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Mafia Casanova  
by M. Robinson & Rachel Van Dyken

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# AUTHOR NOTE

We are SO excited to bring you our first collab! We've both been writing mafia for over a decade and this just felt right to us after connecting in the Erotic Playroom (a group on Facebook) we had to do a co-writing challenge and after meeting, we hit it off and decided that we needed to do a book together.

We hope you enjoy it as much as we did writing it and we are so pumped to bring together two mafia worlds

<3 XOXO, M. Robinson & RVD



# DEDICATION

To both of our mafia worlds, we never imagined it would get this big or this amazing, combining both fandoms and creating Mafia Casanova, but we are so ridiculously thankful to our readers for rooting for us.

This book is for you!!!

And don't worry, you'll only need like two bottles of wine, not the usual three.

Just kidding... or are we?!?

# PROLOGUE

“If the world were perfect, it wouldn’t be.” —*Bizzaro*

*Romeo*

*Now*

“Do you have any idea what I could do to you?” I rasped into her ear, fueling the demon deep inside my soul.

Rage dripped like the very blood I was about to spill. After all, rage was a lot like a small wound, it slowly seeped until it made a puddle you couldn’t risk not seeing, and that puddle turned into a lake, that lake into an ocean—until you were consumed with the need to do something about it.

Why? Because you couldn’t fucking breathe.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” she whispered with a smile. Her face said yes, while her lies said no.

It didn’t matter. She’d be silenced soon.

After her screams of ecstasy turned to those of horror. Anyone standing outside would just assume it was the best night of her life.

Not the worst.

When in fact, it was her death in broad daylight.

I wasn't the man she thought I was...

The sweet talker.

The gentleman.

The Casanova.

The man who could make her come over and over again until she begged for mercy when, in reality, she wanted what all these bitches did.

My heart.

My soul.

Those three little words that always carried the hardest and heaviest blow...

I want you.

I need you.

*I. Love. You.*

Women wanted the fairy tale, the happily ever after, the dream come true. I'd walk through hell just to get to you. They'd yet to figure out it was all a ruse, an illusion, a fucking made-up lie. If you told yourself something long enough, you were bound to believe it.

Well, guess what. Love was no different.

I knew what you were thinking; I was an intuitive bastard like that. That was what made me damn good at what I did. Staying alive when everyone wanted me dead.

Another three little words which were the truest and dearest of them all...

*Who hurt you?*

Images of her with him assaulted the forefront of my mind. I spent years trying to fuck her out of my mind. For some reason, I couldn't begin to explain or understand, memories tried to shove their way to the surface—

memories of a brother.

*My brother.*

Who'd do anything for me, anything for the family—or should I say The Famiglia. Our world was a dark place where light never shined unless you were taking someone's life. A moment of clarity was, in fact, a double-edged sword, one that dragged me deeper and deeper into the depths of my own depravity. I never said no... to anything or anyone.

I nodded when I was supposed to.

I smirked when I needed to.

I complimented when the timing was right.

Then... I'd send them to Hell after giving them nothing but Heaven.

I should've felt guilty.

I didn't.

I simply wanted the thrill of feeling alive.

In the words of the late and great Shakespeare, "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

I lived by those words.

Blood in, no out.

When it came to women, they were by far my favorite victims. Fucking and killing were two of my best qualities. I always delivered the final act with a mind-blowing orgasm.

Wet.

Warm.

*Red.*

Soaking my hands.

This woman? She meant nothing. None of them did...

*But one.*

The rage I was fueling decided to burn, to shift into the monster I was becoming as I pressed an open-mouthed kiss on her neck.

Her legs wrapped around me.

My groans fell easily.

My movements on repeat.

I thrust into her.

Hard.

Fast.

I fucked her with urgency.

“Romeo!”

We all had our demons.

My name was mine.

In seconds, her ankles dug into my skin.

Her nails into my back.

Her panted breaths into the nape of my neck.

I clenched my teeth to keep from saying what I really wanted to—and to her face.

*Traitor.*

*Whore.*

*Fucking rat.*

“Feel good, baby?” I licked down her chest and up again, stopping at her ear before I gave it a small tug with my teeth. “Been watching you all night...”

“I knew it...” She moaned as I filled her to the hilt. “I knew you wanted me.”

I almost killed her right then and there. Barely able to keep my anger in check. I pumped, deliberately this time, my hips thrusting at a painfully slow speed.

I wanted her to beg to come... or maybe it was to live?

“So smart,” I taunted. She was merely another bitch in heat. “What are you doing here, huh?”

I inwardly winced when she reached for my jet-black hair, giving it a tug. Did she really think I was that into her that I wanted her to touch my hair?

I was in control.

*Always.*

She was a means to an end.

They all were.

“You.” She giggled. “I’m doing you. Get it? Oh, God.” She yanked harder on my hair, and I couldn’t help myself; I pulled her hand away.

Over it.

*Over her.*

“Who are you sleeping with?” I asked, pausing for a moment.

What was her name?

Tasha?

Natasha?

Who the fuck cared?

“I wouldn’t want to piss him off,” I added. Lying was part of the process.

I didn’t give a shit who she was deep throating as long as I got my answers in the end.

“Tristian,” she replied with no hesitation. “But he’s been really busy lately, especially since the Russians decided to turn and—”

“Wow,” I interrupted. “You’re just full of surprises, is that it? I fuck you hard enough, and you sing like a goddamn canary?”

She threw her head back and laughed. Her fake brown hair slid off her shoulder before her ember eyes locked onto mine. “You have a certain reputation for bringing the little death, Romeo. How could I say no?”

Especially if it means that I get another night in your arms—I'll tell you whatever you want to know. Just don't stop what you're doing with your dick inside of me.”

“Hmm, you drive a very, very—” I thrust deep “—hard bargain.”

I didn't let up. The slapping sound of my balls against her ass echoed around the room, along with the noise of her pussy soaking down my shaft.

I waited until she was on the brink of the edge.

Hanging.

Ready.

Eager.

“Who's he working for?”

“Tristian?” Her back arched off the bed.

“Yes.”

“The highest bidder. You know who that is.”

I thrust with more determination, hitting her G-spot.

“Oh, Romeo...”

Her mouth parted.

Her legs shook.

Her core locked up.

“I'm coming...” she moaned.

“No shit.”

Her cunt clamped down on my cock.

“I think I'm in love with you.”

They all loved me; it was part of my charm.

I gave her a devious smile. “Thanks for the fuck.”

Our eyes connected, becoming one. Before she loudly gasped.

Toes curling.

Chest seizing.

Heart stopping.

I watched as blood oozed out of her mouth and down her chin. Getting lost in the symmetry of her death.

I did what I had come to do.

Fuck her senseless.

And then...

I slit her throat.



# CHAPTER ONE

“Sometimes the only way to stay sane, is to go a little crazy.” —*Harley Quinn*

*Romeo*

*Then: Six years ago*

“**Y**ou’re so full of shit!” Tristian gave me a shove while he nodded to the bartender for two more shots. “That’s physically impossible, and you know it!”

“Ah, but you don’t. Because you’ve never tried it, you’re too afraid your dick will fall off, you pussy. By the way, it won’t. Though with your small dick, I do worry if you can hit the exact spot where her eyes start rolling to the back of her head like she’s seeing motherfucking God.” I winked, knowing I was getting to him.

By sibling standards, my brother and I had a normal relationship. There was rivalry as much as there was love. He was older but not wiser. I had inherited that trait. Which was why our father loved me best, and Tristian

knew it too. Even our baby sister, Juliet, was aware of it. Everyone was; he didn't try to hide it.

Our mother was more discreet when it came to displaying her love and devotion toward us. However, she loved me more, as well.

Don't get me wrong, they both adored Tristian. He was their firstborn, their pride and joy, the apple of their fucking eyes. With him, everyone knew what they were getting. He was stable, complacent, safe. The Famiglia's accountant, his job was to ensure the money went where it was supposed to go.

*Hidden.*

Making ruthless sons of bitches richer by the day.

I was not given the same leniency as my older brother. From the moment I was born, I was Romero Sinacore.

I killed.

Avenged.

Made panties wet.

"Ugh!" a familiar sultry voice expressed, bringing my attention to the redheaded beauty walking into the bar. "Can you get any more vulgar, Romeo?"

"Depends on how much more liquor I chug down."

She smirked, narrowing her piercing blue eyes in my direction like we were the only two people in the wide-open space, which happened a lot when we were together. Especially when it came down to the three of us. Despite the years of trying to avoid the way she looked at me, pretending as if I didn't see her face light up when I walked into the room.

Playing off the way I made her laugh.

Smile.

Cry.

And fuck, did I ever make her cry.

Eden De Rossi, the daughter of Bartollo, the head of our security. We'd known her all our lives; she'd practically lived with us since her father's job was to make sure we stayed alive. Eden grew up with us. She was my age, twenty-one. Tristian was two years older than me, while our baby sister Juliet was only sixteen. Already proving to be a royal pain in the ass.

I watched out for her.

For all of them, including Eden.

Especially from me.

Our mother wanted Tristian and me to be close in age in hopes we would be there for one another. In the Italian mafia, family was everything.

Loyalty and trust, end of fucking story.

The Sinacore ancestry only knew blood and violence. Generations upon generations killed in the name of The Famiglia. We were one of the Five Families, which meant no one crossed us and lived to see another day.

*I* made damn sure of it.

From early on, I was chosen as the boss's favorite, not once trying to hide the fact that he wanted me to partner with him, standing to the right of his throne.

One day, I'd rule the underworld.

Where Tristian was weak, I was strong. I didn't give a flying fuck what I had to do. I did as I was told, enjoying it every step of the way. My brother, on the other hand, he was too emotional, too involved. He felt too much, exactly like our mother. I felt nothing; it was just easier that way.

I learned from his mistakes.

I corrected his slipups.

I made sure to make up for his flaws.

You see, Tristian had a heart.

I was certain...

*I didn't.*

Cold.

Dark.

Lethal.

Mafia Casanova was what everyone labeled me.

Tristian narrowed his eyes in my direction. "Just because I'm not named after a pussy doesn't mean I don't know my way around one."

My lips twitched in amusement while uncertainty crossed his features. He was always so damn easy to read.

"You're thinking about it now, aren't you?"

"Shut the fuck up." He threw the shot of tequila back. "Leave it to you to give me actual performance anxiety before I'm even on deck. Son of a bitch, I hate you sometimes."

"You love me; everyone does."

His eyes fell for a bit before he tossed back another shot. "Yeah, that's the problem. How's a guy supposed to get laid around here with you cock blocking me every time?"

I didn't flinch.

I was good at appearing aloof.

I had to be; it was the way I stayed alive.

Seduce.

Satisfy.

Kill.

Welcome to the Sinacore Family.

*Cheers.*

But something about the way he said it rubbed me the wrong way, maybe because I'd heard it my entire life, how every girlfriend from first grade to

present day had eyes for me and only me and gazed right past him.

I shouldn't say every woman.

*Eden.*

My forbidden fruit.

She was always the one who never fell for my bullshit no matter how hard I tried. Then again, she grew up learning how to read people too. She was a lot like us, except she was a little girl who turned into a woman as if it happened overnight. Her father didn't hold the power or level of authority that ours did, but she still learned all the tricks, knowing how to defend herself with more than her favorite gun or knives.

