in Chicago. I couldn't keep her a prisoner forever. She was my wife
and I wanted her to be a proper part of this family.

Not that it meant that I'd be giving her a cell phone of her own any
soon. The Fratellanza and Società were enemies now and I had to be
about any communication between the sisters.

That night in bed, I told Juliana that perhaps she might want to talk
for her birthday present. My cock reacted every time she was near
emotionally we were getting closer too.

After we had both come, we lay in bed with her in my embrace. I
felt closer to Juliana after sex. All the other shit that had happened
come between us when she was in my arms like this.

I knew that for now at least, she was giving herself fully to me.
imagined what it would be like if it could always be like this.

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CHAPTER 30

JULIANA

As I was falling asleep that night, Marco told me that he usually baked the birthday cakes for the family, but that Debi had really wanted to bake a cake for me today.

“It was a great cake—she’s pretty good at baking,” I responded. “Can you bake cakes too?”

“Yeah, after our mom died, I took over the job of making the birthday cakes. It had always been her job until our father killed her.”

Suddenly the sleepiness I had felt was banished from my mind. I turned to Marco. “Your father killed her?” His face showed that he meant to tell me that.

After a pause, he replied. “Yes. He shot her in the head.”

“But I thought...that...”

“That I’d killed my mom? I know that’s what the rumor mill said.”

“That’s what everyone said. That you killed both your parents and took over power of the Fratellanza. But why did your father kill your mother? She had more than done her wifely duty by him even by Mafia standards. She’d produced five children for him, including four boys as potential heirs.”

“He killed her to make a point to Alessio and me.”

“What?” My scalp prickled. “Why would he do that?”

Marco was silent for a while. Then he started to speak. “I was eleven years old and Alessio had just turned seventeen. We had been initiated into the Fratellanza a few years earlier. Our father thought we were still children. Marco paused then.

“I don’t understand.”

Marco sighed. “He sent Alessio to kill one of his soldiers who had been skimming money off the profits and keeping it for himself. I went to see him well. Alessio roughed him up pretty bad and thought that would be enough to teach him a lesson and stop him from doing it again.”

“So, he didn’t kill the soldier and your father was mad?”

“Mad is an understatement. He was livid that Alessio had disobeyed him. So, you know He said Alessio was weak, and he decided to teach him a lesson to make him toughen up. Then he shot Alessio’s dog.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face. “Oh my God,” I whispered.

“The dog was called Comet. Alessio was as close to Comet as he is to me. Our father thought loving a dog, or any sort of pet, was a sign of weakness. He hadn’t killed Comet in front of us.”

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

“I remember crying out when the bullet hit Comet. But Alessio wouldn’t give our father the satisfaction and he didn’t show any emotion. But”

Comet wasn't enough for our father—he wanted Alessio to admit that and then too emotional and too attached.”

“I still don't understand what this has to do with your mom?” I blurted out—bewilderment. I didn't understand what had happened to her, but my gut sense told me that it was really bad.

Marco was silent again as if he were lost in his memories, before continuing.

“Our mom had been scared of our father. As we became older and realized that, Alessio and I tried to look out for her and protect her. I was nine years old when Camillo was born; even at that young age I could sense the tension at home.”

I stayed quiet, just listening as he dug through his memories.

“Alessio and I used to help my mom with Camillo, feeding him and playing with him. She always seemed so tired and rundown. I was nine years old when Danio was born and I had just been initiated, but I still tried to help my mom as much as I could, changing diapers and just doing whatever I could.”

Marco paused, then gave a small smile. “Then Debi was born a year later.”

My mom was thrilled to have a girl at last, one child that wouldn't have been initiated into the Fratellanza. Man, she was so cute. So was Danio—like him, the greatest chuckle and was always laughing. Camillo was a holy terror, always up to mischief, and that's never changed.”

I found it hard to imagine Marco changing diapers, but when he talked to me about his siblings, I could clearly see the love in his eyes. “Our father couldn't stand that we helped our mom with the babies. He said we were mommy's boys and we needed to toughen up. He didn't see that we were being tough in standing up to him.”

“When he didn't get a reaction out of Alessio after killing his dog, he got even more furious. He wanted to see that his punishment had an effect.”

he was dragged our mother into the room and shot her in front of us, point b
the front of her head. He thought that we were too attached to her as w
said insaid that any sort of love was not an option for a Marchiano and that
y sixthto hold ourselves apart to be strong.”

I felt tears running down my cheeks. I couldn't imagine what Ales
arryingMarco must have gone through that day.

“When he shot our mom, neither me nor Alessio could hold back. V
realizedhim to a pulp until there wasn't an ounce of life left in him.”

e when “I can't believe...any father would do that.”

ome.” “He said that we had disobeyed him, our Capo, and that we had n
our duty to the Fratellanza. Obedience and duty are everything in our
im andBut he took it too far. He was deranged and unhinged, and we were gla
twelverid of him. But becoming Capo meant nothing to me after what happ
elp mymy mom.”

ould.” “To do that to his wife, to the mother of his children. And to do it
ar later.of his children, that's utterly horrific.”

ve to be “It was my fault. I should have killed the traitor myself when
-he haddidn't finish the job properly. I was the oldest and I was the future C
error—was my responsibility, and I didn't do what I should have done—wha
have stopped our mom from paying with her life. It's my fault that C
e spokeDanio and Debi had to grow up without their mom.”

father “You were barely an adult. How can you say that any of it was you
ve wereYou can't blame yourself for your father's sins, and your siblings
ve were never blame you either.”

“That's why I have to protect them now. They are my responsil
, he gotwould lay down my life for them.”

ect. He Marco didn't say any more after that and said he wanted to sleep.

blank in ours was a cruel world and nothing either of us said could change that. We lay in each other's arms, silent with our thoughts, until we eventually fell asleep.

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CHAPTER 31

JULIANA

A few days passed, and since I had been able to phone Jess birthday, there had been less tension between Marco and me.

Sometimes I even managed to forget that he'd forced me to c Chicago against my will. I looked forward to spending time with hir he wasn't working, and I willingly shared his bed. I didn't know w changed between us, but there had been a shift at some point.

I felt electrified whenever his gaze fell on me. Even when he er room, I would feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up before saw or heard him.

He was having such a profound effect on me, but I couldn't und why this was happening between us.

I was in the kitchen when Marco walked in. “Mr. Fluffy seem settled now. He hasn’t peed on the floor today,” I commented to him.

Marco eyeballed my pet. “The day is yet young,” he muttered and obviously wasn’t convinced that Mr. Fluffy was house-trained.

And as if to prove him right, that afternoon I found one of Mr. Fluffy’s accidents on the floor. As I was cleaning it up Marco and Camillo came in.

“If that dog stays, I’m gonna need bail money,” muttered Camillo.

“Excuse me?” I asked in confusion.

“I said, if that dog stays, I’ll need bail money—because I’m gonna killing someone.”

“If you say so,” I replied, rolling my eyes.

“Why does the dog even do that?” complained Camillo. Although he looked like a thug with his thick neck, huge arms and endless tattoos, I had seen a much softer side to him when he was with his siblings. I was beginning to think that he was less scary than I originally thought.

Marco was glaring at the puddle. I’m not sure why he was so annoyed. I wasn’t asking him to clean it up.

“He’s marking his territory. Just as all you alpha males like to—when you are having your pissing contests to see who can be the Made Man.”

Marco stood watching me with one eyebrow raised while Camillo stared at me and stomped off.

I even

erstand

s more That evening I was lying in bed while Marco showered.

I felt myself softening when I thought about my life here in Chicago. HeMarco. And I was definitely attracted to him—he could ignite my desire with a single look or with the whisper of a touch.

Fluffy's I loved the feel of his toned muscles under my hands. Before, his size had scared me; now, it made me feel protected somehow. I felt myself reaching out to him more and more.

But then I would worry about my family, and particularly Jessica, and eventually guilt and resentment would come bubbling back up to the surface. I felt disloyal to my family for entertaining any feelings for this man, for letting him kiss me, and for letting him touch me.

ugh he I wondered what things would have been like if we had gotten married as I had originally planned and there'd been no shootout or bloody wedding?

I was When Marco got into bed, I decided to talk to him about Jessica.

“Marco...I'm worried about Jess. She really didn't seem like her usual self today. I could tell during the call that she was really anxious and stressed.”

“It'll be wedding nerves. Most brides must feel the same before the big day, I know, wedding day.”

biggest “Yes, but it seemed more than that. If it was just wedding nerves, she would have said and talked to me about it.”

cowled “Maybe she didn't want to talk about it because she knew that I was listening to the call. Your parents are probably stressed about her wedding after the shit-show that was yours, and they are probably projecting that stress onto Jessica.”

I still wasn't convinced. I knew Jess too well. “Do you think that she'll call her again? Without you listening in? She might be more willing to talk to me if you weren't there.”

“That’s not going to happen. I don’t want you hatching another go withplan.”

ire with “I won’t try to escape again, I promise.”

“No.”

strength “Please. Maybe—”

myself “No. And that’s the end of the matter.”

I knew that I wasn’t going to get any further with Marco tonight.

and that I still believed that Jess’s worries weren’t just down to wedding rface. Iand I couldn’t stop myself from worrying. And I couldn’t help thinki an, for Jess would talk to me if it was just me and her.

ried as JULIANA

It was Saturday morning and Marco, Alessio and Camillo were out rself. I to business matters. Danio was at a friend’s house, while Debi was a re their with me.

Palmina, one of the maids, had come in this morning to do some cl es, she Palmina was the daughter of a Fratellanza soldier. Outsiders weren’t in our homes. On my way downstairs I saw her in Debi’s bedroom, c up and talking to Debi at the same time.

When I got down to the kitchen, I saw Debi’s cell phone sitting t I was kitchen counter. Knowing no one was home, I quickly picked it up an edding at stress the screen.

I could It was pin-protected. Damn it.

I slammed the phone back onto the counter, frustrated beyond belief o talk to

escape I looked back down at Debi's phone and then scanned the living area if there were any other cell phones lying around that I could try. But up empty—Marco must have instructed everyone to keep their phones from me and to have them pin-protected. Damn him!

What about Palmina's phone? It would be in her car because it wasn't permitted to bring phones into the mansion. If I could go to Palmina's car to get her phone, hopefully it wouldn't be pin-protected, I could call Jess from it.

I saw Palmina's car keys on the kitchen counter—together with a Chicago Bulls hoodie that she always wore to work and her sunglasses.

What if I borrowed Palmina's car and drove back to L.A. to see Jess? As the idea hit me, a surge of adrenaline raced through my limbs.

Either I could hope that Marco would eventually permit me to talk to him again, or I could take a stand against his cruel games.

His refusal to allow this one small phone call made things crystal clear to me. Marco didn't see me as a real person with feelings, worries, and dreams.

This one man had turned my world upside down and endangered everything I loved the most. He had directed his men to shoot Jess, he'd hurt Janessa, he'd ordered Cornelio's death. I had been kidnapped by him and forced to come to Chicago, and since then, I'd been held here against my will.

Marco was a monster in every sense of the word.

I couldn't betray my family by thinking of him in any other way. I could never trust this man who had stolen me away from my life.

To him, I was a piece of property, his possession to flaunt in front of the Società as a symbol of his revenge.

I made a plan quickly in my mind. Palmina and Debi were up in their bedroom. All the bedrooms had locks—as I well knew after my capture.

a to see Marco's bedroom when I first arrived in Chicago. Without giving I came time to think and change my mind, I went upstairs and casually joined away Palmina and Debi's conversation.

While we were talking, I snuck the key from the inside of Debi's bedroom staff door into my pocket.

Out to I left the bedroom and quickly shut the door and turned the key face and I outside.

"Juliana? What are you doing?" asked Debi in a confused voice. the red "I'm really sorry but I have to leave. I'm sure someone will be home. I'm really sorry."

? And then I turned on my heel and rushed down the stairs. I could hear and Palmina calling from the room upstairs. "Juliana! Juliana!"

to Jess I told myself that I had to ignore them, or my guilt would make me second thoughts.

clear to I put my hair up in a ponytail similar to how Palmina normally had her hair. I needed both had dark hair, although hers was slightly curly. I added her sunglasses and zipped up her red Chicago Bulls hoodie around me.

ke, and I looked in the mirror at the front door and hoped that the guards would not look too closely when I tried to drive through the gates.

I grabbed some money from the jar in the kitchen cupboard where the cash was kept. Luckily it was well-stocked with one-hundred-dollar notes, and I picked up the car keys and I was about to rush out the door when I thought about Mr. F. I shook some dry food into his dog bowl and filled up his water bowl. I gave him a pat on the head and told him to be good.

I quickly made my way outside and used Palmina's car keys to get into Debi's car. Without stopping to think about it any further, I started the car and drove toward the perimeter gates.

myself I held my breath as I neared the gates. My heart was in my mouth.
ined in The guards opened the gates and waved me through. Luck must have
on my side for once. I wanted to hit the accelerator as soon as I was out
edroomgates, but I knew that I couldn't act suspiciously.

Once I was a good distance away from the Marchiano estate, I pulled
om theand checked Palmina's cell phone. It was pin protected, damn. I knew
might try to track her phone, so I removed the sim card and ditched
and the phone in a trash can.

ie soon.

MARCO

ar Debi

She had promised me. She had promised me that she would not try
ie have again.

She had betrayed me and betrayed my trust. Even worse, she had b
l it. We Debi.

My blood was coursing through my veins, making it difficult for
iglasses think straight.

When I arrived home, Alessio had already gotten there before me a
ouldn't trying to trace Juliana. "We're trying to track Palmina's phone. It was
I knew car. It might give us Juliana's location."

I looked across at Debi who was red-eyed and looked shaken
tes. when I shortcake, are you okay?" I asked, taking Debi into my arms and giving
illed up hug.

"Yes," sniffed Debi. "I don't understand why Juliana did this."

t inside "Neither do I. But don't worry, I'm going to get her back."
engine

At that moment Mr. F decided to pee on the floor. “For God’s sake, someone take that dog into the garden.”

Danio was also back now. “I’ll take him out. Come on, Debi, I’ll cheer you up if you come outside and play with Mr. Fluffy.”

Alessio looked up from his laptop. “I’ve tracked Palmina’s phone to the station near the interstate. She must be heading for L.A. That would be an obvious destination.”

“Call the airfield and tell them to get the jet ready. Get some of our people together and be ready to leave in ten minutes,” I ordered Alessio. “Can you stay here with the kids and let us know if you find out anything else?”

Alessio and I drove to the private airfield. Fury had taken over my car. She has a head-start on us of over six hours.