I had the fucking scar on my right thigh to prove it. The memory of attempting to kiss her during our senior year of high school struck my mind.

Except, I'd like to think it was her way of foreplay.

She threatened to stab me again when I realized I'd just said that out loud.

I gripped her wrist. "I let you attack me once. It won't happen again."

She glared at me.

No one could get my heart racing, and my cock hard quite like she could. Especially when she was trying to prove she was capable of being more than just a woman in a man's world.

I loved her.

Tristian and I both did.

Nevertheless, I loved my brother more.

There was a line I never crossed when it came to Eden. Her garden wasn't mine to plow my seed in.

"Speaking of my growing fan base..." I winked at Tristian, letting her go. "Where's the three to our threesome at tonight?"

"She's right here, and it's not a threesome since I still refuse to participate," she teased, playing coy.

Eden was smart; she knew I wanted her.

Needed her.

Craved her like an addict craves heroin.

Tristian's eyes immediately darkened, drinking her in. I, however, refused to turn around. I already knew what I'd see.

Tits.

Ass.

Legs.

Long ones that seemed to go on forever. Yet somehow, they matched her curves. Triggering my hands to burn with the desire to caress up and down her body.

Marking.

Claiming.

Making her mine.

Until she begged me to stop.

I wouldn't.

I couldn't.

Years of pent-up sexual tension would do that to any man, and I was no different. She had the power to bring me to my knees if she sought it out enough. I refused to allow her to come in between my brother and me.

Even though I wanted her more than anything and anyone.

"Eden." I gestured for another drink. "We started without you."

She reached around me, grabbing the shot from the bartender. "You always do. I'm no longer surprised. So what are we celebrating?"

I slowly turned, keeping my eyes locked on hers. Fighting with the urge to glance down her body. Eden demanded respect, attention; I'd never treat her as if she was just another victim of my charm.

She was different.

Immune.

Not interested.

She loved me, but not in the same way I did her. Hence, the fucking knife in my thigh senior year. Saying some shit about dying rather than hooking up with someone who used scratches on his bedpost as a way to climb to the top.

There was a joke in there somewhere about being on top, spewing out of my mouth, of course. The way she was looking at me had my mind lost in its own thoughts.

Tristian must have noticed. He cleared his throat next to us, simply saving my ass. She'd hit me; I knew it. It was one of the things I loved the most about her.

She was feisty.

Bitchy.

Always needing to have her voice heard and be put in her place.

Hence, why I made her cry often. Despite her dramatics and fucking temper tantrums, she always came back for more. I had that effect on women.

You want to know how to keep their panties wet and under your demand and control without them even knowing it?

Piss them off.

Ignore them.

But always do it with a grin.

There you go, you're welcome.

Bringing my focus back to him, Tristian stated with pride in his tone, "Your father and the Capo just made this asshole his captain."

Despite desperately longing to go from associate to made man, he didn't have it in him. He was The Famiglia's accountant, for fuck's sake. All he saw was the glory behind the bloodshed. Men praising each other for the mentality of kill or be killed.

He never saw the lonely nights.

Showering the blood off your body.

Burning yet another suit because to keep it would criminalize you.

He didn't see the demon I saw in the mirror every day, and I would die before letting him see just how much this life stole from you... bit by bit.

Piece by piece.

Until you were nothing but...

A soulless devil.



## CHAPTER TWO

“We stop looking for monsters under the bed when we realize they’re inside us.” —*Joker*

*Romeo*

“He did?” Eden’s eyebrows furrowed, standing by the bar. “But...why?”

I placed my hand over my chest, feigning offense. “You wound me, fair maiden—”

“Oh, shut up.” She waved me off. “I mean you’re pretty, and I’m sure with all your experience you know how to tie a good knot or pretend to strangle someone, but come on, you barely have ten kills under your belt and —”

“Fifty-seven, but who’s counting?” I corrected. “It’s just a number, right? Double it, and it’s probably how many women I’ve fucked.”

She winced, quickly recovering. Knowing it didn’t matter, I saw it.

I saw everything.

Particularly when it came to her.

“I think it’s time to get extremely drunk. You in?”

She was still gaping at me like she didn't even know me. Obviously, blown away with how many enemies I'd killed, or maybe it was how many women I made come on my cock. Either way, I needed to get away from her shame, and her judging stare burning a hole in my body.

"I'm gonna hit the restroom. Be right back." Tristian, the fucking traitor, nearly ran in the opposite direction taking down an elderly couple in all his haste. He hated confrontation; again, he was just an accountant, for fuck's sake.

I sighed and gazed after him. "Zero tact."

"Absolutely none." Eden shrugged. "It's why he's so charming."

"Wait, him?" I pointed in the general direction of the bathrooms. "My older brother? Charming? Are you already drunk?" I pressed my hand to her forehead only to feel the prick of a knife against my favorite part of my six-pack. "Do it, I dare you."

"I've done it before." She jerked her hand away and sighed. "And yes, if you must know, I think he's charming. He's—" she lifted a shoulder in a weak shrug "—he's different, you know? Not jaded yet, there's no darkness in him, not like..." Her voice caught.

"*Me?* Is that what you were going to say?"

"Look at you, Romeo." Her voice lowered. "Fifty-seven kills at the age of twenty-one? Is that the life you pictured for yourself? You could have been a model, an actor, a firefighter."

"You do realize you named literally every occupation that has good-looking guys, right? Is that your type, Eden? You want a hero? What exactly is he saving you from? Because from what I know about the woman standing in front of me, she's as ruthless as the man staring back at her. So please, enlighten me on what part of you is a damsel in distress."

She rolled her eyes. "My point is, you're in this world now, just like my

dad, just like me...and there is no going back; I'll have to marry for convenience, not love. Like I'm some fucking trophy in the name of mafia life. But Tristian, he's still semi-normal compared to us. It's refreshing; he wants no part of what you do on the daily. Taking lives and fucking women isn't his M.O."

"And who says it's mine?"

"I do."

"Since when are you the authority on who I am and what I do?"

She put her hands up in a surrendering gesture. "I'm not trying to offend you. I didn't think you would care if people called you a killer."

"I don't."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I care if *you* do."

She scoffed out a chuckle. "I find that hard to believe. You get off on the power, Romeo. It's blatant and easy to see. You love that women fall at their feet for you."

"I'd say more like they fall on their knees for me." I grinned. "But yours works too."

"Ugh! You see! This is exactly what I'm talking about. You don't take anything seriously. It's why your brother is different. His life is worth something."

"As opposed to mine, that's worth nothing in your eyes?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. I can read you like the back of my hand. I have since we were kids, and it's what pisses you off the most about me. We have that connection, and you don't share that with anyone but me. Not even my charming brother."

"Your arrogance is annoying."

“So you’ve said a thousand times. Doesn’t change the fact that I know you, Eden.”

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes again. “Does your life mean anything to you?”

“Of course it does.”

“Really? When?”

I opened my mouth to reply, however quickly shut it.

Did my life mean anything to me? Why couldn’t I answer her question?

“Looks like the cat got your tongue, huh? You kill women when they are...you know...” She motioned her hands awkwardly in front of her.

“While they are...”

In a challenging tone, I ordered, “Fucking say it, I dare you. Would you like my tongue deep inside of you instead?”

“I hate you.”

“Correction, you love me.”

“I tolerate you.” She jabbed a finger at me, and that was when I saw it, the flicker of her eyes to my mouth like she was curious, like she wanted to know. It was my job to read people, and for the first time in a long time, she cracked.

It was brief.

Sudden.

Enough.

I leaned in and tilted her chin toward me. “Was orgasm the word you were going for or something dirtier...God, please say it was something dirtier...”

Her breath hitched. “Romeo...we shouldn’t.”

*Again.*

I got her.

There were times where she would let her guard down and stop pretending like I didn’t mean anything to her.

More than friendship.

More than bickering.

Much more than anything...

*Anyone.*

“We most definitely should.” I nodded. “Didn’t you know? Sex fixes everything.”

She burst out laughing. “You’re insane.”

“Then go a bit crazy with me; I promise you’ll enjoy it.”

“You gonna kill me during or after?”

“Oh, definitely after.” I nodded seriously. “Wouldn’t wanna kill the moment.”

She smiled, her cheeks slightly turned a shade of pink. “So tell me, Red... what’s it going to be?” I asked, watching as her eyes dilated at the sound of the nickname I’d called her since we were kids. Twirling her red hair in between my index finger, I tugged her closer to my mouth. Inches away from my lips.

There it was...

Our connection.

A throat cleared, forcing me to pull away from her as Tristian looked between us, his face hard and unreadable. “I’m not feeling well, guys, so I’m just gonna head out.”

“No!” Eden reached for his arm; his eyes softened. “Stay, please!”

His breathing changed the minute she touched him; it was like he transformed into an entirely different human, unrecognizable by even his younger brother.

Because he was fucking in love with her.

I knew that too.

I’d known it all my life.

Eden was the garden we both wanted to plant our seed in.

She was still gripping onto his arm, not mine. While she always pushed me away, with Tristian, she pulled him closer to her. She was different with him than she had ever been with me. Including this very moment. Where I was discussing taking her to my bed, she was pretty much begging Tristian to cock block the fuck out of me.

I'd never been jealous of a body part before, but there you go, a first time for everything. I wanted to cut off my brother's arm.

Quickly, I shoved the thought away.

Family over everything.

*Anyone.*

"Actually," I rasped, forcing an easy smile, "I was going to go find someone to dance with, you two stay."

The hurt expression on Eden's face was a dagger to my cold heart. She knew what I was doing. This wasn't the first time I let him have her, and it wouldn't be the last.

"You're sure?" she inquired, searching my eyes for more lies.

I gave her nothing. A blank canvas. Replying, "Positive." Meeting her eyes.

Bright blue stared deep into mine. For a second, she was able to break through. I was the first to break the power this woman had over me; gazing down at the ground, I backed away.

If I did, I wouldn't turn around and find someone else.

If I did, she'd see right through me.

If I did, I knew that she'd be going home with me.

*Not him.*

This was only the first fuck-up in a long line of fuck-ups.

It would forever change my life.

This was the moment where I turned the page and ended the chapter of what could have been.

Handing her to my brother was the most noble shit I'd done in all my life. It was the least I could do. He was my blood, my only brother, the man I looked up to.

How was I supposed to know I was damning all three of our souls with one choice?

I didn't.

I couldn't.

I surrendered.

In one year, they were married.

In one year, I had everything I wanted.

In one year...

Our lives dragged us straight to Hell.

# CHAPTER THREE

“I find your lack of faith disturbing.” —*Darth Vader*

*Romeo*

*Then: Eight months later*

“She said yes!” Tristian’s face was lit up like a Christmas tree as the family all stood to offer their congratulations. We were at our parents’ house.

I sat.

I sat, and I stared at the wall in front of me.

Soon he’d want to shake my hand.

Soon he’d want me to smile.

Soon I’d want to drink myself to death.

How I could manage to kill without once feeling an ounce of pain, only to feel like I was going to lose my mind at the news of his engagement.

I buried the reasons like I buried my heart.

Like I’d hidden my soul.

Eden.



She wasn't mine.

She never had been.

Now she belonged to another man who wasn't me.

My brother.

*Tristian.*

He didn't steal her from me.

I gave her to him.

And I had only myself to blame.

I'd let this happen.