She might have gotten away, but we could easily cut her off before she reached her family in L.A. It would take almost thirty hours for her to get there, but we could travel that distance in a fraction of the time in our jet.

When we arrived at the airfield, we drove our SUV straight up to the hangar which was being refueled. I hurried onto the jet while Alessio stood on the tarmac talking to the pilot.

Alessio came on board. “You’re not going to like this, Marco.”

“Spit it out,” I barked.

“The pilot says we can’t take off because fog is starting to shroud the runway.”

“Fuck it!” I slammed my fist onto the table in front of me. “How long will it clear?”

“They’re not sure yet.”

“Tell the fucking pilot to look at the fucking forecast. I want an answer in two minutes!” I roared.

I got up and started pacing up and down the aisle until Alessio came

s sake, "The fog is going to be bad. It isn't forecast to lift until tomorrow evening at the earliest."

t might Fuck! Juliana already had over six hours head-start on us, plus the fog would take another four hours. If we couldn't take off until tomorrow morning, then we might not make it in time to cut her off.

be her I looked at Alessio. "We're driving to L.A." We had to try to catch up to Juliana. "Come on!" I shouted over my shoulder, running back down the road in the SUV.

lamillo, As I got back into our car, only one thought was in my mind: what if she caught Juliana, she would be sorry that she ever lied to me.

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“The fog is going to be bad. It isn’t forecast to lift until tomorrow evening at the earliest.”

Fuck! Juliana already had over six hours head-start on us, plus the flight would take another four hours. If we couldn’t take off until tomorrow evening, then we might not make it in time to cut her off.

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As I got back into our car, only one thought was in my mind: when we caught Juliana, she would be sorry that she ever lied to me.

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CHAPTER 32

JULIANA

I drove solidly for the thirty hours it took to get to L.A.

I stopped only for gas, food, and coffee along the way, plus twice a half-hour break to take a quick nap.

I knew that Marco would try to find me. It was a race against time. I ate food as I drove and the coffee had triple-shots of caffeine, providing me with sustenance for the grueling journey.

Worries kept niggling at me, but I had come this far, and I couldn't turn back now.

MARCO

As Alessio drove our SUV, I sat next to him in the passenger seat, emotions rolling off me in waves.

“Even if we don’t manage to cut her off before she reaches her car, we’ll still find a way to get her back,” said Alessio in a grim voice.

I wished I could believe that. If she made it into the Società’s hands, I knew they would never let her go.

Her running away and her rejection of me was like a red-hot blade piercing my heart. Especially because I’d thought that she’d begun to accept our relationship and life together. I’d even thought that she’d started to open her feelings for me.

It had bothered me when I saw that she was upset about her sister, but the thought of losing her was even worse—it was unbearable.

JULIANA

I took a taxi. It was dark when I reached L.A. the following evening. The last day of the trip had seemed like a week; I was utterly exhausted.

I headed straight for my father’s mansion. The adrenaline pumping through my body kept me alert. I had to talk to Jessica.

I parked a short distance away and left Palmina’s car there. I walked the edge of the mansion’s grounds, keeping to the shadows.

I knew that my father had soldiers patrolling the perimeter. I watched them on their regular patrol route and when I judged it safe, I quickly headed to the side gate.

I didn’t have a keycard, but I could try entering the code via the keypad. I held my breath as I typed in the security code and thanked the lord.

at, dark that the code hadn't been changed as the gate opened, allowing me to s

Once I was in the grounds, I kept myself pressed up as close to the family, as possible so that it would shadow me from view. My heart was beating fast that I was sure it would give me away. I tried to steady my breathing, but nothing would calm my nerves.

I moved around the house until I got just underneath Jess's beautiful piercing window. I had picked up a few small pieces of gravel from the driveway and I aimed a piece at a time at Jess's window. The first two pieces missed, I developed not being helped by my shaking hands.

I told myself to calm down and wiped my hands against the sides of my jeans. Then I tried again and this time the gravel hit its target. I waited until no one came to the window. Damn.

I threw three more pieces of gravel against the window and a minute later I saw Jess's drapes twitch.

I stepped out from the shadows finally so that Jess could see me under the moonlight. I saw surprise and confusion break out across her face and I held up my finger to my lips, warning her to be quiet. She quickly went to open the window.

"Juliana, what are you doing here?" she said in a loud whisper.

"Father know that you're here?"

"No. No one can know but you. Come down to the garden. I'll meet you by the big oak tree and I'll explain everything. Bring Jake with you."

I made my way to what we had always called 'the big oak tree'. It was still there but now that we were grown up, it didn't seem nearly as enormous as it had when we were small children. In that way it had lost a little of its magic, then I guess the same thing happened in life when you grew up and faced the realities of the world.

slip in. The tree had a circular bench that wrapped around the trunk. It was
the house and Jessica's favorite place to go when we had wanted to get away
from Mother and Father.

ing, but The night air was chilly, but I hardly felt it as I waited for Jessica. I
wanted to talk to Jessica alone to try and get out of her what was troubling her.
In the bedroom I got to the bottom of the issue, I would speak to Jake as well—
anyway and needed to see him, to check how he was and to apologize for what
my aim gone through at the hands of Marco.

A couple of minutes later Jessica appeared, having put a robe on
and a pair of my sneakers. As soon as she saw me, she flew into my arms and started
singing to me. I but no “I'm so glad to see you, Juliana! What are you doing here?”

“I had to come and see you, Jess.”

Later I “Are you okay, Juliana? What did they do to you? I thought I would
never see you again.”

She said in the “I'm okay—I'm just so glad to see you. Where's Jake?”

and I put “He's away for a few days in Canada talking to our suppliers.” The
company had various drug import routes, including one through the Canadian border.

“Damn, I really needed to see him too.”

“Does “Are you really okay, Juliana?”

I pulled back and searched Jessica's eyes. “Yes. It's you that I'm
worried about. What's going on, Jess?”

She averted her gaze. “There's nothing wrong.”

It was big, “Jess, I know you too well.” My voice was gentle. “Please let me help
you. It's had “It's just wedding nerves. You know how it is—you were nervous
before, but your wedding day.”

I learned “Is it really just nerves about the wedding? I know it's something
more than that. Please tell me. Please let me help you, Jess.”

as mine “There’s nothing else, Juliana. It’s been a lot lately. First getting shy from losing you, and there’s been so much tension at home since your kidnapping.

Then the engagement suddenly happening and before I knew it, I was needed the engagement contract.”

r. Once “You know you can still talk to me even though I’m a Marchian I really don’t you?”

he had “I can’t believe the wedding eventually went ahead. Father was when he found out that Marco Marchiano made you his wife after all and she was trying to change the subject, but she wasn’t fooling me.

bbing. “How’s Jake?” I asked, guilt washing over me as I thought about how he suffered at Marco’s hands following the failed rescue attempt.

“He doesn’t blame you, Juliana. He’s healing and has already gotten himself back into work. It’s not your fault those savages beat and brutalized him.”

“But it is my fault,” I cried. “Everything is my fault. You are having to marry Rafael to strengthen the Società after my kidnapping, and Jacob is hurt trying to rescue me. You’re my siblings. I would do anything to protect you both. I never wanted any of this to happen...” My voice trailed off as we hugged each other again, both in tears by now.

worried I knew that Jess was holding back and not telling me something important about to press her again for details and urge her to confide in me, when a figure stepped out of the shadows, startling me.

lp.” “What the hell is the meaning of this?”

before My head whipped round at the sound of the voice. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck.

g more “Father.” My voice shook as I addressed him.

“Jessica—go upstairs,” he ordered.

ot, then Jessica suddenly looked uneasy.

apping. “I love you, Jess,” I said, quickly giving her one last hug. “Tell Ja
signingsorry for what he went through when he came to rescue me. I never
him to get hurt.”

io now, “I’ll tell him.”

“Jessica, get upstairs now or I’ll drag you up there myself!” bellow
furiousfather.

l.” Jess I reluctantly let her go and watched her walk away with one last lo
her shoulder at me. I slowly turned my gaze toward my father.

how he “What are you doing here?” my father snarled at me.

“I had to speak to Jess and Jake...”

thrown “Jessica and Jacob are nothing to do with you anymore. You’re no
loodiedpart of this family. You are dead to us.”

“I had to make sure that they were alright—”

ving to “Alright? Have you lost your mind?” He thundered. “You behave
ke wasslut, opening your legs for the enemy and marrying him, and then yo
protectshow your face here?” The news of my marriage to Marco in Chica
off, andobviously not been received well within the Società.

“But, Father, he took me—I didn’t have a choice that day.”

. I was “And it took you all of twenty-four hours before you were in his b
when asaid in disgust.

“It wasn’t like that, Father. You were the one who made me s
engagement contract. There was no way out for me after that—you
l up onthat.” My voice was pleading with my father, imploring him to underst

“That contract was just a sham to get as many of the Marchianos a
men in L.A. so that we could take them out,” he snapped.

My blood ran cold. Marco had been right: my father and the Soci

planned this all along, and Jess and I had just been collateral damage. I'd been made to sign an irrevocable contract and then got kidnapped, and I'd wanted had been shot by the first bullet that had been shot by the Società.

God.

"Father, how could you have let Jessica get shot?" My voice was hoarse and I was shocked.

"She's just a girl. What does it matter if she got hurt? The important thing was to get rid of the Marchianos. It was the best chance we've had in a long time, but it all got messed up by your stupid sister getting in the way of the plan. I shakily got to my feet. "I should leave now."

"What do you mean? You're here now and you won't be going anywhere long ever again," he spat.

"But, Father, I'm married to Marco." My voice rose in horror. Surely he couldn't be meaning that he wanted me to stay in L.A. now? "As if I don't know that already. It's all anyone in the Società is talking about. Did you think we wouldn't learn of your betrayal? News like that goes like a wildfire. You're a whore and a traitor—and you'll be punished accordingly."

He grabbed my arm and marched me back toward the mansion. "What are you doing?" I stammered.

"You'll be locked in your room until we decide your punishment. If you sign, they'll be taken to the stables."

"The stables?" My voice shook. The mansion's former stables were now my father's torture rooms. "Please, Father," I pleaded. "Just let me go and they'll never come back to L.A. again, I swear!"

My feet stumbled as terror made my movements clumsy. If my father hadn't been holding onto me, I was sure that I would have fallen.

age. I'd ground.

nd Jess "You've made a laughing-stock of me. My men will think that I am
Oh my because I can't even control my own daughter. You have jeopardized
position in the Società," he hissed.

full of He dragged me up the stairs toward my bedroom. I tried to pull out
hold, but it was no good. "Why are you doing this?" I cried.

at thing "You made your bed and now you'll lie in it," he yelled at me.

1 years, He shoved me into the room, and he slammed the door shut. I heard
bullet." key turn.

After a few seconds I tried the door. It was locked, just as I knew it
ywhere be.

I looked around myself at my childhood bedroom before slumping
rely, he onto the bed and letting my tears overwhelm me.

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ground.

“You’ve made a laughing-stock of me. My men will think that I am weak because I can’t even control my own daughter. You have jeopardized my position in the Società,” he hissed.

He dragged me up the stairs toward my bedroom. I tried to pull out of his hold, but it was no good. “Why are you doing this?” I cried.

“You made your bed and now you’ll lie in it,” he yelled at me.

He shoved me into the room, and he slammed the door shut. I heard the key turn.

After a few seconds I tried the door. It was locked, just as I knew it would be.

I looked around myself at my childhood bedroom before slumping down onto the bed and letting my tears overwhelm me.

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CHAPTER 33

JULIANA

A couple of hours later, I heard the key turn, and my mother entered the room.

“Mother!” I cried, hurriedly getting to my feet to run into her arms. When I saw the look of disgust on her face.

“Juliana, what is the meaning of this? A soldier woke me and you came up to tell us they had detected an intruder and that it was you.”

“Mother, I was worried about Jess and needed to see how she was doing. I wanted to see Jake too.” My words tumbled out all at once.

I looked at my mother’s appearance. She had dressed in a purple sequined skirt and jacket, with a bright red blouse and red six-inch heels. She had put on a full face of make-up and a cloud of perfume wafted around her.

“W-why are you dressed like that?” A surrealness was smothering my senses.

“Your return is significant. Your father may have to call over Elio Santino to discuss your punishment. I need to be dressed appropriately for visitors.”

What mother would be concerned more with dressing up to the nines than rushing to greet her kidnapped daughter?

I took a tentative step toward her, but the look she gave me halted my approach. She was repulsed by me. She, too, thought that I was a disgrace. “Mother, what’s going to happen to me now?” I asked in a shaky whisper.

“That’s up to your father. I’ve washed my hands of you. Honestly, I have no consideration for what you’ve put me or your father through.”

“But Father said it was the Società’s plan all along to target me and Marco through a sham wedding. It was you and Father who wanted to marry Marco...”

“Your father says you weren’t supposed to run off with him. How could you, Juliana? And that photograph he sent!”

I froze. “I didn’t run off with him! You saw it yourself—he dragged me away from the wedding!”

“I can’t talk about this any longer. I always had such high hopes for you, Juliana, but you’ve thrown it all away.” My mother huffed dramatically and she swept out of my room.

I watched her in disbelief. I’d thought that at least my mother would talk to me and talk some sense into my father.

I had always made excuses to myself for my parents’ behavior when I was growing up. I’d thought that my father was cold because of the face he had to hold up for the Società, while my mother was unable to show affection toward her children because others might judge such displays of affection.

ing my weakness. I had always believed, nevertheless, that my parents loved and cared about me in their own way.

Today I could no longer deny the reality: that my father cared only for power, and my mother cared only about appearances.

That night I fell into an uneasy sleep, where I was chased by my nightmares and could find no safety.

ted my

whore.

per.

ly, you When I woke the next morning, I was still exhausted.

As it became light, I got up and went to wash my hands and face in the adjoining bathroom. I returned to the bedroom and sat on the bed, trying to quell my panic.

God, I'd been so stupid.

Marco had told me all along that my family and the Società were the shooting. After what my father told me, I knew Marco had been right—my father had known about the church shootout plan, and he had deliberately endangered our family in the Società's fucked up scheme to gain power.

Why hadn't I believed Marco? And why had I ever thought it was a good idea to come back to L.A.? I couldn't stop these thoughts from going through my head, rubbing at my temples as they throbbed with exhaustion, upon which I was in fear.

A few hours later, I could see by my bedside clock that it was lunchtime, but I hadn't even been given breakfast yet. Maybe they would starve me to death as

ved me part of my punishment?