In the back of my mind, I knew—a life for us just wasn't in the cards. A relationship. A marriage. I barely allowed a friendship. I didn't want this life for her. If it wasn't me, it was going to be another son of a bitch who'd drag her into the flames with him. I couldn't allow that to happen, not after knowing how pure her heart truly was. My brother would be good to her. He'd treat Eden like she deserved. She was his whole world, and I wouldn't expect anything less from him.

But what was worse than what I was currently encountering? I couldn't face her.

I didn't want to congratulate her.

Tell her how happy I was for them.

More lies.

No truths.

The reality of our love story was that it was over before it ever had a chance to begin.

Being married to me would kill her, slowly, day by day, until no pieces of her soul were left. She'd lie with her words, and she'd give me her body. But I'd be left with nothing but the ash of the woman I burned with me.

It was better this way.

She had him,

He had her.

They had each other while I had nothing.

Slowly, I stood on wooden legs and then turned to my brother.

“Tristian.” I held out my hand, surprised it wasn’t shaking with the rage I felt trapped in my body demanding to be free. “I’m happy for you, brother.”

The room fell silent.

They all knew.

They fucking knew.

I sacrificed my happiness to ensure he received his. Tristian’s eyes flickered with sadness before he cleared his throat and reached out, taking my hand in his—a firm handshake, a gentleman’s handshake.

Why did I feel like I was going to fuck him up?

“I’m going to head out; I have a few things I need to take care of.” I sidestepped him, not giving him or any of the family a chance to say shit.

My 1961 convertible Lincoln Continental was parked in front of one of the many Sinacore mansions, just waiting for me to take it on a joy ride. Unlocking the doors, I stepped in and fired up the engine. Instantly, I slammed my hands against the steering wheel until it didn’t hurt anymore until I didn’t want to start a war within The Famiglia.

With my brother.

My flesh and blood.

I needed to get my shit together, I was trained to not feel emotion, and there I was feeling bullshit I didn’t think I was capable of. It was confusing, tearing at my insides, making me feel like less of the man I was born to be.

My hands shook as I finally gripped the steering wheel and hit the accelerator until it was pressed against the floor of the car.

Driving was a blur. One big fucking blur.

All I saw was her face.

Blue eyes, striking red hair, full lips.

*Laughter.*

God, I'd die to hear her laugh like she did with my brother. She loved him. I knew that everyone loved him as well. It was complicated. We were complicated. More so now.

A sharp curve loomed ahead, and I eased off the accelerator as I followed the road, then once again jammed the gas pedal to the floor and punched through the turn, trying to shake off the unrelenting visions of what I'd just seen and heard. Turning up the music, I blared it as loud as it would go. With the hope it would tune out the images of Eden, of Tristian, of the life they'd have together. It hammered loud and hard into my mind, mimicking the pounding of my heart and the ringing in my ears.

I sped through the night. Going over seventy-five miles per hour, pushing eighty, ninety, one hundred. Fucking furious I'd allowed this to happen. I couldn't get to my final destination fast enough, flying by vehicle after vehicle across the valley, my foot heavy on the accelerator until everything I sped by was simply another huge blur.

Switching lanes.

Dodging cars.

I wanted to feel nothing.

"Goddamn it!" I roared into the crisp night air as I slammed on the breaks in front of Elliot's, which was a complete shit show of a dive bar in the Bronx, New York. Every single virus and bacteria known to mankind probably teemed in its old leather wingback chairs and sticky bar tables. However, it was ours.

Or it had been.

Ever since we used our fake IDs on her sixteenth birthday. This was the

place I'd lost her only eight months ago, gave her away like she meant not a damn thing when, in fact, she meant everything to me.

I put my car into park, cut the engine, and then got out, shoving my hands in the pockets of my slacks to keep from strangling whoever waved at me first. I kept my head down as I jerked the door open and made my way to the last empty barstool at the back of the bar.

Fuming from the inside out.

"A bottle," I snapped at the bartender before he even had time to ask what my order was.

Thank fuck, he knew what I drank.

A bottle of Jack and a shot glass appeared in my line of sight.

I said nothing.

Shoving the shot glass away from my hand, I simply grabbed the liquor and chugged until my lungs ached, and I needed to breathe.

*Damn, she was going to look beautiful in a wedding dress.*

Another long swig.

*Would she wear white? Had she been a virgin before Tristian? Or did I let him claim that too?*

Chug.

Chug.

Chug.

He loved her.

I'd protect them from afar.

Watch as their love continued to grow for one another.

A son.

A daughter.

One big happy family.

*Did I drink half the bottle?*

I used to own her soul. It wasn't enough since my brother always owned her heart.

The room blurred around me, the same way my focus had blurred in the car.

I began to feel numb.

Withdrawn.

Alone.

Lonely.

Until I heard the sweetest voice I'd ever known. "Thought I might find you here." Eden's soft tone was so quiet, and yet it felt as though a clash of thunder or a streak of lightning bolted across my body.

I didn't have to meet her eyes to know she was judging me. Her narrowed stare pointed directly at me and then the bottle as I brought the glass up to my mouth.

She sat down next to me, murmuring, "You heard."

"I heard."

She grabbed the Jack out of my hand. The only woman brave enough to do so.

"What are you doing?" she questioned.

"What does it look like?" I answered.

She didn't hesitate in replying, "Feeling sorry for yourself."

We locked eyes.

"You don't have a right to be pissed, Romeo. I hope you realize that."

I jerked back. "Are you fucking serious right now?"

She bit her bottom lip and looked around. "You're drunk, okay? Let's just get you—"

"—Home." I barked out a laugh, "Funny, since home has only ever been wherever you are." I hadn't meant to say it out loud, but there we were.

At a standoff.

A battle.

A war I had started and couldn't end. If I did, I'd lose, and I wasn't ready to give up the fight inside of me yet. Instead, I had done what came naturally. I'd pushed her away, into my brother's arms; that was where she belonged.

"Go home, Red. Go home to your fiancé."

Panic seized my chest as the thought continued to bulldoze through my brain—through my body.

She was engaged.

Getting married.

Becoming Mrs. Sinacore.

It was my worst nightmare come to life. I'd singlehandedly just lost both my brother and the love of my life in one hard blow.

More pain.

More heartbreak.

It was unfair.

Wrong.

So fucking wrong.

"That's not fair," she challenged, strong and determined. "What did you want me to do? Huh? Say no?"

I looked her up and down. "I think the better question is, did you want to say yes?"

"Romeo..."

"I'm waiting."

"Please don't make me answer that."

"If you don't, then I'll never know."

In one breath, she confirmed, "You know."

I scoffed out a snide chuckle, standing up. "I need to go."

“You’re drunk.”

“No shit. That’s why I need to go before I do something I’ll regret.”

“And what’s that?”

“Kiss you. Fuck you. Claim you.”

She gasped, obviously not expecting me to say that.

“See, I need to fucking go before I hurt my brother.”

“And what about me? What about hurting me?” She reached for my arm, her fingertips pressing into my wrist. “Do my feelings not matter?”

I jerked away from her touch. “Says the women who said yes to my brother.”

She winced, not trying to hide it. Though it was useless if she tried to hide anything from me.

“You’re being unfair. You’re the one who’s always treated me like nothing but a friend.”

“Tristian loves you.”

“And you, Romeo?”

She spoke with conviction, almost knocking me on my ass...

“Do you love me?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Maybe I’m the villain in your story, but I am the hero in mine.” —*The Timingila*

*Romeo*

*Fuck.*

“We’re not doing this here,” I demanded in a harsh tone.

“If not here, then where?”

“I’m not doing this with you anywhere.”

“So then that’s it? We’re done because you say so?”

I stepped close to her face, wiping away the solitary tear that slid down her cheek. I reached for her then, cupping her face between the palms of my hands. She was crying silently, and my fingertips were keeping up with each tear, trying to erase the damage that was already done.

She was right.

This was my fault.

And I’d hate myself for an eternity.

I would hate myself for killing what could have been without even trying.



“We were over before we began.” Eden sniffled. “Weren’t we?”

I squeezed my eyes closed, inhaled, exhaled, existed in her presence, greedy for it, sick with it. “Yes.”

“Wh-why?”

I opened my eyes, my hands dropping to my sides, angry that they weren’t touching her soft skin anymore but dangling like useless weapons that had lost their drive, their purpose, their pursuit.

“Because our love wouldn’t survive it—and I refuse to do that to you, Eden. I refuse to make you marry the monster when all you’ve ever wanted was the man. You deserve that. You deserve someone good. You deserve someone that won’t come home with lipstick on his collar and another woman’s perfume on his neck.”

Eden’s eyes flickered with anger as she shoved me. I didn’t waver.

Good, let her be angry.

Let her be jealous.

I welcomed her hate more than anything; it drowned out the love that demanded to be noticed between us.

Yes, let her despise me.

Because I already did.

We were at an impasse.

A standstill.

“Keys.” She held out her hand, breaking our stolen moment.

I grabbed the bottle, taking it with me, then reached into my suit jacket for what she wanted. Handing it over to her, I was careful not to touch her fingertips, knowing if I did, I was too drunk to stop myself from asking if I could kiss each one.

Following her outside, I openly stared at the sway of her hips in her tight black jeans and soft cream sweater. My hands itched to grab those hips, turn

her around, and slam my mouth against hers until she begged me for more. Instead, I wordlessly followed her to my car and opened the driver's side for her to get in.

An awkward silence fell between us.

I nodded toward the seat. She understood my silent command, and I shut her door behind her before I walked over to the passenger side, praying to whatever God that existed to help me pass the fuck out, so I didn't have to smell her lingering perfume the entire drive back to my house.

I buckled up, leaning my head against the headrest, waiting for the torture to begin. We drove in deafening silence, both of us lost in our own thoughts.

Mistakes.

Demons.

When she turned a sharp left into my building, I knew our time together was coming to an end. The valet stumbled all over himself as he rushed to the driver's side and opened the door.

"Come on." Eden was closing my door, wrapping an arm around my waist, leading us into the elevator of my penthouse. She hit the button, and I couldn't resist sniffing her hair like a lunatic, clinging to her more than I needed to.

This would be our last moment.

And I was desperate to slow down time.

Just like I was desperate to fix what I'd broken.

All too soon, the elevator doors opened to my penthouse floor, revealing the living room with skylight windows illuminating the room in front of us in my open floorplan suite.

"Thanks," I acknowledged, letting her go.

The front door shut quietly behind us as I walked toward the balcony, needing to open the doors. The air between us hung heavy and thick, making

it almost hard to breathe. I needed to get away from her; she wasn't mine. The longer I was around her, the harder it was to believe that lie.

*Not yours.*

*Not yours.*

*Not yours.*

*His.*

"I love you," she choked out.

Three words.

Three little words.

Triggered a domino effect.

Waves of anxiety, of anger, washed over me as I repeated those fucking words in my head while they greedily tried to imprint onto my heart.

With my back now to her, I ordered, "You need to go, Red."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes. That's why you need to go."

"What if I don't want to?"

"Then I'll be forced to kick you out."

"Just like that? It's so easy for you to just kick me out of your life, isn't it?"

"What do you want from me, Eden? You're marrying my brother. Why are you here?"

"I was worried about you."

"I'm not a child, Red. I don't need you to babysit me."

"I know that."

"What are you really doing here?" I rasped in a daunting tone.