I hadn't heard any activity outside my door at all since my mother
y about With the impossibility of breaking out of this place, my father ob
didn't need to put a guard outside my room.

en with

Later, I heard footsteps. Terror ran riot through my body.

I heard the lock turn. The door slowly creaked open.

A soldier stood with a tray of food. I recognized him as one of my
e in my men and was about to plead to him for help. Then I was struck by the
ying toutter coldness he gave me.

He thought I was a whore—just like my father and the rest of the S

There was disgust in his stare, and I felt myself wilting under his gaze
behind reduced down to someone who was unworthy of the Società an
ght: my protection.

erately He shoved the tray toward me, and I took it with trembling har
n more retreated and banged the door shut, the sound reverberating through m

bone. I listened as the lock clicked into place and his footsteps receded
a good I sat on the bed with the tray. It held a sandwich and a bottle of v
around was ravenous and eagerly ate the food.

set, and

MARCO

chtime,

e me as

We hadn't been able to get to Juliana. Our sources told us that her visit reached her family and the protection of the Società. My muscles were taut as the rage churned through my body.

We were holed up in a safe house just outside L.A.'s city center. We were playing with fire just being here, but I wasn't going to give up without a fight.

I looked across at Alessio. We were trying to draw up a plan to get back, but the Bonardi mansion's perimeter was near-impossible to get through. Fuck, fuck, fuck!

father's JULIANA
look of

In the late evening, I pricked up my ears as I heard a sound outside the Società's door.

I jumped to my feet—I hadn't heard anyone approaching this time.

As I heard the door's lock turn, I retreated to the furthest wall from the door, as if that could somehow save me from what was about to happen.

"Juliana?" I heard a hesitant whisper.

Oh my God, it was Jess! I ran up to the door and hurled myself into her arms. "Jess, what are you doing here?" I said in a hoarse whisper.

"I had to come," she said as she quietly shut the door behind her.

"Jess, it's not safe. Father will punish you as well if he finds out you're here to see me."

"I couldn't just leave you here." She slid something into my hand. I looked down at a keycard and some cash. "The code on the gates has been changed. This keycard will unlock them."

t she'd "Where did you get this?" I asked in confusion.

re tense "I took it from Father's office. He left his suit jacket hanging on the
of his chair and it was in the pocket."

le were "Father will kill you when he realizes you helped me."

Juliana "He won't know it was me. There are no cameras in here. He'll think
you picked the lock somehow and that you found a keycard in the house
get hersoldier dropped one or something like that. It doesn't matter what he thought
past. you just need to get out of here. I heard Father talking on his cell phone
don't know what they're going to do to you, but he said you need to be
punished and made an example of. He said they should kill you!"

My panic was rising again.

I gave my sister one last hug with tears in my eyes. "I don't know whether
be able to see you again, Jess. Please take care of yourself. I'll try to come
ide my again."

As Jess went back to her bedroom, I hurried downstairs, letting my
of the back door. I crept through the back gardens, knowing that the side
om the would be my best bet for slipping away undetected.
n.

My heart was thumping as I held the keycard to the fob at the side
flinched as the electronic bleep sounded loudly.
nto her

As soon as the gate opened, I rushed through it and then ran off into the
shadows.

I needed to get as far as possible from the mansion before they noticed
u came was missing—I knew without a doubt that my father would send out the
available man to search for me once my escape was discovered.

It was a I was wearing only my jeans and a t-shirt. It was getting chilly
d. This headed toward the main road and was half walking, half running,
heard a car coming up behind me.

I darted nearer the wall of the property I was passing, hoping its distance back would obscure me.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that the approaching car was old and red and nothing like what a Made Man would drive. In that split second I sank that into the road in front of it and flagged it down.

An elderly man was driving. "Miss, you scared me there!" he exclaimed—after rolling down his window.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I was walking home and I was robbed. The man tried to take my purse and coat." It wasn't hard for me to look scared and shaken.

"Could you give me a lift to the main road, and I'll catch a cab home there. I don't feel safe walking around these quiet streets."

"I'll call the police for you," he said, reaching for his cell phone.

"Please, no, I just need to get away from here. Once I'm back home

I'll call the police. I'm afraid the man will come back. I've got some cash in my pocket—he didn't check that when he took my purse, so I have a few dollars to get home."

"There are some very dubious people living in this neighborhood," I commented, no doubt referring to the rumors that had always circulated about my family being in the Mob.

I wished he would hurry up and give me a lift—standing on the street, this was making my heart gallop in fear that one of my father's men might notice I drive past and see me. "I know, sir. I was visiting a friend here and I was walking home when it happened."

"Get in, miss. I'll gladly take you to the main road. I could even drop you home or to the police station?"

"No, please, I couldn't inconvenience you like that." I couldn't let myself get himself in any more danger. If my father caught me now, he would

shadowman too.

As soon as we got to the main road, after thanking the man for the , brightassuring him I would be alright, I flagged down a cab and asked it to t d, I randowntown. It was busy there and I would be harder to find.

Once I was there, I would find a phone. I'd ring Marco, tell him v claimedwas, and ask him to get me—if, that was, Marco was still talking to me

When we reached the busy downtown, I sank down in my seat ook mypassed Matrix, a nightclub owned by the Società—one of thei “Pleasebusinesses that they laundered their dirty money through. I only sat u ie fromwhen we had safely passed it. I had come this far, and I wasn't going any unnecessary chances.

A couple of minutes later, the cab driver pulled over. After I paid ie, then got out of the cab and looked around for a payphone. I spotted one a cash inabout to head to it when I changed my mind.

enough I turned around and retraced the route the cab had driven. I headed Matrix.

od,” he It was Thursday night, and I knew that some of the guys held a d aboutpoker night in Matrix's back office on Thursdays.

I had to see Gabriel Santino.

reet like I was taking a chance. I knew he attended the poker night on occ: 1 mightJake had mentioned it once—but there was no certainty that he would nd justtonight.

I didn't even know what I was planning to do if I saw him, but I had rop you Reaching the club, I knew I wasn't dressed appropriately and wou out like a sore thumb. I definitely didn't want anyone from the Società him putme before I got to Gabriel.

kill this I headed around the back of the club toward the car park.

There I found a black convertible which I recognized as belonging to Gabriel. Anticipation started to race in my heart.

He was here, inside the club right now. I knew I had to wait until he came back out. I couldn't risk going inside and being seen by anyone but him. I crouched down behind his car and hid in the darkness, praying he wouldn't see me. If I got caught and handed back to my father, I knew he would punish me even harder after having the audacity to run from him. I wasn't legal that my father wouldn't find out that Jess helped me—I couldn't bear to be hurt any further by my father's cruel actions, not when she had to be shot and injured at my wedding.

The minutes ticked by slowly as I kept looking at my watch. I didn't know what I was going to say to him—how I was going to bring up what I needed to say.

I was freezing cold in my thin t-shirt, and I huddled into myself. I would have walked around to keep myself warm, but I knew I had to stay hidden for now.

weekly

occasion—

After a couple hours of waiting, I felt ice-cold and wondered if this was crazy.

Seeing Gabriel might not even make a difference: he might hate me as much as my parents.

I had seen various people coming and going from Matrix, including a couple of Società men. When I had seen them, I had crouched even lower.

ging to barely dared to breathe, silently pleading to God not to let them see me

My heart leapt into my throat when I finally saw the man I wanted to see. He strode toward his car with his long-legged stride. Even in the darkness, I could sense his commanding presence.

I came out of the shadows. "Gabriel," I said, my voice soft in the night. No one would

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prayed
for her
already

It's not even
what I

wished I
to stay

this was

to me as

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CHAPTER 34

JULIANA

Gabriel Santino. The future Capo of the Società Mafia.

I shivered as his gaze ran over me.

As soon as I'd stepped out from the darkness, he'd drawn his weapon. "Juliana!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? Your father told me you were still at the mansion. I was holding you at his mansion."

"I managed to get away. Gabriel...he was talking about killing me."

A look of anger passed over his face, "I know. I've been trying to get my father to intervene—to make sure that you are protected. But my father has said he won't interfere in a Bonardi family matter." I knew that the Capo probably agreed with my father that I needed to be punished. "How did you come here? You must have known how dangerous it would be for you to be here." "I had to come to see how Jessica is. I'm worried about her."

“You don’t need to be. She’s fine.” Gabriel had scanned our surroundings and had lowered his revolver to his side when he saw that I was alone.

“Does she really have to marry your brother, Rafael?”

“It’s already arranged, and the date has been set. The wedding is due to be held soon.”

“But couldn’t you intervene and stop it somehow?” I pleaded.

His voice became softer. “You know that’s impossible once the contract has been signed, Juliana.”

“But why? It’s just a contract within our own organization. You have a lot of influence now—people will listen to you.”

“Not about that. If one family is allowed to break a contract, especially a family of the Capo or an Underboss, then our rules start to be eroded. I know I can’t allow that.”

“Gabriel—if you have ever cared for me, please will you try to stop this marriage?” I was begging him. “Jessica’s not as tough as me. I don’t think she’ll cope in a family like yours. Please?”

He paused, searching my eyes with his. “First tell me, Juliana, how do you feel about this?”

“I’m...okay.”

“You can talk to me, you know.” He had a look of concern on his face. He took a step nearer to me.

“There’s nothing anyone can do now,” I whispered.

“I meant it when I said I’d be here for you. How are you—really?” He reached out to place his hand on my arm.

“Why didn’t you get to reply?”

A movement caught Gabriel’s eye and he spun around aiming his gun at the door. But he was too late.

findings Out from the shadows stepped another figure.
 Marco Marchiano.

ie to be MARCO

contract We had a mole within the Società who'd notified us forty minutes
 that Juliana had been spotted lurking in the car park of a Società nightc

ve a lot Our mole had been leaving the club when he'd spotted her, but he
 been able to seize her because he'd been with another soldier. That
ally the that other soldier hadn't been as eagle-eyed as our mole.

d. You I had rushed from our L.A. safehouse to the nightclub. I didn't know
 she was doing there, but I would soon find out.

stop the I parked my car near the club and walked around the back to the club
't think My heart thudded when I caught sight of Juliana.

ow are But she wasn't alone—she was with Gabriel Santino. My blood raced
 my veins.

I quietly approached Juliana and Gabriel.

Gabriel spun around, raising his gun.

face as “Drop the weapon, Santino,” I commanded. I already had my gun
 on him.

Gabriel slowly lowered his weapon, his expression remaining blank.

y?” He “Well, what do we have here? It looks like a big, cozy family reunion
 the Società,” I said, my words dripping with sarcasm.

in. I was furious with Juliana. But now I also wondered what Gabriel
 was doing here. Had she planned this with him?

JULIANA

“You don’t have to go back with him, Juliana,” Gabriel said calmly. “More of our soldiers are inside the club and only moments away.”

He was trying to tell me to call for more help, regardless of what an earlier warning would mean for him—and those consequences came swiftly. Marco shot him in the leg. The sound was muffled by the silencer on his rifle. I hadn’t had time to react. I cried out and reached to help Gabriel, but Marco caught my arm with a painful grip and held me back.

Gabriel didn’t cry out for help after Marco shot him. He knew that if he did, that would mean certain death for him, me, or both of us.

I only had to scream out for help to come from the Società men inside the club, but I wouldn’t risk any more lives or any more bloodshed. Not even Marco Marchiano. I didn’t understand how or when it had happened, but I did know that I couldn’t deny my love for him any longer.

“I’ve got no choice, Gabriel. I have to go back.” Before Gabriel could do anything else, Marco struck him with the butt of his revolver and knocked him out.

I screamed but Marco clamped his hand over my mouth and muffled my cry. With his other arm he held me firmly and dragged me away to his car, shoving me into the passenger seat. He took his hand away from my face. “Don’t make a sound, or I swear you’ll regret it.”

He swiftly moved around to the driver’s side and got in. He started the engine and within seconds we were speeding away from the club.

I looked around to see if anyone was following us, but it seemed like I was alone. I felt sick to my stomach and hoped Gabriel was going to be alright. I could hear the engine of the car ahead of us.

bear for anyone else to suffer because of me.

Marco didn't say anything to me while he drove. I bit down on my lip, worrying about Jessica and Gabriel.

"Thank you for coming to get me," I whispered eventually. "My father said he was going to kill me."

"What the fuck, Juliana? How could you go back to your fucking father after everything they've put you through?"

"I didn't think this would happen...I just wanted to see Jess."

"And what exactly did you think would fucking happen? Your father and the Società are psychopaths. They already endangered you in the wedding—it could've easily been you that was shot instead of your father. Your family thought nothing of starting a shootout in a church full of children. Do you really think that they truly care about you?"

"I know now that the Società started the shootout and they're the ones who shot Jess. I came to L.A. because I needed to see my sister. I never believed that my own family would want to hurt me...or would want to kill me, slowly, the horror still fresh in my mind.

"I've been trying to get you back," he said with a slightly softer tone. "I put my life on the line to get you back. We hadn't yet figured out how to get past the security at your father's mansion, and you managed to escape through the back door. I could get to you, but I would have got you out one way or another. There was no way I was going to just leave you there at your father's mercy."

"God, I'd been such an idiot. I should have tried again to persuade Marco to let me contact Jess. Instead, I betrayed his trust.

Maybe he didn't care about me in the same way I had come to care for him, but he did want to protect me in his own way. He'd come to L.A. to get me back—he'd put himself in acute danger, in the midst of enemy territory.

to save me when I'd been stupid enough to go back to L.A. But this
y lower when faced with the choice between the Società or Marco, I had
Marco. There had been no hesitation in my mind: I had chosen love.
7 father Marco had been right about my family, and I should have listened
from the start. I could see from his expression that he was trying hard
family his temper under control, and I knew now that my actions had hurt
me, but also him.

I sank back into my seat. After a while, not knowing what to say, I
her and "Is Mr. F okay?"
t sham "You should be more fucking worried about yourself, instead of w
r sister about that damn dog."

women After a minute's silence, he continued. "Danio and Debi are lookin
him. They've been enjoying it no doubt, although Alessio is still whin
ies whoa bitch about why the dog is still in the house."

relieved "How's Debi?" I plucked up the courage to ask.
"I said "She was really upset by what you did."

I tried to explain to Marco how worried I was about Jessica, but he
e in his want to hear it and warned me to keep quiet. "I'm about five second
d a way completely losing it with you, Juliana. If you know what's good f
: before you'll shut up."

: There Warily, I gazed out into the bleak darkness of the night. I was expect
" long drive back from L.A. to Chicago, so I was surprised when Marco
larco to into an airfield. I looked at him.