"I just told you. I'm worried about you and wanted to make sure you were okay."

I blew out a puff of air. My composure should have told her she knew

what was coming, what I was about to say, but she didn't. I never thought it would come to this, or maybe I did, and I just chose to ignore it. Swept it under the rug that now held all of our truths.

All our lies.

All our bullshit tied together, where none of us had a chance of making it out alive.

Was it so wrong to want to go down in flames with her? Just once?

What are you doing here, Eden?" I repeated, needing to hear her say it again.

Thirsting for it.

Dying for it.

"Romeo, I love you."

I grimaced, covering it quickly as my hands shook at my sides. "Go home. You need to go home."

"Why are you trying to hurt me?"

"For the first time, I'm trying to do the opposite. All I've ever done is hurt you. With my words, with my actions. I can't do this to you anymore. I need to let you go."

"Romeo," she coaxed, obviously wanting me to stop what I was about to say but knowing I wouldn't.

"Go home, Eden. Go home to your fiancé. Go home to my brother. That's your home now. He's your priority now. Stop worrying about me. I'm not your concern anymore. I never was. He's going to be your husband. It's time you put him first."

"Fine. I'll do all that when you turn around and look me in the eyes and tell me you don't love me. I want you to look me in the eyes and tell me to fucking leave! To go home to my fiancé, your brother! Tell me, Romeo! Look at me and tell me to go home!"

I tensed, my hands fisting in the pockets of my slacks.

If I told her the truth of how I felt, then we'd be back to square one, and she'd wake up in my arms. Both of us betraying a man who'd die for her.

I sucked in a deep breath, trying to steady my mind.

My heart.

I spun and faced her, staring deep into her glossy eyes. Tears streamed down her gorgeous face. In five confident strides, I was standing in front of her.

She sucked in a breath when I leaned over, pausing inches from her lips. Pecking the corner of her mouth, I kissed away the tear that fell because of me.

She wanted me to fight with her.

She wanted me to tell her that it wasn't true.

My words devastated her, but not because they weren't true. They gutted her because they were true, every last one of them.

Hurt.

Pain.

Sorrow.

Of love and hate.

I loved Eden, but there were also times I hated her.

This was just one example of why.

*"I do,"* meant *"goodbye."*

To the memories.

To the love.

To the woman I'd spend the rest of my life trying to forget.

*"I do"* was simply the end.

Tristian had asked me for this one thing.

One thing to be his.

*Eden.*

The woman we both loved more than anything.

So I fucking said it.

“You’re his.” I looked straight into her tear-stained face and cupped her chin. “You’ve always been his.”

I slammed the final nail in my coffin, spewing, “Go home, Red. I don’t fucking love you.”

# CHAPTER FIVE

“People change, it’s just a matter of if they die before it happens.” —  
*Orochimaru*

*Eden*

*Now*

I don’t know how long I stood there, water pelting my shivering body until my teeth started to chatter until my body went numb like my heart. Until it felt like nothing was left of me.

I loved him.

I swear, I did.

Liar. My dark heart whispered.

For years he was my everything... until he started to change. Until we morphed into something unrecognizable. We shared a life, a home, a son. We had a future filled with happiness. I deserved that. He’d owed me that.

We both did.

Naz needed him.

His hero.

Now he was gone.

I watched with devastation as the shiny black casket was lowered into the hard, cold dirt. The heavens were raining upon me, weeping right along with me, raindrops seeping into my black dress.

Burning my core.

My heart.

My soul.

Little by little.

Deeper and deeper.

It became much more difficult to stand on my own.

But still, I stood there...

Not listening to the eulogies.

Not paying attention to the well wishes, and I'm so sorry.

Not caring for the prayers.

Not even reacting when people whispered under their breath that he deserved this.

Nothing would bring him back to me. Not even God.

There was nothing I could do, nothing I could say, no amount of hail Mary plays would make it okay. I could spend the rest of eternity on my knees, beating my chest, shouting toward Heaven.

And Heaven? Would punish me with its silence.

I lost myself until darkness surrounded me until all eyes were only staring at me until I wanted to die too.

With him.

Beside him.

One with my husband.

The only tether I had to this world was my son now, and even then, he



was a constant reminder of what pieces of my heart would be forever missing.

I could feel the eeriness of the guests like a noose around my neck, just waiting to take my next breath. Waiting for me to react, waiting for me to breakdown, just waiting for me to do something.

*Anything.*

It could have been one minute, four days, or two months that had passed in front of my swollen eyes at the speed of a lightning strike. There was no saying how long I stood there staring at Tristian's casket. If my puffy eyes and shivering body were any indications, I would have guessed a few hours. Time just seemed to stand still while my whole world shattered all around me.

Piece by piece.

One by one.

Now there would be nothing left of me.

Not the woman Tristian loved, married, had a son with. All they saw was a hollow shell of a person they used to know, holding onto the hope that I'd be that woman again. She was somewhere deep inside of me.

Hiding.

Scared.

Ceasing to exist.

Except I tried to pretend I wasn't there. I tried to imagine that my life hadn't been changed in a matter of seconds. That my whole world hadn't been turned upside down and inside out in the span of a few hours. That everything I wanted to believe in wasn't truly...

Another lie that would bring Tristian back.

It wouldn't.

He was dead.

And nobody knew why.

His choices.

Mine.

Ours.

Good ones.

Bad ones.

It all spun together, forming a catalyst of chaos and questions with no answers.

There were no do-overs, no matter how much I tried to reach those invisible lines and put them back in order, fixing what was broken.

I couldn't.

We were happy.

Weren't we?

I didn't choose this. I didn't want this. I'd never prayed for this. My husband had been buried today, six feet under, where I would never see him again.

Not one smile.

Not one laugh.

Not one, "*I love you.*"

I tightly shut my eyes, listening to the rain beat down on me.

And then, I suddenly felt *him* behind me.

Everything about him hurt.

His composure, his scent, especially his love for me.

*For us.*

"I'm sorry, Red. I'm so fucking sorry," he stressed in a tone that was filled with nothing but pain and remorse.

Guilt rolled off him; he radiated it. Consuming and bleeding into me. Holding me hostage, captive in the arms of a man who threw me into his

brother's bed.

I could feel it engulfing me, making it hard to breathe.

Hard to think.

Hard to feel.

Right now, at this moment.

My life ended in the arms of Romeo.

While men from all over New York City stopped by to show their respect to one of the most powerful families in the Sicilian Mafia.

I leaned into his embrace, trying to shove the guilt from the last fight between Tristian and me.

It was always the same.

Jealousy—the chip on his shoulder.

And working too much—the chip on mine.

I never believed it would come to this, that our last fight, our last words would be the end of us. I'd let him slam the door. I'd screamed after him in frustration.

There had been no goodbye kiss.

No kind words.

Just destruction.

And now, desolation.

Romeo was the last person I wanted to see. To feel. To have comforting me.

He would always and forever be the chasm between Tristian and me. The one bridge both of us refused to build, to cross.

"I'm sorry, Red," he repeated.

"I know." I barely got the word out before clenching my teeth back together to keep from sobbing again, to keep from screaming Tristian's name like it would bring him back.

Romeo tugged me closer into the side of his body, and for the first time in years, I felt nothing for the man who once meant everything.

“For what it’s worth,” he whispered into my ear. “I didn’t want this for him.”

I didn’t want to feel his heat.

His life.

His steady heartbeat.

I didn’t want the reminder that his brother—my husband was dead, and he was still very much alive.

Our eyes locked.

I hissed, “Leave.”

“No.”

Unable to hold back any longer, I spit fire, “It should have been you.” My voice cracked. “Do you hear me? It should have been you.”

“You’re right.” He tensed. “And you know I would have taken his place over and over again just to see you happy.”

“I can’t—” I sucked in a breath. “—I can’t breathe, I can’t—”

Romeo turned and pulled me into his chest. “Breathe, in and out, there you go, in and out, Red.”

Somehow the pressure against my chest gave me something to feel, to measure my breaths against; I clutched his hand and inhaled, exhaled.

That’s all that existed in that moment, sucking air in and letting it out until my body finally collapsed under the weight of grief. I fell to the ground, taking him with me. Slumping against Romeo’s chest, he wrapped his arms around me tight.

“What do you need?”

His question brought me back to another place and time when he had asked me that same thing. I peered up through my lashes. Water dripped from

his sharp chin.

I counted the drops.

And then I said, “I want you to find whoever killed Tristian, and I want them to suffer. I want them to bleed and beg for mercy. I want you to torture them until they die from your hands. When you’re done, I want you to come find me and show me their blood on your hands.”

He was quiet for a second before he kissed my forehead. Letting his lips linger, he finally confirmed what I’d been waiting for since the moment I felt him.

Not hesitating, he stated, “Done.”

## CHAPTER SIX

“I’m not afraid.” —*Maleficent*

*Eden*

*Then: Three months later*

He was punishing me.

Right there in front of all our family and friends.

He was proving just how much he could hurt me.

“Eden has always been the apple in everyone’s eyes,” Romeo declared into the microphone, standing front and center in the banquet room of our dinner rehearsal.

This wasn’t your average wedding rehearsal dinner by any means, not when I was marrying into the Sinacore family. Nothing they did was normal. This was just another event where they could flaunt their power and influence. Show how big their brass balls were with the names in attendance.

Rossi.

Nicolasi.

Campisi.

Martinez.

*The Five Families.*

Those were just to name a few present, and this was only the night before our wedding. Tomorrow it would be politicians, cops, detectives, officers, judges.

The list went on and on...

Not to mention, the press, which was itching to get the first picture of the Mr. and Mrs.

I waited, feeling as though I was on my knees begging for mercy. However, I wasn't. I was sitting at the head table next to my soon-to-be husband, who held my hand tightly while we listened to his brother give a toast on our behalf. Silently, I prayed Romeo would grant me some leniency knowing, in my heart, he wouldn't.

He never did.

Romeo continued on. Only I would notice that his smile was more cruel than congratulatory. "Eden has always been the type of woman that men gravitate toward. She walks into a room, and everyone turns to look at her, consumed with every last inch of her. She has the power to take your breath away without even trying. I can only hope that one day I will meet someone like her for myself. I want her to have your ability to make everyone love her, exactly like you do, Eden."

I kept my eyes on his, pretending as if I didn't want to scream, "You fucking asshole!" in this room full of people because if he really wanted me, he would have had me. Rejection pounded through me at his words.

I swear Romeo read my mind; his eyes suddenly connected with Tristian. "Growing up, my brother and I were both taught to go after what we want. For as long as I can remember, he's loved you, Eden. He will be devoted to

you, always putting you first no matter what. He was made to love you, Red, and you were born to love him.”

I squeezed Tristian’s hand tight. He lifted mine to his lips and pressed a soft kiss against my skin, mistaking the squeeze for love when it was hate, so much hatred for his brother.

His gaze came back to me, making sure I still had his attention; I refused to look away, lifting my chin in defiance as he continued to speak. “I’m looking at all of the beautiful women who came out to celebrate this union, and while he’s got the happily ever after, I’ve got my pick of the room.” He grinned. “You think you guys will do this again next week?”

Everyone laughed, except me. Feeling the sting of his words. He guzzled down more of his amber liquid.

Was he drunk?

“From the first time we saw each other, I knew you were destined to be someone special in my life, and now I know you’re the woman who’s going to keep my brother’s bed warm.”

Once again, everyone laughed at Romeo’s remarks. To an outsider looking in, he was the doting brother who was simply wishing us well. I knew better; he was throwing digs at me.

“I promise I’m almost done.” He winked at me. “In all seriousness, I used to tease Eden about being a tomboy. After all, she was raised with us, fought with us, cried with us—often. And as I stand here and make this toast, I’m having a hard time imagining her all grown up—I’ll always see the little girl with pigtails chasing after us. I’ll forever cherish that girl even though she’s grown into a young woman. What a hard truth to accept—that even though I don’t see it—because I don’t want to—Eden’s all grown up.”

I nearly jumped to my feet in outrage. Because that bastard knew. He knew his words hurt. I’d hit puberty late, hated that he called me little girl all



the time, and now he was rubbing it in my face. All those private confessions where he told me I was perfect even though I had a flat chest and braces.

My first sloppy kiss was Romeo. At least he attempted it before I chickened out and nearly stabbed him.

It didn't matter, because it was still a first. Right along with my first love, my first heartache.

And now he was deliberately hurting me, drawing a line in the sand, shoving any sort of love that was still left on my part off a cliff, and obliterating my heart in the process.

Raising his glass in the air, he added, "I will always hold a special place in my heart for..." Romeo paused for a second, and it felt like my heart did too.

*Give me something. Please...*

"...the love you and Tristian share."

And my heart dropped to the floor.

He gave me nothing.

A single tear ran down my cheek, I tried to wipe it away before Romeo saw, but it was useless. Because Romeo Sinacore saw everything. His eyes flashed as he continued his toast.

"To my brother and his bride, congratulations. I wish you all the best and many years of happiness. Welcome to the family, Eden. Soon to be Mrs. Sinacore."

He tossed back the last of his drink in finality and left the stage as the DJ turned up the music, motioning that the toasts were finished and the dancing should begin. It was seamless, the itinerary for our rehearsal, just like my future. Everything would be decided for me. To anyone who didn't know, my life would be perfect, a fairy tale for a mafia princess.

My eyes followed Romeo as he disappeared behind Andrei, the Sinacore boss. And there I sat, watching the laughing couples as they raced to the

dance floor and started slow dancing to whatever the hell the song was.

I could hear my own shallow breathing, and I wondered if Tristian noticed the deadness in my eyes, the empty feeling in my soul.

“Hey.” Tristian stood and kissed the top of my head. “I’m gonna go grab some more food; you want anything? I noticed you didn’t eat a lot before the toasts.”

How considerate.

But that was Tristian.

Always thinking about others.

Putting them before himself even if it killed him.

“No.” I forced a smile. “I’m good.”

A wide grin spread across his face. I drank in his chiseled jaw and warm brown eyes. “Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?”

“Only three or four times.” I kept my voice even, my smile small, to anyone watching they’d think we were having an intimate moment—how romantic, the soon-to-be bride and groom can’t seem to get enough of each other.

Only the bride wasn’t thinking of her groom.

I wished it was that easy.

That the beautiful man in front of me consumed my thoughts, owned my soul.

Instead, it was the asshole who hurt me. No matter what Romeo did, no matter how much love or hate he tossed in my direction, he would always take up residence in my heart.

If I could quit him.

I would.

“Well, it’s true.” Tristian cupped my chin between his fingers, lifting my face toward him as he pressed a soft kiss against my lips. “Be right back.”

I took a deep breath when he left in an effort to calm my anxiety and the tightness in my chest.

The song shifted to one of my favorites, Lie by Jake Scott. I was almost tempted to go after Tristian when Romeo grabbed the microphone again and said. “I dedicate this song to the lovely—” My breath hitched. “—Celeste Gambino.”

He set the wireless microphone down next to the DJ and crooked his fingers at Celeste.

It was the final nail in the coffin.

She smiled in triumph as she stalked toward him, her strapless red dress so short it was indecent—he’d have easy access. And she’d allow it. She’d wanted him for years.

We’d grown up in the same circles. I wouldn’t exactly call her a friend, more like an enemy, and Romeo knew that. She was the one woman I’d told him was off-limits. We’d actually made a pact when I was sixteen. She’d hit on him again right in front of me, and I’d nearly pulled her fake blond extensions from her tiny head.

He’d promised me he’d never touch her.

And now?

Now she was in his arms, her body plastered against his as they danced. He smiled down at her like he couldn’t wait to get her alone while she ran one of her hands through his hair, hooking it around his neck and pulling him closer.

He was doing it on purpose.

Making my hate boil to the point of no return.

He spun her around, then locked eyes with me over her head, expression smug.

She must have said something funny because he laughed, stole one last

look at me, then lowered his head, eyes never leaving mine—and kissed her.

Both arms went around his neck as she clung for dear life; he broke eye contact with me and deepened the kiss earning a few knowing looks from people dancing next to him and an exasperated sigh from Tristian as he returned with a plate of food and sat down. “I’m surprised he lasted this long.”

“What do you mean?” My voice sounded weak, even to my own ears.

Tristian rolled his eyes. “Romeo. You think he can really keep his dick in his pants when some of the most beautiful single girls from every powerful family in the Cosa Nostra are present? The bosses have been throwing women at him all night.” He winced. “Just never thought he’d pick Celeste out of all of them; she’s literally the worst.”

“Agreed.” I clenched my teeth. “Then again, it’s Romeo; he always has a reason behind his fucking, right?”

Tristian’s hand froze over his fork for a few brief seconds before he clenched it and turned to me. “Are you okay?”

“Actually.” I licked my dry lips. “I’ve been fighting a headache all night; I just didn’t want to worry you.”

Concern etched his features as his brows knit together. “What can I do?”

“Nothing.” I smiled. “I think I’m just going to go back to the suite; besides, I have to be up at seven, so I look like the perfect Sinacore bride.”

He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it. “You already are.”

I gently pulled my hand away. “Thanks, Tristian.”

“No need to thank me for telling the truth. Do you want me to walk you up to your room?”

“Thank you, but I’m fine.” I grabbed my crocodile Prada clutch from the table. “I’ll see you at the altar.”

He stood and leaned in, kissing each cheek. “I’ll be the one in the black tux next to the minister, just in case you get confused.”

I froze as my heart slammed against my chest.

It was like he could read my mind.

Did he know? Assume? Was I that transparent?

“I won’t.” I stood on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his mouth. “Get confused.”

His jaw clenched just briefly before he whispered, “I know.”

It was the first time in years that I saw a crack in Tristian’s otherwise perfect façade. All because of me. All because of his brother.

All because of the secrets and lies, the love and the hate between the three of us.

But Tristian knew, more than anyone, that I kept my word and that my loyalty would always be to the one who fought for me, not the one who gave me up.

“Sweet dreams, Eden.”

I smiled, unable to find the right words, and worried that he’d hear the hitch in my voice. Already my steps wavered as I weaved in and out of the crowd.

I waited until I was inside the elevator.

Until I was alone.

Just me and my fragile heart.

I watched the numbers light up as the elevator ascended.

And as the distance between Romeo and myself grew, I told my heart we would be okay because we had Tristian.

I was lucky, right?

So damn lucky.

And yet, two tears escaped.

Tears of anger.

Sadness.

Tears he didn't deserve in the first place.

Tomorrow I would become Tristian Sinacore's wife—tonight...I would drink Romeo Sinacore away.

I exhaled in relief the minute the elevator stopped on my floor, and I found my room. I pulled my key card from my purse and tapped it against the door. It clicked open, and I could finally breathe as I kicked off my heels and went straight to the bar in my suite.

The alcohol was only temporary, but it would at least numb the catastrophe of Romeo. It had been one thing after another. Like he couldn't help but continuously bruise my heart until it bled. I'd reached my boiling point. Instead of pouring a glass, I grabbed the bottle and made my way out onto the balcony to drink away the memory of him.

I don't know how much time went by when I heard a knock on my door.

Moments later, Romeo's voice echoed through the room. "Red, open the door."

I shouldn't have walked back inside.

I shouldn't have let my heart guide my mind.

I shouldn't...

I shouldn't...

I shouldn't...

Have opened that goddamn door.

*I did.*

Now I stood in front of him, with no one else around, just our truths between us.

I went against my heart this time, spewing, "You need to leave."

"Is that what you want, Eden? For me to leave?"

I hesitated for just a second, and he kicked open the door and walked right in. Grabbing the bottle of Jack from my hand, he kicked it closed behind him. “That’s what I thought.”

“What do you want, Romeo?”

“You know what I fucking want.”

I scoffed out, “Really? That’s news to me. I never know what you want because guess what? You never tell me.”

“I don’t need to tell you, Red. You know me better than anyone.”

“Bullshit. I don’t know you at all.”

“Is that right?”

“Absolutely.”

He stepped toward me, and I stepped back.

“Where are you going, baby?”

“Don’t call me that. I’m not your baby. I’m not your anything.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” In the blink of an eye, he backed me into the wall and caged me in with his arms. Whispering against my lips, “You’re my everything.”

“Ugh.” My head fell back. “I can smell the woman’s perfume on you. Whose bed did you crawl out of?”

*Please, God, don’t say Celeste.*

“Who said it was a bed?”

I shoved against his thick chest; he didn’t waver.

“The only thing I know is how much I fucking hate you. Do you hear me? I fucking hate you so much.” My body shook. “I fucking hate you!” I repeated, desperately trying to make him believe it.

Which only fueled his determination to get what he wanted  
*Me.*

“You wish you fucking hated me,” he sneered.

“I hate y—”

He crashed his mouth into mine, digging his hand into my hair and yanking my head back to deepen his kiss.

It was intense.

Forceful.

Demanding.

Urgent.

I vigorously gripped onto the front of his shirt, yanking him closer like we weren't already close enough, trying to mold us into one person.

He kissed me as if his life depended on it.

“Fuck... I'm going to go to Hell for this...” he groaned against my lips.

With a strong force I found somewhere inside of me, I pushed him away and slapped him across the face as hard as I could. His head whooshed back from the unexpected impact.

There was no hesitation in my words this time.

Speaking loud and clear, I said, “I. Hate. You.”



# CHAPTER SEVEN

“We’re all bad in someone’s story.” —*Thanos*

*Romeo*

**M**y cheek burned instantly. I couldn’t remember the last time someone dared to hit me.

“What do you need, Eden?”

“I need you to leave,” she gritted out, standing taller, her expression a mixture of anger and heartache, a reminder that I was the fucking bastard responsible.

I shook off her blow, watching as she continued to put on a show. She stood there unfazed, not backing down. Putting on a performance.

For me.

For her.

For both of us.

Even though I knew her hand was throbbing from the assault, I reached for her on pure impulse. As soon as she felt my strong arms wrap around her waist, she flinched against me as if my touch burned her skin.

“I said, you need to go!” she shouted bloody murder, pushing me as hard as she could again. My back hit the column with a hard thud, and she didn’t falter.

She came for me.

At me.

With everything inside of her.

Again and again.

“I hate you!” Another hard shove. “All you do is hurt me!” Two kicks to my shin. “Do you hear me?” She scratched across my arm. “I. Hate. You!” she repeated, her hits assaulting every inch of my body she could access.

I tried to block each and every advance, instigating her further to push and hit me harder. After all, I deserved it. She took out every ounce of frustration and hatred she had on me. All the years of pent-up anger were shown in one instant.