"I've got a jet on standby. We'll fly home. It's late and I've had eno
e about today."

.. to get At least we would get home more quickly.

territory, "Get out," he ordered, as he cut the engine and moved to exit the car

is time, He obviously wasn't going to open my car door for me. *Such a generous* But then given his current mood, I should have been glad that he automatically put a bullet through my head.

to him We boarded the private jet and Marco pushed me into a seat. He didn't keep near me; instead, he took a seat as far away from me as possible. About not just minutes later, Alessio also joined us on the jet. Alessio must have come from L.A. with Marco.

I asked, As the plane took off, I was reminded of the last time I was on a plane. That time Marco had also been dragging me to Chicago.

worrying But things were different now. They were different because I loved him.

I don't know when exactly the realization had hit me, but what had happened after a man kidnapping me had somehow led to me falling in love with him. It was like I still couldn't understand what had happened between us since the time he'd taken me from the church and forced me to go to Chicago with him.

He was a Made Man and a killer, but over the last few weeks he had shown me a different side to him. It was a side that was unexpected: it was a side that was protective.

As from This was a man who would lay down his life for those he loved. He had taken care of his siblings since the death of his parents, looking out for them and loving them. They were his world and he protected them with a fierce determination that was almost scary—just like he had been trying to protect me from my cruel father and dysfunctional mother.

Being back in L.A. had made me see how wrong I'd been about my parents. Sure, they had arranged my marriage to a cruel Capo, but in the Mafia, marriages were a normal way of Mafia life. What wasn't normal, though, was using your child to set a trap for your enemy—letting your soldiers fire

...woman. weapons around your family and endangering them, and even shooting
... hadn't like my sister had been shot.

Jess had been shot by a Società bullet: it may have not been deliberate
... didn't sit my father knew the danger he was placing us all in when he and E
... out ten came up with their messed-up plan. At least Marco had let me know he
... come to was after she'd been shot. I doubted my father had even cared, given
... comments regarding it when I'd been back in L.A.

... plane. I couldn't stop thinking about my father's words and they kept replac
... my mind. He thought I was a slut and a whore. There was no concern
... Marco. what I had been through as a result of the kidnapping and its aftermath
... I begun mother hadn't even been glad to see me back. I knew I should be a
... im. them both. What I really felt, though, was a deep hurt that I mattered
... the day to my parents.

... m. After the last forty-eight hours, my body ached with exhaustion. As
... I shown further back into my seat, I looked across at Marco and let my gaze lin
... caring I don't know when it had happened, but somewhere along this
... journey I had fallen in love.

He had

... or them MARCO

... with a

... tect me

... It took four hours to fly back to Chicago. I didn't talk to Juliana and
... looked at her. I didn't want to see her, touch her, or smell her sweet j
... out my scent.

... ut such

... gh, was When we landed in Chicago, cars were waiting for us. I tugged
... toward them, walking fast so that she had to hurry to keep up with r
... re their took one SUV while Alessio went in the other waiting vehicle.

ing them It was a short drive back to the Marchiano estate. During the
however, exhaustion overcame Juliana and she fell asleep, her head
ate, but against the seat and her full lips slightly parted. She'd had a long co
manue days, and it was very late now.

ow Jess I was furious with her, but added to my fury was a twisted thrill th
ven hiser back. I couldn't believe that she went crawling back to the Societ
to Gabriel Santino.

ying in I wondered if she'd thought about him when I'd penetrated her
ern for little pussy, stretching it around my cock and driving into it relentless
ath. My I felt her tight channel clenching in orgasm around me. She was mir
ngry ather pussy was mine—mine alone.

so little When we arrived back at our estate, I turned off the ignition, but
didn't stir. I decided not to wake her. I scooped up her body into my ar
; I sunk carried her upstairs to our bedroom.

ger. I felt the smooth skin of her arm as it fell against my hand whi
twisted holding her. This was her home now, not L.A. and not the Società. It
right to have her back in my arms, back in my possession.

In the bedroom, I put her down onto the bed and pulled the she
comforter around her. I ran the back of my knuckles against her sof
which was tinged pink with sleep.

l barely The gentleness of my caress was in direct opposition to the wrat
jasmine after what she had done, after who she had turned to and who she had
save: Gabriel Santino.

Juliana Taking one last look at her, I left the room and turned off the light.
ne. We I couldn't be around her tonight; instead, I made my way to one
guest rooms.

drive,
resting
uple of

at I had
à, back

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ie. And

Juliana
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CHAPTER 35

JULIANA

I woke in the morning still feeling exhausted and it took a few seconds for the memories of yesterday to come tumbling back into my consciousness. I opened my eyes and quickly turned around to look at Marco's side of the bed. He hadn't slept here.

I looked down at myself and saw that I was still dressed. I must have fallen asleep in the car on the way back from the airport, and he must have gotten me up and put me to bed.

I carefully got out of bed and silently walked over to the bedroom door. I wasn't sure why I was being so quiet, unless it was because of the nervousness or fear within me. I held my breath as I tried to open the bedroom door. It shouldn't have been surprising, but I was when I found that it was locked.

I went back and sat on the bed and waited.

After a short time had passed, I decided that I couldn't sit here doing nothing. I got up and went to the bathroom to take a shower. I took off yesterday's clothes and stood under the scalding water in the shower, feeling good to wash away some of the anxiety from yesterday as I felt the water cascading over my body.

I took my time shampooing and conditioning my hair, before soap suds ran down my body. Then I stood under the powerful spray, letting the hot water ease the tension in my shoulders. I closed my eyes and savored the hot water running down my body.

My scalp prickled. I opened my eyes to find Marco standing in the bathroom doorway, staring at me.

"Hi," I squeaked.

But he didn't respond. He stalked over to the shower. "Get out."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, slowly reaching out to turn the shower water off. When the water stopped, I turned around and faced Marco.

He said, "Out."

I stepped out of the shower. As I reached for a towel, he grabbed me by the arm and hauled me into the bedroom. "Wait, I have to dry first."

He ignored me. When we reached the foot of the bed, he spun around and faced me.

The look in his eyes was wild and I took a step back from him, but he had his hand grasping my arm and he yanked me back toward him.

I

was giggling

in my head. I

was

MARCO

She looked fearful, but I didn't care.

and do “Are you scared of me, beautiful?”

ook off She didn’t reply, her eyes huge and wary as she watched me.

: It felt “Answer me,” I demanded, her lack of response angering me further

e water “I—I don’t know,” she whispered.

What sort of fucking answer was that?

ing my With one hand I held onto her wrist, feeling her racing pulse, wh

ase the other hand unbuckled my belt and pushed my pants and boxer briefs do

rivulets I shoved my fingers between her legs. I could feel the slippery juice

sex. “Fuck, you’re already wet for me.”

at the She shook her head at me as if attempting to persuade me otherwise

I gave a cruel laugh. “Your soaking pussy doesn’t lie, beautiful.”

I pushed down on her shoulder and forced her to kneel in front of

blue eyes widening as they came level with my straining erection. S

off the given me quite a few blow jobs over the last few weeks, but they had

been on her terms.

Today that would change.

my arm She had betrayed me and betrayed my trust. I needed to make her

make her obey.

ound to My possessiveness knew no bounds, and after what had ha

yesterday, this was the only way I knew to get her back to being mine.

he still I reached for her breasts and roughly twisted her nipples. She always

it when I played with her breasts. But this time it wasn’t about her pl

and she winced at my harsh treatment of her tits.

I grabbed her silky hair into a ponytail and tugged her head bac

clamped her lips shut and didn’t comply, not until I tugged her ha

harshly so that she was forced to obey me.

She reluctantly opened her mouth, knowing what I wanted but ti

about whether she could defy me.

I shoved my cock into her mouth in one thrust.

She cried out, my hard rod muffling her sounds, and her small hands pushed against my muscular thighs as she struggled to take my thickness into her mouth.

Her wet mouth and soft tongue against the bare skin of my dick. I held her firmly in place so that she couldn't escape me.

Her cries were just making me even stiffer—I loved hearing her protest and feeling her small hands pushing against me and fighting me.

With each protest her perfect mouth made, her lips and tongue pressed unwillingly against my hardness, making it leak pre-cum into her mouth. She squirmed her body against my hold.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked in a harsh voice.

She faltered, panting through her exertions.

“Do you?” I demanded in a louder voice.

She gave a small shake of her head.

“Good girl,” I growled at her.

She knew she deserved her punishment.

And that was all I needed.

The sight of her full lips stretched around my hardness made me love her even more. I started thrusting roughly into her mouth, hammering her back and forth in a punishing rhythm as I held her firmly in place.

She struggled at first with the pace I had set.

“Relax, beautiful, just relax into it,” I said as tears leaked from her eyes and I penetrated her tight lips again and again.

Slowly she stopped struggling as much and focused on taking a thick load each time I withdrew from her mouth.

I anchored her head and mouth in place with my fist in her hair, making clear who was in charge and who was her owner.

My hands I don't know if it was the lack of oxygen, but eventually her body became wholepliable and slackened, giving itself over to my demanding rhythm.

I was pushing into her mouth relentlessly. Each time I withdrew she would not waste a breath before taking another thrust of me between her lips. Her body became softer as she relaxed, allowing me to push my cock against the protests of her throat.

She was now accepting me without gagging. The feeling of her body moved throat swallowing around my dick was incredible. I continued until I could hold back no longer, emptying my seed down her throat, forcing her to swallow every last drop, except for the bits that came down the sides of her mouth.

I used my finger to scoop up those stray drops. "Suck," I commanded and she obediently and willingly licked my finger clean. She looked at me in a daze.

After I let go of her hair, she slumped back onto her calves. I picked her up and threw her onto the mattress.

Before she could make any movement to escape, I pinned down her legs with my hands and plunged my tongue into the valley between her legs. "You're so fucking wet. You got turned on by that blow job."

I thrust my tongue into her channel, mimicking the action my cock would make, alternating this with sucks and nips on her swollen labia and her eyes, clit.

I was already hard again. I lined myself up with her tight entrance and breathslammed into her in one hard thrust, causing her to cry out.

My rough thrusts aroused her even further, making her even wetter.

aking it even with that she struggled to accept my thick cock as my hips har
her into the mattress.

became She tried to resist her orgasm, but her body betrayed her because
feel her pussy muscles clenching in the way they did when she appi
e would her peak.

mouth She was trying to fight it, she was trying to fight me, not wanting to
ne back to her climax. Not wanting to give me that prize—because she knew t
would be mine.

r upper But everything about her, including her pussy, was mine.

I deepened my angle, hitting the sensitive spot at the front of her inn
own her repeatedly until I forced the orgasm out of her, making her scream
escaped name. “Marco, please, Marco!”

That was the ultimate prize, hearing my name on her lips and hear
ed, and scream out my name again and again with each of my punishing thrust
ne in a Her pussy clamped around me, triggering my second orgasm,
pumped my cum deep inside her, making her pussy take all of it an
l her up me.

Afterward she lay limply in my arms, trying to catch her breath.
r thighs When she had calmed down, I should have cleaned her up. Instead
s. her to my chest, and we lay there with our limbs entwined, sweaty and
with our cum.

After this, she could be left in no doubt of who she belonged
ngorged *belonged to me.*

My treatment of her, and her submission to me, proved that she wa
nce and her body, mind, and soul.

As we lay in bed, after getting her breath back, Juliana finally looke
ter, but me.

numbered “You will never try to run away again,” I growled. “You will never run away from me.”

I could Her eyes were huge in her face. “I was always going to come back and see you. I missed you so much,” she said quietly. “And I did come back.”

“You came back because it was the only choice you could make in that situation,” I said. “You had to give in to Gabriel Santino.”

When she “You don’t really think that?” Juliana asked.

“You said you had no choice. You said you were coming back with me because you had no choice if Gabriel Santino was to live. That’s the only reason you came back with me.”

Juliana looked uncertain as she spoke. “You’re right, I came back because I had no choice. I had no choice because...because I love you. I love you so much that I would do anything for you, even if it meant coming here even after everything that has happened, despite how messed up this thing between you and me is.”

Despite how fucked up this thing between you and me is.”

and I

and all of JULIANA

Marco just stared at me.

I held I loved Marco, and I knew I had to tell him how I felt. I had betrayed him and hurt him deeply when I had gone to L.A.

Marco thought that I came back with him to Chicago to save Gabriel. She but I had to tell him the real reason. I came back to Chicago because

Marco.

is mine:

I couldn’t go on betraying him, and I’d be doing that if I let him think that Gabriel had been my priority. That thought was hurting me, and I didn’t want to hurt him—I wanted to love him.

never get Thinking back about everything that had happened, I understood not much Marco cared about me. Marco had risked his own life by coming after I'd rescue me from L.A. after my stupid plan to see Jess all went wrong.

I looked at Marco and waited for him to say something. He looked like he was going to speak, but then I saw a flicker of confusion in his eyes and his characteristic emotionless expression returned.

Without another word, he got up and took a shower before getting dressed and heading downstairs. As I watched his tall figure walk out of the bedroom, I not only didn't hear the lock turn in the bedroom door.

I got up and tried the door handle and found that he had left it locked. Because deciding not to give him time to change his mind, I quickly showered and got dressed.

That is. As I dressed, I thought about how I had just admitted to Marco that I loved him. I couldn't deny it any longer, and I didn't want to.

He might be a Made Man, but I had seen a softer side to him, a side that didn't live in the darkness of our world. He cared for his family with a protective fierceness. And I could see that he did care for me in his own way, although I knew he would never love me after everything that had happened.

After dressing, I made my way down to breakfast. I hardly ate anything yesterday and I was ravenous.

As I made my way down the stairs, I couldn't stop thinking about my relationship with Marco.

I loved He was possessive—maybe too possessive—but he had been trying to protect me from my family.

How could I not love a man who was devoted to his family and mine? Marco, protect me from mine? Who wanted to look after me and stop me from getting hurt?

How how He wanted to give me a life away from my dysfunctional family, a
nning to who had shot my own sister and put me in harm's way. I knew Marco
different: he would never harm his family, and he would never hurt me
like he more importantly, this was a man who made my whole being burn
before desire and my heart beat much too fast.

When I reached the kitchen, I saw that Danio and Debi were not dressed
breakfast yet and Mr. Fluffy wasn't anywhere to be seen.

room, I "Danio, bring that damn dog down here before Alessio finds out you
sleep in your room," Marco hollered up the stairs.

t open. I felt like pointing out that Alessio probably heard Marco yelling,
d again most of the neighborhood, but thought it wise to keep my remarks to
given the mood Marco was in.