“Red, calm the fuck down,” I ordered, trying to grip onto her wrists.

She jerked back. “Don’t tell me what to do! I’m so tired of you thinking you can do whatever you want to me!” she yelled, hitting and shoving me more, the closer I tried to come to her. “You just gave me away! Like I meant nothing to you! You never fought for me!”

“What the fuck?”

“When you fight for everything!” Her voice cracked. “But never me. N-never.”

She dug her nails into the sides of my neck and scraped all the way down, making me bleed. She raised her hand up to slap me across the face as hard as she could. Then she prepared to slap me again, but she wasn’t strong enough to hold me back any longer.

In two seconds flat, I gripped her throat, shoving her into the nearest wall. Taking hold of both her wrists with my other hand and placing them above

her head.

I got right up in her pretty little face, rasping, “What did you expect from me? He’s my brother.”

Her eyes flashed. “Then what are you doing in my room?”

“I wanted to apologize for how I behaved tonight.”

“Oh! For that, you feel sorry. How convenient for you. I’ve had enough.”

“No. It’s not enough. Nothing is ever enough between us. You know it as much as I do.”

“Then what, Romeo? What happens next?”

“You marry my brother.” The words burned, sending my soul careening into the depths of Hell.

“Then you can leave now. Do you hear me? Just leave, and I’ll make sure to go on without you. I’ll be happy in your brother’s arms every night while you’re alone, knowing that you have no one to blame but yourself.”

I growled against her lips, and that was all it took for her to lose her shit. She crushed her mouth to mine, biting down on my bottom lip till she tasted blood. I abruptly jerked back, holding her wrists with one hand and yanking her hair by the nape of her neck with the other. She panted, frantically trying to gather her bearings from my tight hold. Both our bodies shook with undeniable desire. Every part of her resolve was hammering all around me.

I could hear it in my ears.

I could feel it in my bones.

Breaching the walls she securely had in place for me. I swear every part of my nervous system was breaking, shutting down, making it hard to see, let alone stand.

She weakly thrashed around some more, ignoring the pain in her head and the ache in her heart. The sorrow in the depths of her soul I’d caused. I held her tighter against my chest, both of us gasping for air.

Which had me breathing out, “I love you, Red. There. I fucking said it. But that doesn’t change the fact you’re marrying my brother.”

She let out a frustrating scream. I didn’t know if it was from what I said or from knowing it was the truth. Or possibly from knowing she wasn’t going anywhere unless I allowed her to. Closing her eyes, she tried to govern her breathing and her thoughts just like I’d taught her years ago.

Her fucking heart.

Would always be mine.

I loosened my grip, slowly brushing my lips against hers. I saw memories passing through her eyes, attacking her mind at rapid speed.

Of us.

As kids.

As teenagers.

Now, as adults.

Both moving in the opposite direction when I know she only ever imagined a different ending. But those happily ever afters weren’t for us—they weren’t for a man like me. The darkness had already taken hold long ago, and it would be the cruelest thing I could ever do—to fight for her, steal her away, and slowly kill her light.

“Fuck you, Romeo.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I love you. You know that. You know that... I’m no good for you. It’s why I let you go. My brother will give you everything I can’t. I know you know that too.

She turned her face away from mine, but I gripped her chin, forcing her to peer back up at me. The truth created a near standstill between us. But the truth demanded to be said despite the pain those words inflicted.

“The hardest thing I’ve ever done in all my life is to let you go. Please... forgive me,” I rasped, chest heaving.

We stared at each other for what felt like hours, both of us lost in our own darkness.

In our own demons.

“I just wanted a minute to look at you, be with you, fucking feel you against me.” Rubbing her bottom lip with my thumb, I reveled in the feel of her velvety skin. Licking away the blood from my own lips, silently wishing it was her who was doing it for me. Her eyes followed the movement of my tongue, aware of what I was thinking and what I wanted. She could always read me, which is why she hated my lies; it was an insult to everything holy between us.

“I fucking hate you,” she panted, once again slamming her lips into mine.

I growled, parting them. My hands went to the seam of her tight dress, hiking it up to her hips. Slapping her ass, making her whimper before I turned her around and shoved her against the wall instead.

I forcefully yanked her head back farther, claiming her lips. Winning this power struggle between us. Working my button and zipper, I was unable to get them open fast enough. Pulling out my hard cock, I aggressively stroked it back and forth while I crudely tore the bottom of her dress up her thighs.

My hand went to her throat and the other on her hip, gripping hard. Applying ample pressure to both. Wanting to mark her body the only way I could. In one hard thrust, I was deep inside of her.

“Fuck,” I groaned loudly against her parted lips as she hissed into mine. Crying out but not saying a word.

I dug my fingers into her hip bones, thrusting harder with more determination. There was nothing sweet about what we were doing.

It was primal.

Heady.

Angry fucking.

With every thrust inside her, the mass of my body movement inched her a little higher. Savoring the feel of my mouth claiming hers, her pussy throbbing against my shaft, and her G-spot pulsating along the head of my cock. Over and over again.

“I’m going to come,” she panted as I quickly pulled out only long enough to turn her to face me; our eyes locking as I drove in and out of her a few more times. I abruptly pulled away, needing to look into her eyes.

Spiraling out of control in a frenzy from the feel of our mouths and bodies colliding. Coming together for the first time. She could feel it as much as I could. It was lingering in both of our chaos.

Each thrust.

Every moan.

All of it.

I carried her up by her ass, making her straddle my waist before I fucked her up against the wall. A picture crashed to the floor and shattered. Her heart was beating as fast as mine. I kissed her passionately with everything left inside of me. Needing her to understand how much I loved her and hated that I had to let her go.

“Ah! I’m going to come...”

Desperately and deliberately, I wanted to literally fuck her out of the depths of my soul.

“Open your eyes. Look at me,” I demanded.

“No.”

I mercilessly pounded into her, harder and faster. My balls drenched from her wetness. The slapping sound of our skin-on-skin contact echoed in the suite.

“This what you wanted, Eden? Me to fuck you? Huh? Answer me!” I seethed, slapping her ass.

“I’m going to come...”

“Open your eyes while you come on my cock.”

“No.”

“For fuck’s sake. Look at me!”

She closed her eyes tighter.

“Eden, look at me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t say goodbye to you.”

I slammed into her, using her hips as leverage. Making her keep up with my vigorous pace. Never once letting up on my ruthless thrusts.

“You’re going to have to, baby. This ends tonight. Now, look at me.”

“Romeo, I’m going to come...” she breathlessly panted, fighting back my truths and tears. She cried out, squeezing her thighs with her release. Clamping down on my dick.

A growl escaped from deep within my chest, taking me right along with her. Our bodies went lax. Our thoughts running marathons, mimicking our fuck session that happened out of pure anger and desperation to feel some sort of connection.

Both of us fully aware this truly was the end of our torrid love affair.

I reveled in the brief feeling of her in my arms, knowing I fucked up. I shouldn’t have come here. I shouldn’t have kissed her. I shouldn’t have taken her like she was mine to begin with. She was my brother’s, and I would forever remember this moment for the rest of my life. This was where I really let her go.

“Red, please look at me.”

She slowly lifted her gaze.

Tears already swelling her big blue eyes.

I needed to kill her in order to live without her.

So I said the very thing I knew would do exactly that. I lied. “I don’t really love you. I only came here to fuck you.”

She froze, and I stared profoundly into her solemn gaze.

Finally ending us once and for all, I hurt her for the last time...

“Now go marry my brother.”



# CHAPTER EIGHT

“Your enemies always get strong on what you leave behind.” —*Michael Corleone*

*Eden*

*Now*

I remembered nothing about the limo ride back to the house—our house. The one that Tristian purchased right after our wedding.

A gift, he’d said.

For his perfect wife.

I’d kissed him then, purifying my lips with his, expelling the lies of the week before when I took my vows in front of God and Family.

Romeo reached for my hand again, helping me out of the limo. I took it out of necessity, out of fear that I would collapse again, and I refused to let my son see weakness when he needed me to be his strength.

Already the house was crawling with associates, family members, policemen, politicians; the list was agonizingly long, and I knew by the end

of the day I'd be worthless, emotionally and physically exhausted by doing my dutiful job as the accountant's widow.

"Mama!" The front door flew open as Naz sped toward me, his white shirt untucked from his black trousers. Already, he was barefoot. His pitch-black hair was a tousled mess like he'd been running his hands through it. A habit he'd learned from his dad.

I jerked away from Romeo, dropping his hand, and opened my arms as Naz jumped into them.

"I missed you." He sniffled. "But Nana said I had to go back."

"I'm here now." I kissed the top of his head, willing the tears to stay in. "Give me a few minutes to freshen up, and then we'll get you a snack. Sound good?"

"They have cakes." His whisper was almost louder than his regular voice bringing a smile to my face. "Don't tell Nana, but I licked the frosting off the chocolate one."

"Scout's honor." I grinned and stood.

He reached for my hand and then reached for Romeo's. "I feel sad, Mama."

His daddy was gone.

And he'd worshipped him.

Called him his best friend.

My heart couldn't take it.

My chest felt like it was going to break in half, only to do it on an endless cycle until the day I died.

"Go freshen up. I'll take care of him." Romeo grinned down at Naz. "You still like extra sweet sandwiches?"

"Super-duper a million sweet!" Naz flashed his toothy grin as we made it through the front door and into the foyer.

“Go,” Romeo urged.

I couldn’t look at him. If I did, I’d crack. Again. Romeo was everything Tristian wasn’t. And they’d both known it.

Things had shifted that night.

And then after the wedding.

It might have been my wedding day.

But it might as well have been Romeo’s funeral.

“He’s been coloring a lot.” I changed the subject. “If he’s hungry, just get him one of the sandwiches from catering, and his coloring crayons are—”

“Eden,” Romeo interrupted me. “I’ll take care of it, just...” He didn’t have to say it.

It hung in the air between us anyway.

Just fix your makeup.

And clothes.

Put on a brave face.

Not just for my son.

But the family.

For him.

*Romeo Sinacore.*

Because they could never know—that Tristian hadn’t died an honorable death—but one of a rat.

*How could you?* My heart screamed.

*How?*

Betrayal hit me square in the chest as I looked away from Romeo’s perfect jawline and stared into the giant foyer mirror.

“Give me ten minutes,” I whispered to my own reflection.

Romeo stared at me through the mirror, his eyes drinking me in with an intensity that was impossible to look away from.

He nodded once and then left as Naz continued chattering on and on about how to make the perfect sandwich. My heels clicked against the marble floor as I walked down the hall, feeling more zombie than human.

I made it into the master bathroom, shut the door behind me, and then moved toward the mirror. I leaned against the porcelain sink; with shaking hands, I quickly turned on the water and splashed some onto my face. My makeup drawer was to the left, Tristian's drop kit had always been on the right; we'd shared a life of perfect harmony for nearly six years.

Unless it was about Romeo.

Our last fight was one I'd never forget. I shivered at the mere thought of it.

His need to prove himself had been his downfall.

Why?

How?

What possessed him to even go down that road, knowing what he knew about the family? He made a choice and sacrificed his family in the process, and for what? Pride?

He'd been the perfect husband.

Father.

And he'd died a betrayer's death.

Nothing made sense.

Had he been lying this entire time?

Nobody was that good—least of all, an accountant who cooked the family's books and hosted cookouts every summer for his employees.

Not Tristian.

I was too afraid to ask Romeo for details—but I knew this, I wouldn't want someone like Romeo after me.

They were dead before he even found them.

So I knew, regardless, Tristian's death would be avenged because they were sending the Grim fucking Reaper after them.

And he'd send them to Hell.

With a grin on his face.

It ended up taking me longer than ten minutes to fix my makeup and change into another simple black dress.

I held my head high as I made my way out of the en suite and down the hall to where the rest of the reception was being held.

People were in shock.

Talking in low whispers.

What did this mean for The Famiglia?

Had the Russians been behind it?

The Petrov boss, Valerian, had attended the funeral and had seemed devastated at the loss. He was ruthless, but he was loyal to all the Italians, which meant it had to be someone on the inside.

I gave my head a shake; I wasn't going to solve his murder today, or possibly ever—that was where I relied on Romeo. As much as I loathed him—he was good at his job—too good.

I made my way into the kitchen. Wine bottles lined the granite countertops.

Typical Italians.

Someone dies? We drink.

Someone's born? We drink.

It's a Tuesday? We drink.

"Naz?" I rounded the corner and nearly choked on my tongue as Romeo sat at Naz's little Fisher-Price dinner table, his knees knocking the cheap plastic, red crayon in hand. Naz stuck his tongue out between his lips in concentration as they both colored in silence.

“Uncle Romeo, why do you use red all the time?”

“Oh, I’m sure one day you’ll know...” Romeo smirked and then held it up. “Trade you for the pink?”

Naz stared at the red, then at the pink in his hand. “No deal.”

“I’ll up it by one green.” Romeo dug around the crayon box and pulled out a green.

“I love green!” Naz held out his hand. “Pleeeeeeease?”

“Please, what?”

Naz rolled his eyes. “Please, favorite uncle?”

“There it is.” Romeo handed him the green, then took the pink and started adding to whatever masterpiece he was working on.

Naz started scribbling something and looked over. “Mama! Where were you? I looked! I got scared, and then Uncle Romeo said you needed to put on lipstick!”

Leave it to Naz to be the only human in existence capable of putting a smile on my face during my husband’s funeral reception. “Uncle Romeo was right,” I pointed to my mouth. “What do you think?”

“Pretty,” Naz giggled; his jet-black hair fell around his ears, his clear blue eyes were identical to his fathers; it was ridiculous how gorgeous he was at five years old.

Ridiculous and terrifying.

“Do I get kisses then?” I knelt.

“Only two.” Naz crossed his arms. “Because I’m a man now.”

“True.” I winked and pointed to my cheek.

He reached up with his grubby hands and held my head, then kissed my cheek twice. “Okay, Uncle Romeo’s turn!”

My eyes widened in horror.

Romeo’s coloring crayon broke in half falling from his fingertips and

rolling onto the ground.

Was he thinking about it too?

That night so long ago.

Where I'd finally snapped.

Getting shot would hurt less than the words Romeo had said to me. I would never forgive him for stealing my heart and then, in one fell swoop, breaking it in half like it meant nothing to him.

He didn't know I hadn't slept with Tristian yet.

Just like he didn't know how he took more than my heart that night. One day I would show him the damage. One day it would be impossible not to.

"Um, buddy." Panicked, I forced a smile. "Uncle Romeo doesn't give Mama kisses, silly."

Naz frowned up at me. "Course he does, he gives Nana kisses, and Papa, and he gave Daddy kisses on his cheeks sometimes, Daddy says it's r-r-resp—" He stopped talking. "It's responsible?"

"Respectful," I corrected before I realized I was agreeing with him by correcting him.

Perfect.

"Yeah! Dad said so! He's in Heaven with Uncle Louis now, and he's watching. Don't make Dad sad, Mama."

Motherfucker.

I half expected Romeo to repeat, yeah, don't make Dad sad. Instead, he'd completely paled like the idea of kissing me on the cheek was right up there with a beheading.

Seriously?

I smiled at Naz and slowly walked over to Romeo.

He stood, part of the broken crayon still in hand.

"See?" Naz grinned. "You're making Dad happy now!"

Romeo coughed under his breath. “Not so sure about that...” And before I could stop him, his full mouth was pressed against my cheek, once, twice.

I was lost all over again.

To the man who had loved me only to destroy me.

To the man that had fucking given me to his brother like a consolation prize.

It was over before it even really started, but the linger of his lips felt like a branding on my body—my soul.

And something told me this was just the beginning of the carnage he would leave in his wake because how could he not?

He was Romeo Sinacore.

His brother had been my best friend.

And by marrying him...

I'd lost my soul mate.

“Yay, Uncle Romeo!” Naz did a little cheer. “Does that mean Dad gets to come back now?”

I couldn't help the gasp that escaped between my lips.

“Little man.” Romeo got down to his level. “I know it seems that kisses are magic and while powerful—sometimes even the best kisses can't bring back those that we love. Right now, your daddy's in Heaven, and he's gonna stay there a bit, but that doesn't mean you should stop kissing your mama; it just means you need to kiss her more since your daddy can't right now, all right? You see, she's going to miss his kisses, and now that you're the man of the house, he's handed you that job; you're such a big boy that he thought you could handle it, so you think you can do it? Can you give your mama kisses for your daddy? You know she was his soul mate, right?”

I winced; I couldn't help it. Those words stung.

“What is a soul mate?”



“It’s when you meet your other half. The person you’re meant to spend the rest of your life with.”

“Oh... so who’s your soul mate, Uncle Romeo?”

I winced yet again, and so did Romeo. However, he quickly recovered while I stood there, frozen in the spot I was standing in. Wanting him to continue. To answer Naz’s question. To make me feel something when I felt nothing.

“I don’t have a soul mate, Little Man.”

I jerked back, winded.

“Why not?” Naz questioned with his eyebrows raising, reminding me so much of his father.

“Because you have to have a heart to have a soul mate.”

“Well, then maybe Mama can be your soul mate now that Daddy is gone?” His little hand scratched his head, and I swear my heart was beating out of my chest.

Pounding.

Thrashing.

Proving that I wasn’t dead after all, from my husband’s untimely death.

I was alive, with my heart in Romeo’s hand.

Naz excitedly shouted, “Mama has a heart, a huge one! Maybe her heart can be your heart too?”

Naz and Romeo had always had a special relationship. A strong bond between them. I think a big part of that was Romeo knowing he’d never have children of his own, so he made sure he was the best uncle to his brother’s kid.

Or at least that was what I told myself...

I couldn’t wait for Romeo to answer Naz and hurt me more than he already had.

Getting down to his level, I chimed in, “Naz, a soul mate is someone your heart belongs to, not just someone who is in your heart.”

He eyed me curiously, trying to follow along with what I meant.

“One day.” I ruffled his hair. “When you’re older you will understand the difference.”

I could feel Romeo’s heat burning a hole in my back. He didn’t like my response, and he wasn’t trying to hide that fact. I silently cheered.

*Good.*

Take that, asshole.

I felt the loss of his emotions the minute he walked away from us.

I felt it in my soul.

Twisting in my gut as he walked away to join the others.

I barely survived his indifference the first time.

I wouldn’t survive him twice.

The only way to protect my heart was to let him go along with Tristian.

I was officially done with the Sinacore brothers.

My best friends.

My family.

Because loving them only ever brought pain.

In every aspect of my life.

# CHAPTER NINE

“If you have a gun you can rob a bank, but if you have a bank you can rob anyone.” —*Black Mask*

*Romeo*

*Then: The wedding day*

I had no words to describe her as she floated down that aisle. In the sickest, darkest part of my mind, she was walking toward *me*, smiling at *me*, minutes away from saying she was *mine*. Taking those vows and uttering them for the world to hear.

And yet... I knew.

Those footsteps only led toward him.

That smile? Wasn't for the sinner standing next to the saint.

I rubbed the back of my neck. The scratches from her nails were still there, ugly, raw, red, and like the sick fuck I was, I left them full-on display. Wearing them like a badge of honor. Was it selfish to want something today? Anything that showed that I had a part of Eden's heart that he would never

get? Fuck it, she was marrying him, at least give me the blood, the tears, the pain, give me the sin over and over again—let me have one fucking thing.

“Nervous?” I asked as the music started.

My brother shot me a knowing grin only to have it falter when his eyes flickered to the side of my neck and back again. “Not really. Because today... she’s mine.”

“Lucky man.” The words tasted like acid. If only he knew that my cock had been inside her less than twelve hours ago, her thighs wrapped around my legs, shouting she was going to come over and over again from her lips.

Would he feel the same? If he knew that the love of his life was divided in two, wanting but knowing it could never be me?

He was a motherfucking consolation prize. And never had I felt so much jealousy in my entire existence.

Her smile was bright, her strapless white dress nearly indecent as it shimmered in the morning light streaming through the colored glass of the St. Mary’s Cathedral, the lace train pooled behind her. I clenched my fists at my sides as she walked arm and arm with her father, a man I loved.

Admired.

Respected.

A man who looked so fucking pleased that his only daughter was marrying into the Sinacore family. And I had to ask myself, why him? Why not me?

*Because you’d break her until there was nothing left of her. And she’d forgive me until there was nothing left of me. Killing whatever love was left between us.*

The music started.

The violins picked up as the doors suddenly opened, and there she was.

Stunning.

Breathtaking.

*Mine.*

I clutched my fists.

This was supposed to end differently.

That smile.

That body.

That mouth.

All of her.

*Was mine.*

Instead, she was walking toward *him*.

The only comfort I had was the sick knowledge that while my brother slept—I'd been deep inside her, claiming her, marking her. And he could never take that away from her, from us.

Everyone stood.

She kept her head high as she held on to her father's arm, and when she finally made it to the altar, all I could think about was sinning some more with her.

Fucking her against the altar.

In front of God.

Our family.

My brother.

Licking up and down those thighs, sucking her until she screamed my name in an unholy confession.

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” the priest questioned.

“Her mother and I,” her father answered with a wide smile and tears in his eyes. Slowly, he lifted the simple lace veil over her head and kissed her cheek. The same cheek I'd wanted to assault with my mouth, right next to the neck I'd kissed and licked as I'd held her captive against the wall last night.

I tried to shove the thoughts away.

And then she lifted her hand to her father's face, and I saw the marks on her creamy skin.

I clenched my jaw so fucking tight my teeth hurt. A slight blue bruise was present on her wrist. They were my fingertips, my assault, my claim.

Today she would marry my brother with the imprint of my hands on her body, and because I was a sadistic son of a bitch, I smiled. At least I was given that.

A gift.

A reward.

A fucking reason to not scream from the rooftops that I had been balls deep inside of her in the wee hours of the morning.

Our sin.

Our love.

Our bodies coming together as one was blatant for all to see.

My salvation was being with her at least once before she was given to another.

I did that.

I handed her over.

I lost her and gave her to my brother.

Knowingly, she would give her body, her soul to him, but she would know, the entire time, that I had her first, I broke her first. And he could never take that away from us.

*From me.*

Let him have the happy ending because I'd had the fucking beginning.

Time stood still as she turned and took Tristian's hand in hers. He preened like a goddamn peacock as he pulled her to his side and faced the priest.

And me? I simply smiled at them both since this was it, wasn't it? At least

I'd tasted. I'd bitten. I'd swallowed. I'd sinned. I'd never be saved.