I loved A minute later, Danio and Debi came downstairs with Mr. Fluffy tucked
Debi's arms. When I saw Debi, I couldn't help it and burst into tears. I
said that sorry, Debi. I shouldn't have done what I did yesterday to you. Can you
with forgive me?"

in way, I was crying because I was sorry that I hurt Debi, and I was crying be-
cause I couldn't help Jessica yesterday. Debi was also my little sister now, just
nothing Jessica.

Debi came toward me and gave me that sweet smile of hers. "Don't worry
about my Juliana. We weren't locked in the room for long before Alessio came
downstairs."

Of course I forgive you. I know that you had to see your sister. Wasn't it
right when you saw her yesterday?"

"I'm not sure," I sniffed. "But I really needed to see her. I'll try to
apologize to Palmina too and deal with getting her car back and getting a
new cell phone. I hope she'll forgive me, but I'll understand if she can't."

"Can I take Mr. Fluffy for a walk before breakfast?" asked Debi smiling.

family she smiled at me.

Marco was “Of course. I can see that he’s getting quite attached to you now,”
me. But with a wobbly smile back at her.

room with

MARCO

down for

You let it We carried on like this for the next few days.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t understand Juliana. She had
me since she had set foot in this house and then she had run off back to
as had didn’t know what I was supposed to think anymore.

myself I virtually ignored her, except for at mealtimes and at night when I
seek out her body and she would respond willingly.

ended up in One morning I was in our gym room training with Alessio and getting
“I’m so ass kicked by him. “What’s wrong? You haven’t been yourself since
you ever returned from L.A.”

because “I’m fine,” I said tersely.

just like “We got her back. That’s all that matters,” Alessio drawled.

I paused, not sure how to explain. “She said she loves me.”

Alessio raised an eyebrow. “Juliana? Is that why you’ve been in
n’t cry, foul mood for the last few days?”

home. “I’m always in a fucking foul mood in case you haven’t noticed.”

Was she “You know what I mean,” replied Alessio. He looked at me carefully
what’s the problem? You know after everything that’s happened, this
have to only turn out in one of two ways—love or hate.”

ing her a When I didn’t respond, Alessio probed further. “What did you say to
’t.”

lyly, as “I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t say anything?”

” I said “I don’t know if I believe her. She said that’s why she came back v and that she always planned to come back to Chicago after seeing her :

“For a fucking genius, you’re pretty obtuse sometimes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s clear that she intended to come back. Think about it. It’s obv how she looks at you now that she no longer hates you. Things are d between the two of you than when you first brought her here. She’s fought here now. She’s happy being with *you*.”

o L.A. I I just looked at Alessio, not sure what to make of what he had just sa

[would Alessio carried on. “Anyway, she wouldn’t have left the dog here was planning to stay away forever. She had Palmina’s car, and she easily have taken Mr. F with her to L.A.”

ing my I stopped training and thought about what he had said. I felt confu nce we was a new feeling for me and a feeling I wasn’t sure I liked.

JULIANA

such a That night, we went to bed and Marco still remained largely silent.

I stole a glance at him, unsure if he would ever forgive me for g L.A. Even worse, I didn’t know how he felt about me telling him that ly. “So, him.

s could I hadn’t chosen Marco to be my husband, nor to be kidnapped b After everything that had happened between us, I wanted Marco to w o her?” for myself—not as his captive or as someone he owned through the c but as someone he loved.

I knew that I was probably too late to save my relationship with him with me. He had kidnapped me at the start, but then he had shown me that his sister.” about me. He’d wanted to protect me from my family, but I had betrayed after all the care he’d shown me. He didn’t just want to look at me physically, but he also wanted to protect my emotions. That was why I’d been so nervous in me know how my sister was after she’d been shot, so that I’d stop worrying about her injury.

That’s also why he’d not killed Jacob when he caught him entering the Marchiano estate. I’d been so distraught about my brother getting hurt that I’d ignored that Marco had actually spared him. Marco should have killed me if she after he’d caught him, but he’d let him go and he’d done that for me. Those weren’t things a captor would do for his captive. To him, I was more than a captive, more than a possession that he’d acquired through a contract between our families. He’d tried to show me this, but I’d thrown it all back in his face by running off to L.A.

Over the last few days, I kept turning over in my head recent events. I knew why he was mad that I went to L.A., but I couldn’t just abandon my sibling when she needed me. Even worse, I hadn’t even been able to help her because my father had turned up before she could tell me what was wrong.

Between my worry for Jess and Marco’s reign of silence toward me, I was feeling utterly dejected. The only things that brightened my days were the fact that Debi wasn’t mad at me and that I had my dog for company. Debi and Mr. Fluffy were definitely glad to have me back.

I fell asleep, turning over in my mind the words I’d finally admitted to Marco and wondering if he could ever love me back in the same way.

MARCO

he cared

ved him I bolted upright in bed as I was suddenly woken.

fter me I grabbed my gun and ran my gaze around the room before picking
he'd let phone to check the security feeds and guard reports. I already knew I
orrying find everything as it should be.

“Marco...?” murmured Juliana sleepily from next to me.

ing the “Go back to sleep.”

urt, I'd “Are you okay?” she asked, pushing her hair out of her face and ga
d Jacob me. “Is something wrong?”

I sighed. “I can't stop thinking about our mom being killed...ab
'd been siblings having to grow up without her. I can't stop blaming myself.”

ugh the “It wasn't your fault, Marco.” Her voice was soft.

rown it “Alessio was there that day, but I should have taken charge. I v
future Capo. A Capo-to-be and I wasn't even able to take care
vents. I scumbag soldier who was skimming a few measly grand off our profit
don my I wasn't able to stop our lunatic father from killing our mom.”

elp Jess “You have to stop blaming yourself,” Juliana said, moving closer to
ong. “I barely sleep some nights, dreaming about the day she died. Ever

3, I was are the dreams where I imagine a life where our mom didn't die, and t
ere the crushing moment when I wake to reality.”

7—both Juliana spoke quietly into the silence, her hand resting gently on n

“You saved me from my family. So why can't you forgive your
itted to saving your siblings from your father, a man so cruel that he kille
mother?”

“I don’t feel guilt about many things in my life, but this is something that keeps tormenting me.”

“Your family is your Achilles’ heel. You hurt when you think that you might be hurting.”

“How do I stop feeling like this?” I asked in desperation.

“You won’t ever stop loving your family, so you won’t ever stop caring about them...just like I’ll never stop caring about my siblings. You should forgive yourself. They don’t blame you, so you shouldn’t either.”

Was she right—was I being too hard on myself? And was I also being too hard on her? She actually seemed to care about what I was going through and I was stunned that she was offering me comfort after everything I had said to her.

I never normally talked about my feelings of guilt to anyone, not even Alessio. For some reason, however, it felt right telling Juliana. Not only that, but it also made me feel like part of a load had been lifted from my shoulders—and

While these thoughts ran through my head, I looked down at Juliana and she looked fucking serene—like an angel.

Without thinking any more about it, I lay down and took her into my arms.

And, for once, I managed to fall back asleep.

When the

MARCO

my arm.

The next evening, it was still warm when I went with Juliana and Marco for their evening walk in the woods.

We followed Mr. F’s route, walking together in silence.

“Are you happy?” I asked Juliana suddenly.

ing that She looked surprised at my question, or maybe she was thinking that was the longest sentence I had spoken to her since I had brought her here from L.A. She hesitated as she thought about my question. “Sometimes I replied.

“What would make you happy the rest of the time?”

When she didn’t answer, I captured her hand in mine and pulled her back to me. “Answer me, Juliana.”

She avoided my intent gaze on her. “What do you want me to say that’s stupid enough as it is.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’ve ignored me ever since I admitted that I love you. How else am I supposed to feel except stupid?” Her words came out in a rush. “I know I’m not even messed up, falling for the man who kidnapped me. I can’t help how stupid I feel. I just wish I hadn’t blurted it out to you.”

I raised her chin up with my hand. “Look at me.”

She slowly raised her bright blue eyes to mine. God, every time I looked into those eyes, my heart stopped for a moment. “I’m glad you told me your feelings, Juliana.”

“You are?”

I looked deep into her soul. “Yes—because I love you too.”

Juliana was startled into silence.

I put my hands on her arms. “I understand now that you didn’t return to L.A. to seek the Società’s protection. I believe you that you only wanted to see your sister, and that you always intended to return to me.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I do.” Gabriel Santino turning up had been a surprise to her. She hadn’t planned anything with him. I knew in my heart that Juliana would

hat this attracted to Gabriel Santino in any way.

er back Although I still remembered how Gabriel had looked at Juliana
es,” she engagement party—even though she wasn’t attracted to him, I
definitely been attracted to her. However, she was mine now. And
importantly, she wanted to be mine.

ner to a My reaction to Gabriel’s presence—my jealousy—drove home to r
strong my feelings for Juliana had become. What started as a plan for r
? I feel turned into love somewhere along the way.

“You really love me?” she asked, her blue eyes wide.

“Yes, I really love you. I swore to myself that I’d never step foot
se am I again after the church shootout. But I came back for you. I risked my
ow it’s rescue you, and I’d do it all over again if anyone ever dares to take yo
I feel, I from me,” I growled.

“I’m just so happy to be back here with you.”

“I was going mad when your father was holding you at his mansion
looked had no way to rescue you. I don’t know what I would have done
old me, harmed you.” I pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. “I love you, .
And I want to marry you.”

She frowned. “Um...we’re already married, in case you’ve forgotten

“Yes, but I never asked you. I just told you that you would marry m
I’m asking you.”

return to “And if I say no?”

inted to “Do you want to say no?”

“I want to say yes,” she whispered.

“Because you love me?” I asked.

and she “Yes.”

was not “Say it,” I demanded.

“Because I love you, Marco Marchiano.”

at the “And I love you too.”

he had I did love her. Perhaps I had loved her from the first moment I h
l, moreher. Knowing that I could love this woman was an amazing feeling, a
confusing at the same time.

ne how But it was definitely a feeling I could get used to. And I wanted to g
revengeto it—with Juliana at my side.

"Despite everything that's happened and the darkness inside me t
forced you to witness, you still want me, and you want to love me.
in L.A. understand it."

7 life to "Maybe that's what love is about—going along with the universe's j
u awayyou."

"I'm a bad man, and my ways may at times seem harsh, and I wo
change. But all logic flies out of the window for me where you're coi
and we—you've captured my heart, captured my soul, and captured my love."
if he'd She smiled at me.

Juliana. And I grinned back at her. “Everything’s settled then. Now let’s get
to bed so that I can make love to my pretty little fiancée.”

1?”

e. Now

“Because I love you, Marco Marchiano.”

“And I love you too.”

I did love her. Perhaps I had loved her from the first moment I had seen her. Knowing that I could love this woman was an amazing feeling, although confusing at the same time.

But it was definitely a feeling I could get used to. And I wanted to get used to it—with Juliana at my side.

"Despite everything that's happened and the darkness inside me that I've forced you to witness, you still want me, and you want to love me. I don't understand it."

"Maybe that's what love is about—going along with the universe's plan for you."

"I'm a bad man, and my ways may at times seem harsh, and I won't ever change. But all logic flies out of the window for me where you're concerned—you've captured my heart, captured my soul, and captured my love."

She smiled at me.

And I grinned back at her. “Everything’s settled then. Now let’s get you up to bed so that I can make love to my pretty little fiancée.”

EPILOGUE

JULIANA

I didn't think Marco was serious about having another wedding. It turned out that he was completely serious, and he arranged for us to have a church blessing in the church a few weeks later.

I was glad about it being in a church. The ceremony at the hotel had been quick and efficient, and it hadn't felt real. No matter how much money had been spent that day on the hotel, dress, and reception, that wedding had felt devoid of love and true feeling. I wasn't a religious person, but when I thought about getting married, I had always imagined that I would be married in a church in front of a priest.

I think Debi was even more excited than me about the church blessing. She was enjoying helping with all the preparations. I had never imagined I would be thinking about wedding dresses and bouquets again.

Doing these things together with Debi made us grow closer. I was glad that, both for me but also for her. It couldn't have been easy for her to grow up without a mother in a house full of boys. They loved her more than themselves, but I couldn't imagine not having a sister to confide in and share with.

And that's what we were now—sisters. No one would ever take the place of Jess, but Debi was special in her own way. She was gentle and so easy to love. I could see why her brothers adored her.

Sometimes I worried about what the Mafia world would throw her way. Being in our world wasn't easy, but she had always had the protection of her brothers. What would happen when she married and left home?

Being concerned for her in this way made me realize how much she was cared for. I was determined that when the day came, Marco and his brothers would only marry her to someone who truly deserved her, irrespective of the needs of the Fratellanza.

But it had been a long time since Marco had proposed to me in the orchard, he had been treated differently. He was softer with me in some ways, as if he was now willing to show his feelings to me. I knew that couldn't be easy for him after being told growing up that he needed to be emotionless and ruthless.

He was, little by little, letting me into his heart. He knew now that I wouldn't want to deceive him or hurt him, and I knew he felt the same way toward me.

One of the biggest practical changes for me was that he had given me a mobile phone and I was able to call my siblings. I hoped that in time that Jess would be able to get back to where we had been, where we'd been able to share each other everything. I knew that I was a Marchiano now and our families were enemies, but that didn't mean that Jess and I couldn't be close.

glad for

growing

than life

and things

I decided to call Jacob today to see if he knew anything more about what was going on with Jess.

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It was great being able to talk to my siblings, although I knew Jacob kept my calls a secret from our parents. Once my parents had found out that I'd married a Marchiano, they'd declared me to be no longer a part of their family or the Società.

"Hi Jake."

"Hey Juliana. How are you?"

After exchanging news of how we'd been since our last call together, I moved on to the reason for my call. "Jess won't tell me what's wrong with her, you know what's going on with her, Jake?" Even if my parents no longer considered me family, I wasn't ever going to abandon my brother and

"I don't know. I don't think there's any specific issue. My dealings with Rafael have been fairly limited. I tend to work more with Gabriel, and I've never got to know Rafael particularly well."

"Yet Jess seems terrified. Do you think she's terrified of him, or of me?"

"I really don't know. But I'll keep an eye on her, I promise, and I'll let you know if I have any contact with you about it."

"Thanks, Jake. That will make me feel a bit better about it all. And I'll let you know if I have any contact with you about it."

"Yeah?"

"I...I just wanted to say sorry again—about what Marco did to you and the fact that he caught you trying to rescue me. I'm so sorry you got hurt."

“It’s part of the job,” he replied unemotionally. Then his voice softened. “It was more than the job, actually—it was about you. And I would go through it all again if you ever needed me to.”

ut what We were both silent for a moment, lost in our thoughts. Jacob turned the subject to me. “Tell me, how have you been?”

ess and I’d already told him during our last phone call about the birth ceremony; however, he hadn’t been entirely convinced that I was getting part of happy about it, no matter how much I had tried to explain things to him.

I also had something else to tell him today. “Jake, I’ve got some news. I was nervous to tell him. I didn’t know why—actually, maybe I did know.”

“Good news, I hope?”

ether, I After a slight pause, I spoke. “I’m pregnant—I’m having a baby. I already told Marco a couple of days ago and he’d been over the moon.”

ng. Do “Dear God.” I could hear the shock in Jacob’s voice, even over the phone. I no longer sister.

gs with “Is that why you went back with *him* to Chicago and didn’t put up a fight?” he asked, not even being able to bring himself to utter Marco’s name.

getting “No, I didn’t know I was pregnant when I came to L.A. to see Jessica. I went back with Marco because I love him.” I had tried to make Jacob understand this several times already, but I knew he still couldn’t get his head around it. “I’m happy now. I’m happy being married to Marco. And I’m excited about this baby.”

ake...” There was silence on the phone before Jacob spoke again. “Did you do the right thing, just tell me that?” he asked, quietly.

I didn’t have to hesitate before I answered. “Yes, I did.” I knew that Marco and Jessica might never understand my reasons, but I also knew that

ned. “I know where I belonged and where my heart belonged.

rough it “That’s all I need to know. Look, I have to go now, but I’ll keep an things with Jess. She’ll still be nearby once she’s married, so if she ned the anything I’ll be here for her. Just like I’ll always be here for you, Jul you’re happy, then that’s all I want for you. I couldn’t bear to think of blessing being unhappy or trapped with a man you didn’t love.”

ruinely “I’m not, I promise you, Jake.”

n. “You know I’m here for you if you ever need me, don’t you?”

ews.” I “I know, Jake. And thank you. That means a lot to me.”

ow. I knew my parents would never have me back. I was a Marchiano n slept with the enemy, married him, and was having his baby.

y.” I’d But I didn’t want to go back to L.A.

Chicago and the Marchiano mansion were my home now, and th phone. where I wanted to be.

more of

Marco’s

. I went One afternoon, I was on the couches with Debi, with a heap of erstand magazines next to us. Debi had gone slightly overboard—I think sh ound it. have got a copy of every bridal magazine in the shop.

d about We also had a pile of baking magazines. Debi wanted to bake a have after the blessing and she wanted to get some ideas. “How about i do the velvet layer cake with chocolate frosting?” suggested Debi, showin picture of such a cake.

it Jacob “That looks gorgeous—I’m up for anything with chocolate.”

t I was

I looked up as Marco, Alessio and Camillo walked into the house eye on from doing some business. I had just opened a parcel that had been delivered and needs and was pulling out the contents.

Juliana. If “What in God’s name is that?” asked Alessio, as I pulled out an outfit for you as Mr. Fluffy. It was a red satin waistcoat and matching bow tie.

“It’s an outfit for Mr. Fluffy to wear to the church blessing.”

Camillo grimaced. “You can’t be serious. He’s a dog.”

“Yes, I’m completely serious. Mr. Fluffy loves dressing up and he’s perfect. You know, I’m the bride and I should get whatever I want.”

Juliana: I’d “Bridezilla,” muttered Camillo under his breath but loud enough for everyone to hear.

Marco slapped Camillo around the head. “Hey, she’s right. I know that was wedding, and she gets whatever she wants this time after the almighty show the first time around.”

Camillo rubbed his head with his hand. “Man, you’re already whipped. But at least she makes you less grumpy than usual.” Camillo laughed as he dodged Marco trying to slap him again.

I had come to realize that Camillo was a bit of a gentle giant around the family, which was at odds with the role he played within the Fratellari. Made Men had violence running through their core, but some of them were more of a conscience than others.

I still got the sense that Camillo’s Made Man pride was a little wobbly after Mr. Fluffy had bitten him the first time they’d met, but he definitely seemed to be getting over it. Despite his tough guy persona, Camillo was a big teddy bear around his younger siblings.

Alessio looked at Marco and grinned. “Camillo’s right, you know. He’s less grumpy nowadays. Juliana is good for you.”

e, back That sounded a bit like a compliment to me, and it felt good that .
delivered was starting to accept me into the family too. My relationship w
family had started in the worst possible way, but everything had chan
it fit for the better now.

I went over to the kitchen to make some coffee and Alessio followe
made for the fridge. I saw him rummaging for a snack. I wondered
might be a good time to say something to him and I decided to just go
'll look before I lost my nerve.

“I’m sorry if Mr. F brings back bad memories for you,” I said cautio
ugh for Alessio. He and I had got off on the wrong foot, what with everythin
the church shootout and then Mr. Fluffy arriving unexpectedly.

it’s her Alessio regarded me carefully and was silent. My words must hav
ty shit-him realize that Marco had told me about his dog, Comet, and wh
happened to their mom. I hoped that I hadn’t said the wrong thing.

pussy- “It’s not that so much. I just didn’t want Debi and Danio getting a
Camilloto Mr. F. In our world, the fewer people we are close to, the simpler
are for us.”

und his “Danio is almost sixteen, and he and Debi will be adults before yo
iza. Allit. You can’t protect them forever.”

em had “You wanna bet? I’ll kill anyone who hurts any of my siblings, esp
Debi,” growled Alessio.

ounded “One day Debi will fall in love and that means that she will give h
:finitely to someone, making her vulnerable to getting hurt.”

was like “You’ve fallen in love with Marco, and you haven’t gotten hurt.”

I was thoughtful for a few seconds. “I’m happy, but that doesn’t me
You are falling in love hasn’t hurt me. I’ve lost my family now that I’ve dec
stay here. I mean, I still get to talk to my sister and brother sometin

Alessio there's a barrier up between us now, like we're on different sides of the road with this Jake got hurt because of me and Jessica doesn't really confided for anymore. I feel like I've lost part of my old life and I'm working hard and get it back."

And as he Alessio looked at me. "I'm sorry that you've had to go through that hell if this I am. I consider you family now and I don't like to see you hurting."

So ahead We sat at the kitchen island in a comfortable silence for a few minutes watching my dog run around. "You know what would cheer me most suddenly said to Alessio.

Dealing with "I get the feeling I'm not going to like what you're about to say..."

"I think we should get Mr. Fluffy a girlfriend—"

He made "No fucking way. I've given in over Mr. F living here, but we don't want to have another dog in the house."

"But—"

Attached "No."

For things I decided to quit while I was ahead. Today Alessio had admitted he didn't hate me and that was a massive step forward for me. This was my new family now, and I had all the time in the world to build my life here.

Specially

Her heart

The next day, I was watching Marco cook dinner. "So, you still think animals are more worthy of your care than humans?" he asked.

Mean that "Sometimes," I answered slowly, not sure where he was going with

Decided to

Yes, but

he war. He fixed his dark stare upon me. “I’ve looked into it and if you still
in meto, then you can do a veterinary nurse college course.”

d to try My jaw felt open. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah.”

t, really Suddenly my soaring heart crashed back down to earth.

A frown crossed Marco’s brow. “What’s wrong? I thought you
tes, just pleased.”

up?” I “It’s just that my father made me leave school before I could get my
school diploma. I wouldn’t be accepted onto a college course.”

“You can get your high school diploma first. There’ll be distance-learning
courses for all that shit too. And if you can’t get onto the course you
’re not I’ll just have to bribe the admissions officer—or do something else to land

I stood frozen to the spot for a few seconds, unbelieving of what
heard. As comprehension sunk in, I flew into Marco’s arms, laughing
kissing him at the same time. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

that he “There are conditions though,” he said sternly.

was my “Of course there are,” I couldn’t stop myself from rolling my eyes.

“I’m not giving you complete free reign with this. You’re my wife
and attending college would pose too many dangers. You’ll have to study
distance-learning, and any practical classes you need to complete
taught to you on a one-to-one basis.”

I couldn’t be a normal college student, but I didn’t care as I was so
ll think that he was allowing me to do this. Of course, I would have to take some
off when the baby was born, but there was no rush, and I could fit the
this. in around raising the baby.

“And I’m not saying you can get a job yet. That’s something we’ll
talk about in the future. You’re going to be busy enough over the next

ill want years studying and having babies.”

I nodded. “I’ll have as many babies as you want. I love you, Marco.”

“Good. I want you to be happy in this marriage. If going to school makes you happy, then I’m okay with that. Our way of life constrains me. I’ll never be like your father—I’ll do whatever is in my power to make you’d be happy and keep you safe at the same time.”

ny high

earning

u want, On the afternoon of the blessing, I got dressed with Debi’s help.

aim.” This time around, I was wearing a much simpler white dress. I’d worn I’d just an elaborate wedding dress twice now, but today was going to be different and the last two times. And today was definitely the last time I would be this.

My dress was full-length, fitted to my body and made of a light fabric, with narrow straps to hold it up.

fe now I left my glossy dark hair to tumble over my shoulders, just like udy via Marco liked it, and my bouquet was an arrangement of white roses will be Danio had collected this morning from the gardens and had bound it with a white ribbon.

thrilled When Danio came in with my bouquet, I turned from the mirror and ne time was getting ready. “Thanks, Danio, the roses are gorgeous, and this bouquet course is just perfect,” I said while giving him a kiss on the cheek in thanks.

After he had gone, Debi said, “Danio’s really sweet, isn’t he? I mean have to know, for a guy.”

ext few

“Yes, he definitely got most of the charm genes in this family. C
” he’s going to make a great husband for some lucky girl.”

ool will I turned back to the mirror and applied my makeup. I kept it sim
us, but natural, keeping in line with the much simpler theme of the ceremony
ake you While I put on some mascara, Debi got Mr. F ready in his waistcoat a
tie. I was glad that we had gotten the outfit for him—he was going
great, and it had been great fun picking it out with Debi. Who knew
were so many websites dedicated to doggy wedding outfits?

My pooch, however, was in a particularly playful mood and seemed
interested in having a tug of war with the bow tie, than getting dressed
“Come on, Mr. F, you want to look smart today for Juliana, don’t yo
vorn an can’t let those other boys look smarter than you. You’re going to be th
nt from handsome boy in the church today.”

e doing Debi was giggling away when Marco came in. “Hey, what abo
Aren’t I supposed to be the most handsome boy today?” he teased Deb
ht satin “You know I think you’re great, Marco, but you don’t have th
cuteness factor as Mr. F,” replied Debi seriously, making me la
I knew Marco’s pretend look of devastation.

; which “The boys are waiting downstairs and Camillo will drive you all
ogether church,” he told Debi.

“Do you think Camillo will let me take Mr. F in his car?”
where I “Shortcake, you only have to bat your eyelashes at him, and he’ll
bouquet have whatever you want.”

She finished tying the bow tie on Mr. F. “There, you look great now
an, you gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before taking Mr. F and I
downstairs.

One day MARCO

ple and “Mrs. Marchiano, you look stunning.”

7 today. “Will I do?”

nd bow “Always,” I said with a grin. It was true that Juliana made me ha
to look had never felt that my life was missing anything until she had come al
w there

I wrapped my hand around her stomach, resting my hand there. ‘
our baby doing today?’ *Our baby*. I still couldn’t believe it, and whe
d more thought about it, it made an ecstatic feeling flutter through my heart.

ed in it. “Good so far. I didn’t throw up this morning and as long as I don’
u? You up while I’m standing at the altar, then I’ll be happy.”

re most I looked deep into her eyes. “And are you happy?” I had asked l
ut me? before, but I had to be sure.

i. “Definitely. I know it’s pretty soon to be having a baby, but I’n
e same happy about it. Although maybe I’ve just gone crazy if I’m looking f
ugh at to having little Marchianos running around the place.”

l to the “I like the idea of a mini-Marco,” I quipped. “I’m Capo and the
girl.” need an heir and a spare—so we’ll have a couple of boys first and

“How many babies do you expect me to have?” exclaimed Juliana.

let you “With all the practice we’re getting, it will be a few at this rate,” I g
into her ear before nuzzling her neck. I couldn’t keep my hands o
woman.

n.” She I held out my arm and she placed her smaller arm in mine. I wall
reading down to my car and together we made our way to the church. Today

ceremony, it was just going to be the two of us, my siblings, and Anna and Lorenzo with their two kids. And Mr. F, of course.

Lorenzo's daughter, Clara, was a flower girl during our blessing ceremony. I'm sure Lorenzo wouldn't have allowed her to take part in one of the previous weddings, but today was low-key and I had assured him that she would be completely safe.

The four-year-old girl looked adorable in her off-white dress, carefully tottering down the aisle as her chubby hands carefully sprinkled petals in her route.

Anni looked on with happiness on her face, while Lorenzo looked proud and would burst with pride as he watched his little girl. He shot a look at me and I could see in that look how much he loved his wife.

As Clara reached the altar, I scooped her up in his arms. "You did an amazing job, Clara," I said gently to the little girl.

She smiled shyly up at me as I gave her a kiss on her pink cheek and then turning around and handing her to Lorenzo.

Lorenzo held Clara close, his daughter resting her tiny hands against his broad chest. "You're the most beautiful flower girl I've ever seen," he crooned at her, earning him a beaming smile from his little girl as she nestled into his hold and sought his closeness. "I love you, Dad," she said quietly to him as she laid her head in the crook of his neck.

Just before Juliana started her walk down the aisle toward me, I got a smile at Debi. And I got a gorgeous smile back from her. Man, Debi was going to be a heartbreaker one day, especially with those big brown eyes.

Finally, Juliana made her way toward me, this time all smiles and love in her eyes.

nni and Father Ugolino was our family priest and performed the blessing.

decided to make the traditional Catholic vows today because we did
emony.married in a church last time. I wanted to give Juliana whatever she wa
of mymake her happy.

at Clara “Marco and Juliana, have you come here to enter into marriage
coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?”

ntiously Juliana and I smiled at each other because, this time, we did both w
s alongwholeheartedly.

I replied, “I have,” and Juliana said, “I have.”

like he “Are you prepared, as you follow the path of marriage, to love and
it Anni,each other for as long as you both shall live? And are you prepared to
children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the
did anChrist and his church?”

I replied, “I am.”

before Juliana looked at me with love in her eyes and said, “I am.” We c
wait to meet our first child, although we knew that we might have to
inst hisMr. F for it first.

en, mia Since my proposal to Juliana, he had stopped nipping at my an
ttle girlmuch. Maybe he could sense that everyone was calmer and happier
la,” shewas rubbing off on him too. He definitely preferred females and
Juliana, Debi and Danio were his clear favorites.

shot a Father Ugolino asked us to join our right hands. I turned to Juliana t
debi wasmy vows to her. “I, Marco, take you, Juliana, to be my wife. I promise
eyes oftrue to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will lo
and honor you all the days of my life.”

nd with Then it was Juliana’s turn. “I, Juliana, take you, Marco, to be my h
I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness

We had health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”

It didn't get I felt my heart beat faster as I heard her finally say these words willingly. I wanted to. Father Ugolino asked for the rings, which we had removed before service. Juliana had wanted the rings blessed by the priest.

without I took Juliana's band and slid it onto her finger. “Juliana, receive this as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Juliana then took my wedding band, and I held out my hand. “Marco, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

to accept When Father Ugolino announced that I could kiss my wife, I didn't know how to. I hesitated. However, Mr. F sounded a loud bark, whether in protest or celebration I wasn't sure. We all laughed. This was how a wedding should be: full of family and full of laughter.

couldn't I had never imagined that my wedding day would be like this. Now I had found Juliana and found love, I wasn't going to let them go. Juliana gave me more than love—she gave me happiness and a sense of completeness.

It was so

, and it JULIANA

kids—

We got back to the mansion in the early evening.

to make Marco and Alessio had planned a cookout in the garden. When we were to be back home, we all helped to carry the food outside. I kept the same dress I wore on our wedding day—it was simple and easy to wear, and I didn't feel the need to change.

it.
husband.

and in

The guys grilled chicken, steak, and burgers and had prepared a ngly. salad, homemade coleslaw, and a green salad with sundried to ore themozzarella, basil, and olive oil.

I was getting spoiled by all the good food the guys cooked and I de his ringfelt inadequate when I thought about my non-existent cooking skills son andalready looked into taking some cooking classes so that I could do share of making dinners.

to her. While the guys stood around the grill, I sat and talked with Anni. e of the “When I watched Marco with Clara in the church earlier,” I said, “ tell that he’s going to be a wonderful father in the same way Lorenzo didn’tthat thought has made me even more excited about the baby growing ttest orof me.”

ng day “I’m so happy that things have worked out for the two of you,” she “There aren’t many women who could handle Marco, but I think w that Iperfect for each other.”

na gave I looked over Anni’s outfit and admired her pale pink vintage 1960 ss. which she wore with bright orange ballet flats that had pink bows at th

“I’ll soon have to start to think about getting some bigger clothes things are starting to feel tight,” I said as I ran my hand over my st “But I haven’t really seen many maternity clothes that I like.”

“I make some of my own clothes, and I often customize clothing an that I’ve bought,” commented Anni. “I could help you make some m. we got clothes if you like?” lress on

Before I could answer, Marco interrupted. “No offense, Anni, but e out of want my wife taking any weird fashion tips from you—I like the v dresses just fine.”

“No offense, Marco, but I think your wife is capable of think

potato herself,” Anni shot back at him, making me grin. I loved the way she ate the potatoes, up for herself.

When the food was ready, the whole family ate outside, and the food was definitely delicious as we chatted with each other and enjoyed the last of the summer. I had we had eaten, I went over to Alessio to thank him for the cookout. “Thank you very much for all your cooking today. I really enjoyed it.”

“No problem. I’m glad to see you and Marco happy.” And he genuinely seemed to mean it.

After the cookout, we stayed outside talking and laughing. I had been seeing Marco’s siblings as my family now. Chicago was my home.

It was getting chilly despite the fire pit we were sitting around, but I didn’t want to break the moment to go grab a sweater. I rubbed my hands down my arms, trying to get some heat into my body.

Danio, who was sitting next to me, handed me his hoodie. “Here, take it. It’ll keep you warm.”

“Thanks, Danio,” I said with a smile at him.

We both looked over to Alessio, who was straightening Mr. Fluffy’s tie, which had become crooked during all his running around the doghouse. “You know, Mr. Fluffy really adores Alessio, even if Alessio grumbles about it nonstop,” observed Danio.

“Animals are like that,” I smiled. “They can always sense who their favorite person is.” I had a feeling that Alessio was much fonder of Mr. Fluffy than I was.

Marco came over and wrapped his arm around me, hugging me. I snuggled up to him, enjoying the closeness and the warmth.

“Happy?” he asked, looking into my eyes with his soft gray eyes.

“Yes, definitely.” I could see the love in his eyes, and I knew that I

e stood have that from him for the rest of our lives. I looked around my new
as they sat around the fire pit. I was going to be happy here.

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1. After today also hadn't been a wedding of two strangers on opposite sid
Thanks Mafia war. I was part of this family now, for better or for worse.

At that thought, my heart swelled with love as I looked over at
nuinely Marchiano: he was the King of Chicago, my Capo, and my husband.

And he was forever mine.

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Thanks so much for reading. See here for a free **BONUS EPILO**
I didn't you are already missing Marco and Juliana: <https://BookHip.com/CSZ>
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have that from him for the rest of our lives. I looked around my new family as they sat around the fire pit. I was going to be happy here.

Today hadn't been the big wedding originally planned by our families. But today also hadn't been a wedding of two strangers on opposite sides of a Mafia war. I was part of this family now, for better or for worse.

At that thought, my heart swelled with love as I looked over at Marco Marchiano: he was the King of Chicago, my Capo, and my husband.

And he was forever mine.

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SNEAK PEEK

MAFIA AND PROTECTOR
A DARK ARRANGED MARRIAGE ROMANCE
(MARCHIANO MAFIA SERIES)

CHAPTER 1

*Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora
nostra morte.*

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour
death.*

— the words every Made Man recites upon a death.

JESSICA

“Jessica, your father wants to see you in his office.” My mother, Casmundina Bonardi, had just dashed into my bedroom and was as dramatic as usual.

“You mean right now?” I asked her.

“Yes, straight away. What on earth are you wearing?” She grimaced when she saw me dressed in my lilac sundress, with my dark, wavy hair pulled into a simple French braid that was already starting to unravel. “I thought I told you to get rid of that dress. It’s shabby and does nothing to enhance your plain features.”

It was a hot day here in L.A. and my outfit was perfect for the weather. “But, Mother, I like this dress and you know it’s my favorite.”

“You’re eighteen years old now. That dress makes you look like fourteen and still a schoolgirl.” She seemed to have forgotten that I had been a schoolgirl until just a couple of weeks ago when I’d finished high school.

“I thought it would be okay to wear it since I’m just spending the summer at home—”

My mother cut me off. “There’s no time to change now. You know your father hates to be kept waiting. You need to put some shoes on.”

a della
She threw open my closet door and grabbed a pair of five-inch spiky shoes for me to slide my bare feet into. My mother had bought these shoes some time ago, though I had so far managed to avoid wearing them.

of our

The sparkly gold shoes looked ridiculous with my dress, but there was no time to argue over her choice of footwear.

“*Pronti?*” My mother asked if I was ready. She always broke into a sweat when she was nervous. Or when she was excited, or happy, or sad, or surprised—so, basically, when any sort of emotion reared its head.

“I think so.”

mother,
ting all

“Quickly now, you don’t want to anger him.”

She was right—I definitely didn’t want to anger him. My father, Bonardi, was a *Made Man*—a man initiated into the Mafia. He’d always been fairly short-tempered; however, after the recent kidnapping of my oldest sister, Juliana, he’d been as explosive as a piece of dry tinder. I really missed Juliana—I hoped she would be home soon and that things would go back to normal.

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I rushed downstairs to the office which was located at the front of the house.

weather.

As I hastened my step, I ran my palms over my wavy hair, trying to smooth any stray tendrils. Maybe if my hair looked half-decent, my mother wouldn’t notice my dress.

you’re
id been
ool.

I knocked on his office door, waiting as always until I heard the sound of the door ‘enter’.

day at

I opened the door to his office, hoping that he wasn’t irritated with me for how long it had taken me to answer his summons. As I hurried into the office, my breath suddenly came to an abrupt halt as I realized that he was not alone.

w your

y heels
for me

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Father. Mother said that you wanted to see me? I know that you had company. I’ll come back later.”

“No, Jessica, stay. We’ve been waiting for you.”

was no

Italian

r angry

My heart started pounding in my chest. In the room was the man I had heard so much about: Emanuel Santino—he was the boss of the *Società Mafia*. From their base in Los Angeles, the *Società* ran their criminal empire and ruled over the West Coast of the United States.

The Capo sat in one of the wingback leather chairs in front of my desk. Standing by the fireplace was his oldest son and heir, Gabriel,

second son, Rafael. My thoughts were racing through my mind. I hadn't had anything that could incur the wrath of the Capo...or had I?

Cecilio I hated this room and had always tried to avoid this part of the house. I had always tried to minimize the chance of running into my father or any of the men who worked for him. And there were a lot of comings and goings, given that my father missed was one of Emanuel Santino's *Underbosses*, meaning that he held a powerful position within the organization.

"Sit down," my father commanded me.

In my haste to obey, I wobbled in my heels and lost my balance.

I managed to grab the edge of his desk in time, preventing me from falling flat on my face, although I couldn't stop the flush from rising up my cheeks.

I hoped that no one had seen, but one look at the expressions on the faces of the Santinos was enough to tell me that they had definitely noticed my deep clumsiness.

I silently cursed my mother for making me wear these ludicrous shoes. I gratefully sank myself down into the second wingback chair, sitting on the edge of the seat with my hands tightly clasped in my lap. I swallowed a lump in my throat. "Is there something wrong, Father?"

"You must know that we have always hoped for a marriage bond between our family, the Bonardis, and the Santino family. We have now decided to go ahead with that union."

Capo, Oh my God. They'd found my older sister, Juliana!

My heart soared—they'd finally gotten my sibling back after West kidnapping a few weeks ago. Gabriel Santino was in love with Juliana, and it had always been thought that they would marry, and now they finally could.

"You've found Juliana?" My voice was giddy with excitement.

"Do not mention that girl's name in this house! Everyone in the

“I don’t know that she is a slut,” thundered my father, the venom in his voice making me sink back into my chair. “Your sister means nothing to me now. She is no longer part of this family.”

My father paused for a moment as if collecting himself, before continuing. “We have decided that you will marry into the Santino family.”

“I’m to marry Gabriel?” I was dumbfounded.

“No, he’s not interested in you.” My father was as blunt as a hammer. “Instead, Emanuel has suggested his second son, Rafael. You will marry him in two months’ time.”

I stole a glance across at Rafael, who stood leaning against the mantelpiece by the fireplace.

Despite his casual stance, Rafael’s whole demeanor was icy. I noticed my handsome features and sandy-blond hair, but it was his dark blue eyes that noticed as they radiated a stark coldness. A shiver ran through me.

The Società Mafia had started out by controlling the port and the shipping trade in L.A. before extending its influence into other activities. Now it was one of the most formidable criminal organizations in the US, and the Santinos were some of the most powerful—and most feared—men in the country. “What does Mother think about this?” I squeaked, forgetting my place. My father didn’t like to be questioned about anything, even if it did concern his whole life.

“Your mother will do whatever is the best for this family and the best for her as well,” snapped my father. “We will sign the engagement contract today.” The Mafia was still a traditional institution and families followed the custom of signing an engagement contract.

“Today?” I blurted out. My mind was scrambling, trying to calculate the age gap between Rafael and me. He was twenty-five years, if I reme-

making correctly, making him seven years older than me.

There is no “Yes, today,” interjected Emanuel Santino.

My gaze darted across to Rafael again and I wondered what he was continuing about this marriage. A black Brioni suit hugged his muscular body, and black: the typical Mafia uniform. And although his suit was obviously expensive, there was something untamed about him, and that sent a shiver always through my body.

I knew that he couldn't be thrilled with me as his future wife. After all, I knew that everyone thought I was plain and unattractive. It was my older sister who was the beauty of the family, and she'd always been the one to draw admiring looks. I'm sure he had expected, as the second son of a He had Capo, that he would at least marry someone prettier than me.

As that I Emanuel pushed the engagement contract across the desk until it was in front of me. He might be Capo, but he was also a slimeball who treated his drug wife with a complete lack of respect, sleeping around with a long list of it was lovers and hookers. I prayed Rafael did not take after his father.

Santino “Um...please may I ask why we are signing this today? Usually the contract is signed at the engagement party.” I was unable to keep my face. My bewilderment from my voice.

When my “The engagement party will be in a week's time; however, we will have it finalized today,” said the Capo. “Everyone is unsettled after the Società kidnapping of a Mafia daughter. We must focus on making the Società contract strong as possible from within, and there is no better way than by a marriage wed between the families of the Capo and his Underboss. Once this contract is signed, we can announce the engagement to the rest of the organization. The union will be a demonstration of strength to the rest of the Società. All members should put a stop to the various jitters and rumors swirling around.”

Great, I was being used as a means to quiet the gossipmongers and the over-wrought nerves within the Società, regardless of what I thought actually want.

Brioni I worried my lower lip, trying to think of a way to delay the signing I had previously told two minutes ago that I was to marry Rafael Santino, and now I was shivering and asked to sign away my life to him via the engagement contract. I knew once the contract was signed, there was no way out and that I was, for ever all, bound to Rafael Santino forever.

My older brother But then, I thought to myself, I am a Mafia daughter—I had no choice in the matter of who I was to marry. Did it really matter if I signed the contract now or next week? There was no way out of this, no way to escape Rafael Santino, no matter what my wishes on the subject were.

My father was in I licked my dry lips and picked up my father's favorite fountain pen. He hated his daughter. I looked up and in desperation said, "Wouldn't Gabriel prefer to see the line of Juliana to return, and then he can marry her? And then our families would be united through that marriage?" I couldn't stop the words tumbling out of my mouth. Hell, I couldn't just keep my mouth shut?

My father kept the "For God's sake, Jessica!" My father really lost it now. "She's obviously no longer pure. When we get her back, no decent man will look at her. She's not worth anything anymore. She's worth no more than a used whore. Now sign the damn contract. We need to move on now that your sister is no longer of any use to us."

My father's Società as Gabriel's jaw tensed and his eyes darkened at my father's harsh words. My father's marriage was obvious he was still interested in Juliana, and I was glad that she was still apart from me still believed in her and realized that what had happened to her wasn't her fault.

My father and that I signed my name slowly, all the while wondering if this was really happening. As I completed my signature, I laid the pen down carefully.

id calm to the papers.

might Rafael prowled toward me, his jaw tightly clenched. He took the sign his own name, and as he towered above me with his tall frame, I g. I was I had thought to push the contract toward him so that he wouldn't is being stand so near to me.

ew that He was so close that I could smell him—a clean, masculine scent ould behind of cologne. As he wrote, I noticed his strong wrists. They were and my eyes followed the trail of sandy hair which disappeared i voice in sleeve of his dress shirt.

contract After he had finished signing his name, I glanced down at my Rafaelseeing that some black ink had leaked from the fountain pen and stai fingers.

. I felt like I wanted to wash my hands straightaway. In fact, I wa wait for wash my whole body and try to wash away the stain of the Mafia, the will be this life that I'd been born into. But I knew that even though I coul t—why away the ink, I could never get rid of my duty as a Mafia daughter.

never get rid of my obligation to marry this man standing next to me. viously After we had both signed the contract, I knew that there was no v . She'll for me, and I was now bound to the Santino family for life.

ve need Great, I thought, I'm marrying into a family where the fath murderous psychopath, his eldest son is still in love with my older sis ords. It the man I am going to marry was...well, I don't know what he was l omeone I'd never even spoken to him.

ppened Emanuel stood. "We should leave the couple alone for a minute Rafael can present the engagement ring." With that, they filed out s really office while they carried on talking about business matters, leaving me lly next in the chair and Rafael standing over me.

This couldn't be any more awkward. Wasn't getting engaged supposed to be romantic?

But then, this wasn't a usual sort of engagement. As was the norm in the Mafia world, our families had arranged this marriage. Rafael clearly wasn't interested in me—he'd never sought me out at formal Società functions with a talk or ask me to dance. He was just marrying me to keep his father's name tanned and the Società stable.

His whole energy filled the room, his proximity unnerving me, his scent consuming me. I didn't know where to look or what I was supposed to do with my fingers.

"Stand up." His low voice penetrated the silence.

I would prefer to have remained sitting rather than risking standing on these heels again, but I guess he couldn't put the ring on like that. I got to my feet, my left hand holding onto the edge of my father's desk for support.

He got out a small velvet box and opened it to reveal a large oval diamond flanked by two smaller sapphires, all set on a thin band of platinum. It was an exquisite design.

I watched as he removed the ring from the box and brought it toward me. "Give me your hand". Was anything he said not a command? I hesitated, not wanting to let go of the desk in case I lost my footing again.

"Don't worry, I've got you," he said softly, as if realizing why I was so reluctant to give him my hand.

I slowly gave him my hand, and as his fingers touched me for the first time, I felt a flush run up my cheeks and my heart thud too fast. It was the first time I had been touched by a man who was not a family member.

osed to He slid the ring onto my left hand, but he didn't let go of it immediately. Instead, he admired the ring on me.

1 in the I discreetly looked at him. Up close, I could see that the stormy darkness wasn't of his eyes was warmed by some lighter turquoise streaks. And as I continued to gaze over his hair, I thought somehow he was less scary than I imagined he would be. Yet I knew how deceptive appearances could be. And he was Santino—there was nothing that wasn't scary about that family.

and his “I was taken by surprise when my father said our families wanted to marry,” I said in a rush.

“I could tell by your reaction.”

“Oh, I don't want you to think it was personal against you.”

ling on “Don't worry, I've had worse said to me than someone indicating I slowly prefer my brother marry into their family,” he drawled.

lesk for I flushed. “I didn't mean any offense.”

“I'll survive.” His response was curt.

iamond I fiddled with my hair, trying to tuck in the loose strands. “Sorry, I didn't get a chance to brush my hair before my father summoned me.”

“No matter. It looks fine.”

ard me. “Do you think? My parents like me dressed properly, especially in front of company.” I realized then how that sounded and rushed on. “Not that I don't dress properly at other times.” Jesus, why was I rambling in front of a man?

7 I was There was an awkward silence, and I willed myself not to fill it with more of my gabbling.

he first “Do you always wear those shoes?” he said dryly.

was the I frowned, wondering if he was making fun of me.

Deep in thought, I flinched when he brought his hand up to my face.

diately. He ran his thumb over my brow and my eyes didn't leave his gaze
shouldn't frown so much."

rk blue I didn't know what to say, yet I felt the frown relaxing under his
ran myHis touch was gentle, but I knew better than to be disarmed by
ined hegestures. He was a Made Man, and his whole life was about violer
e was acruelty.

He slowly dropped his hand as our fathers returned to the room.

it us to My father's voice broke the tension in the room. "That's all we need
you, Jessica." He was dismissing me. I should have been relieved that
escape this room now. However, I was confused—was this all the dis
there was going to be about the biggest decision of my life? About v
; they'dwas going to marry?

I bit down on my lower lip, knowing there was nothing I could sa
So, I walked toward the door and let myself out quietly.

I ran up to my bedroom, keeping my head down and trying to k
I didn'ttears at bay until I was safely ensconced in my room. I didn't want any
live-in staff to see my distress. My mother had always drummed into
need to maintain appearances.

front of I didn't have long to myself before my mother appeared at my b
I don'tdoor, pouncing on me immediately. "I've been looking for you every
of thisJessica! Why are you hiding yourself up here? Did you sign the enga
contract?"

ith any "Yes, I did. Why didn't you tell me that Father wanted to see me to
me of my engagement?" I had felt ambushed, and I couldn't help the
accusation in my voice.

"It wasn't my place to say. He wanted to tell you himself. What did
think of you?"

2. “You “I don’t know. We didn’t speak and he barely looked at me. I’ve spoken to him before, and I didn’t even speak to him today.”

thumb. “No, of course he wouldn’t have noticed you before today. After a small and Juliana were always joined at the hip, and standing next to her, you look even plainer.” My mother really knew how to boost my self-

“Really, Jessica, what were you thinking putting on that lilac dress this morning? It makes you look unsophisticated and insignificant.”

and from My mother gave me no time to answer, however, and instead launched into wedding talk. “You will have to dazzle Rafael by wearing the most expensive wedding dress money can buy.”

whom I “I’d prefer something simple and elegant.”

“Nonsense! People will be expecting something elaborate and classy now. After all, it will be the wedding of the year!”

I recalled her saying exactly the same thing about Juliana’s wedding. We’d all seen how that had turned out.

I knew there was no way out of this marriage now that the contract had been signed. Once we were married, I would do my duty as a Mafia wife

do what Rafael expected of me. I knew I was plain, shy, and uninteresting. However, if I was a good wife to him, he might treat me with respect and remain faithful to me. Some arranged marriages turned into love over time and I was determined to work as hard as possible to achieve that with my own marriage. I wanted a loving husband with whom I could build a happy family life.

inform family life.

hint of “Come along and change your dress right this minute,” nagged my mother. “Then it is only fit for the trash can.”

Rafael I would change out of my lilac dress to stop my mother from embarrassing me, but I definitely wouldn’t throw it away—I wasn’t going to give

e never favorite dress so easily.

As I undressed, I couldn't help thinking to myself that soon I was going to lose even more control of my life, and that thought made my blood run cold. It made my self-esteem plummet.

As this

When I stepped into the bathroom, "Ortensia Santino telephoned this morning," my mother informed me that week. Ortensia was Rafael's mother. "She rang to arrange an appointment for you to start on birth control. The Santinos are sending you a card tomorrow, which will take you to see their doctor."

"Couldn't I just get it from our own doctor?" Better still, I thought I could just not consummate our marriage at all. But I didn't say that out loud—and because I knew that was out of the question.

Not only would I be expected to consummate the union on our wedding night, I would also be forced to provide evidence of it the next morning. Life and sundry.

I knew that in line with the Sicilian tradition of *cunzata del letto*, the bed would be prepared with the 'virgin sheet'. The virgin sheet could not be touched by married women; instead, just before the wedding, four unmarried girls would make up the bed with pure white, hand-embroidered sheets. My happy mother would also sprinkle rice between the sheets as good luck for the new couple's fertility.

Tradition further dictated that on the morning after the wedding, the husband would hang the virgin sheet out on the balcony. It was proof of fertility.

up my

families that the bride had been pure on her wedding night and that going to marriage had been consummated.

I could. The marriage could be annulled if it hadn't been consummated, and annulment would be a disaster given that the marriage was a strategic arrangement between the two families. The Mafia still followed this vulgar tradition of checking the virgin sheet. They loved anything to do with blood.

I shuddered at the humiliating thought of my bloodstained wedding night being on show to the whole of the Società. I wasn't sure which was worse: the sheets being seen by some people who I barely knew, or the sheet being seen by my parents.

"It's all arranged now, Jessica. Anyhow, the Santinos are only trying to help by making you an appointment with their doctor. Even if you don't appreciate it, at least they recognize how much I have on my mind. I'll arrange a wedding within such a short timescale," said my mother in a martyred tone.

She set a large box in front of me. "I've chosen what you will wear to the engagement party," she announced, sounding exceptionally pleased with herself as she proceeded to pull a dress out.

I looked at it with undisguised dismay.

It was completely over the top. It was obvious my mother had bought it from Signora Demonte's boutique, otherwise known as *The Desperate Bride's Boutique*. It was where Società mothers went to get 'eye-catching' fashion dresses for their unmarried daughters to wear at Società functions, with the hope of snaring a good husband.

The more desperate the parents got, the more daring the outfits became. It was an embarrassment for a Mafia daughter to not be engaged by the time there was a '2' at the front of her age—in other words, by her 20th birthday.

hat the On the other hand, the men were permitted to get engaged at a later date and no one raised a single eyebrow at their sleeping around and sowing the seeds of and anoats.

ic bond This was clearly one of Signora Demonte's signature dresses: low neckline, high hemline – check, sequins – check, lace – check, screaming color – check, clingy fabric – check, slutty – check.

g sheets My mother insisted I try on the dress. After I had put it on, I pulled it down—worse—at the hemline, wondering if it would stretch any further.

s being “Mother, you know that this sort of dress really isn't my style.”

“Jessica, first impressions count. And Rafael's first impression of you would have been awful in that dreadful lilac sundress you were wearing. You need to put you in a dress which will show him that you're not a unsophisticated young girl.”

er in a “But that's what I am,” I wailed, although I knew I had no chance of changing her mind over the dress.

r to the “Nonsense. This dress will transform his view of you.”

ed with Yes, he would now change his mind to thinking that I dressed like a sophisticated girl. “What does it even matter what I wear to the engagement party? He has already seen me and he's signed the contract, so it's not as if he might not be persuaded into marrying me.”

Brides “It's important he changes his view of you.”

g', high My heart sank to my stomach. “Did he say he wasn't happy with me?”
tions in “No, but of course he wouldn't have been happy—he wants a sophisticated wife. We can't do much about your disappointing looks, so we'll just make the best of it. Try and impress him through your clothes. Even a plain Jane like you can look sensational in a dress like this.”

irthday. Jesus, my mother was delusional.

age and
air wild

eckline

bright The next morning, when it was time to leave for the doctor's appointment, I was surprised to see that my mother wasn't getting ready to leave. 'd down you coming with me?"

"No, Ortensia said that Emanuel told her that he had arranged everything so that I wouldn't need to attend with you. He is even sending a car and a group of you of his soldiers to escort you. The Santinos are determined to get everything in order. We preparations out of the way and keep the wedding date on track. They are not and that the only way the Società will get some stability after recent events is through a Santino-Bonardi marriage."

ance of I worried my lower lip. "But I don't know the doctor and I really want to come with me for this."

"You have to appear to be a grown-up, confident young woman. A woman you are marrying into the Santino family, the head family of the Società. Rafael I looked at her doubtfully.

needs to "For goodness sake, Jessica, you will do this and attend by yourself. You will not embarrass this family any further, especially after what happened with your sister, and not to mention your outburst at the contract signing...?" when you suggested Gabriel might still want to marry Juliana."

sticated "But I didn't mean to embarrass our family when I said that. I only have to..."

ou will My mother cut me short. "Jessica, you are a smart girl, so try not to be a tactless American tonight. Sometimes I think we should have brought..."

up more in the traditions of the old country.”

The old country—Italy, of course.

My mother was always harking back to her land of birth, where she lived until her parents brought her to America as a young child. She looked at life in Italy as the pinnacle of perfection, conveniently forgetting how “Aren’t she enjoyed the trappings of her wealthy American lifestyle.

“Your father is still unhappy about what you said, so please think carefully before you speak today and make sure you do not cause any further shame to the Bonardi name.”

I headed out to the car sent by Emanuel Santino, sitting in the back with the two soldiers sent to guard me.

I was wearing a white tailored dress, although its formal style wasn’t to my taste, and I felt uncomfortable due to the neckline and cap being edged in scratchy lace trim.

I thought that white clothing always made me look washed out, and after all, skin merging with the pale fabric, making me look sallow and faded.” However, my mother had insisted that I wear white, cream, or ivory as far as possible in the run up to the wedding, so as to remind everyone that I was the bride-to-be. She definitely wanted to shout it from the rooftops. I emphasized to everyone that I was marrying into the Capo’s family, my siblings and I had always joked that our mother, Casmundina Bonardi, was a typical Mafia wife: obedient and demure, yet ruthlessly ambitious and meant to bring honor to the family.

When I arrived at the clinic for my appointment, I was shown into an examination room and introduced to the doctor.

I wasn’t sure why, but something about his demeanor set me off, putting my senses on high alert.

“I need to ask you some questions and then we can get on examination.”

she had *Examination?* No one had said anything about any examination. I looked at the chill spread through me.

very much The doctor took my medical history and asked me all sorts of questions about my periods and whether I was still a virgin.

carefully After that, he handed me a paper sheet. “Take off all your garments including your bra and panties.”

“I don’t understand...why?”

behind “Didn’t your mother explain? You will need a vaginal examination. I can prescribe you birth control, and I’ll also need to examine your cervix. The contraceptive pill can lead to a higher risk of breast cancer, so you need to have regular check-ups. Once you have undressed, wrap the sheet around yourself and lie down on the examination table.”

my pale Once the doctor had left the room to give me privacy, I quickly undressed and wrapped the crackly sheet around my body.

so much I had never had an internal examination. The Mafia didn’t allow a woman to have a pap smear before her marriage, so as to prevent any accidental pregnancies and to her hymen before her wedding night—they wanted to take no chances. My given how important the bloodied bedsheets were in proving the girl’s virginity.

for her I looked down at the sheet. I assumed it was to provide some modesty, although it only came to mid-thigh and I wished it covered more of me. A few minutes later, I heard the door slowly open and close, and heavy footsteps came into the room.

on edge, The doctor was back.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I sensed that something

to the didn't feel quite right.

I looked up and felt the blood drain from my face...

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