Who would want salvation after tasting the sweetest sin?

The ceremony was a blur as the priest droned on, and when it was time for the vows, I found I was holding my breath, watching, waiting for her to say she couldn't do this; I half expected her to lose her nerve, but when she opened her mouth.

It wasn't my name that fell from her lips.

It was his.

She said it twice.

"Tristian..." A full smile. My body gave an involuntary flinch. "Tristian."

My fingers twitched at my sides. I held my breath.

Once again waiting.

Wanting.

Yearning.

"My vow is simple, my promise to you." She lifted her chin, her eyes clear, her conscience black as mine. "From this day forward... I'm yours."

I hated her in that moment.

Despised her to the core of my being.

Traitor.

Cheater.

Whore.

She promised him the one thing I wanted, and she said it so simply, with such purity amidst the chaos we'd created, we'd participated in, that I wanted to seethe from the inside out.

It was as if she was reminding me by claiming him, as she said from this moment on.

And our moment was yesterday.

She was saying it would never happen again.

Had she shot me, it would have hurt less.

I knew this was my doing. I was the one who told her to marry him. I had rejected her. What else did I expect? I was being irrational, and knowing that I was didn't stop the emotions that were surging to not come.

"Tristian?" The priest grinned over at my brother.

Tristian reached up and pressed his palm directly over the bruises on her wrist, then lifted that same wrist to his mouth and pressed a gentle kiss across my mark.

Across my claim.

*Motherfucker.*



# CHAPTER TEN

“Be the hero, they will notice the bad. Be the villain, they will notice your good.” —*Joker*

*Romeo*

His gesture may have been subtle to the room full of people in attendance, but I knew better.

Did he know?

Assume?

“From this day forth,” Tristian kissed the bruising again and then flipped her hand over, bringing it to his face, cupping his cheek. “I will always be yours. Forsaking family, forsaking all others, you own me, body, mind, and soul.”

My breath hitched as she smiled up at him like she was seeing him for the first time, her eyes filled with tears, her hand pressed against his face.

She mouthed, “*I love you,*” sufficiently killing something in the depths of my soul as he mouthed it back.

I had to look away.

I had no choice.

She was killing me.

This was killing me.

Their love.

Their holy union.

Their fucking matrimony.

It was all dragging me to the ground, burying me alive.

The priest kept talking, and I found I couldn't tear my focus away from her wrist or the way she would rub it self-consciously like she could rub the sin away.

The mistake.

The regret.

The memory.

*Me.*

"I now pronounce you, Mr. and Mrs. Tristian Sinacore." The old priest beamed. "You may now kiss your bride!"

Tristian wasted no time in pulling Eden into his arms; his mouth slammed down onto hers with near violence as she parted her lips and welcomed him into her.

Just like she would tonight.

Just like she'd done to me last night.

He'd be inside her.

He'd be pleasuring her.

Would she scream his name while dreaming of mine? Or was this really the end? Part of me needed it to be the end, while another sinister part said it was just the beginning of my obsession with her need.

I kept my eyes trained on the happy couple, my hands folded behind my back, my smile frozen on my face as Tristian pulled away, only to change his

mind and press another kiss to her mouth; he lingered there in that sensual space that existed after two mouths meet and decide they want to do it again only to tease one another with each breath before one of them leans in once more.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Her eyes lit up with joy. “I love you too.”

He lifted her into his arms, facing the congregation amidst cheers, whistling, and then walked down the aisle while she laughed.

I clenched my teeth and followed the rest of the wedding party out, careful to keep a slight smile of amusement teasing my lips when, in reality, I wanted to die inside.

I couldn't decide which one of us had given the final blow that destroyed whatever was left between us.

Was it when they kissed?

Was it when he touched her bruises?

Was it when she told him she loved him?

Or was it the night before when I told her I didn't love her?

I'd been a bystander to my own death and destruction, and the pain was still burning alive inside me, threatening to spill over into a war of chaos where my white flag was up.

I surrendered.

Gave up.

Game over.

No do-overs.

No second chances.

No love for me.

Not in this life.

With a curse, I left the church lobby and went into one of the Sunday

school rooms. I'd left my Glock hidden so I wouldn't have to explain to the priest why I was packing next to the communion table. It was one of the first times in years where I'd actually chosen not to wear my gun.

I knew it bothered Eden.

I could keep her safe without a gun.

It was her wedding day.

So even though she didn't know, I did, and that made all the difference, or it had.

"Knock, knock." Tristian rapt his knuckles against the wood door, then crossed his arms. "You feeling okay?"

"Course." I snapped out the answer, waving my gun at him. "Just left this in here next to the crayons and goldfish. Why?"

His eyes flickered from my gun to the scratches on my neck and lingered there for a good five seconds as if he wanted me to know he saw.

He knew.

He might even slightly understand.

I shifted on my feet. "Tristian?"

His gaze fell to me. "I'm only going to say this once."

"Good, because I'm starving, and I'm about three seconds away from stealing the goldfish and animal crackers in that cupboard."

"Stealing from children, how typical." He moved farther into the room, his posture rigid, his eyes fuming despite his sarcasm.

"Well?" I leaned against one of the tables littered with construction paper and more art supplies.

He eyed the scissors.

Not promising.

"She's mine now." He looked over at me. "You understand that, right?"

I jerked back, never expecting him to say that.

“Answer me, Romeo.”

I put my hands up in a surrendering gesture. “Whoa, man, I don’t know what you’re accusing me of.”

“The past you have with my wife stays in the past, including whatever history you and Eden may have had. Consider it nonexistent.” He stepped toward me, getting right in my face. “She’s my wife now, brother. Are you understanding me?”

With a rigid stature, I replied, “Loud and clear, *brother*. Loud and fucking clear.”

He turned and gave me such a pitiful look that I’d prefer getting punched in the face. “Want to know why you’ll always be second place when it comes to Eden, Romeo?”

I cocked my head, arching an eyebrow. “Enlighten me, Tristian,” I said dryly.

He let out a snicker, “Because there’s only room for one person in that dark heart of yours—you.”

I flinched. “Some might say that’s how I stay alive.”

“Some might ask if you’re really living.” He took a few steps toward me again and then jerked his chin up. “Next time, have the fucking decency to at least cover up the scratches from whatever whore you were with last night—the last thing Eden needs is to be reminded of what you do and how you do it.”

My nostrils flared. Did he know? Was he baiting me? I gripped the table with my fingers to keep myself from wrapping them around his neck. “Or what?”

“If you touch her again,” he continued. “I’ll put a bullet between your eyes.”

I burst out laughing. “Did you rehearse that? You almost had me there.

Don't worry, brother, the last person I want to touch is your precious virginal wife; I'd compare that experience to fucking a corpse."

"Tristian," Eden's voice filled the room. "They need us for pictures."

Slowly I turned toward her.

She was furious.

Hurt.

Beautiful.

*His.*

"Eden, you're a beautiful bride," I whispered as agony washed over me, through me, around me. Taking me whole, holding me captive.

"Don't you mean corpse bride?" she snapped, and then as if deciding I wasn't worth it, she brought her attention to my brother, her smile bright. "You ready?"

"I've been ready my whole life, Eden." Tristian shot me one last look and then joined her, wrapping an arm around her body and leading her out of the room.

I'd been wrong.

The final break hadn't taken place during the vows or even during the kiss or the I love yous.

No, it had just occurred.

And I'd been the one to do it.

My relationship with them both would never be the same, and all I had to do was look in the mirror to know the person responsible for it. This was the moment our dynamic changed into something unrecognizable. The broken pieces of our hearts shattered into a kaleidoscope of black and white when we used to be nothing but bright, blinding color.

Crashing to the floor by our feet.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

“A Villain is just a princess who has not been rescued.” —*Maleficent*

*Eden*

*Now*

The house was silent except for the low murmur of the bosses at the living room table. They were long past a few bottles of wine, just like I was long past my ability to smile and say thank you every single time someone approached with their condolences.

Naz had passed out hours ago, clinging to the stuffed horse Tristian had given him when he was born. What used to be white was now gray, missing one eye, and a bit matted, but it didn't matter. He loved it.

It was the one thing he refused to sleep without regardless of how old he got. He didn't hear me check on him tonight, but I could still see the stain of tears on his ruddy cheeks while he clutched the horse under his arm, mouth open, blankets kicked off.

How did we survive this? How did anyone explain death to someone

who'd only lived a short life? To a tenderhearted boy who just wanted to see his daddy again, hold him close, and tell him about his day or his new Lego set?

Exhaustion hit me hard and fast as I walked through the dark kitchen, unsure of what to do next. I was too tired to sleep, still had guests, and was afraid if I closed my eyes, I'd lose it again. Seeing my dead husband. A crippling numbness washed over me as I leaned against the kitchen sink, staring at my haunted expression in the window's reflection.

Dark circles stood out beneath my eyes; even my expert makeup couldn't cover up the sadness that lingered like a mask across my face.

*Why, Tristian? Why?*

His death forced me to question every conversation, every choice, every instant I asked if he was okay only to hear a lie fall from his lips.

Was he ever truly happy with us?

With me?

His brother?

Or was that a lie too?

"Eden." Romeo's voice was low, rough, tainted. I remembered a time when it caused chills of excitement. Now? All I felt was dread. "Andrei wants to see you."

I hung my head, my eyes locking on the empty sink as I gripped the edge of it. "Of course, he does."

Why wouldn't the boss of the Sinacore Family want to see me after my husband's funeral?

"He's worried."

My smile was sad. "I know."

"Come on." A hand reached out and gently touched my shoulder. "Please. Seeing you like this is killing me."



I wanted to respond in anger.

Tell him to fuck off.

Go to hell.

To leave the home I had made with his brother and never come back again.

I didn't do any of those things; instead, I jerked away and slapped his face trying to feel something other than sadness. At least the rage would stop the tears, right? Isn't that what madness did? Took over until all you saw was red? Felt nothing but fucking crimson, bleeding red.

I was still lost in my thoughts, held captive by these chains around my heart, where Romeo once held the key.

There was no response from the sting of my hand on his cheek. Not one. He stood in front of me, allowing his expression to speak for itself. I saw a whirlwind of emotions fly through his eyes, making me feel alive yet still so fucking broken.

He was the first to break the silence between us, stating, "I'll be whatever you need, Red. If that means I'm your punching bag, then so be it."

"Don't call me that. You lost the right to call me that a long time ago."

"I know."

Unable to hold back, I slapped him again. When I still didn't see the anger I desired flash through his gaze, I slapped him again and again.

"Fucking fight back!" I seethed, feeling abandoned by my husband and the man who, at one time, I thought was my soul mate.

"Do it, Eden! Fucking hit me!"

I did.

"Hit me harder!"

I didn't have to be told twice, hitting him harder than I'd ever hit anyone in my life. I slapped him so hard my hand was on fire, mimicking the wrath

of my assault.

“I hate you! I fucking hate you, Romeo!”

Before I could slap him again, he gripped onto my wrist mid-swing and turned my body around until my back was pressed against his solid, sturdy chest. In one quick, sudden movement, I was now in the arms of the man who’d hurt me in ways I never imagined were possible.

My body burned from the heat of his embrace. He wrapped his arms around my torso, holding me closer than I’d been to him since the night of my wedding reception. We hadn’t crossed any lines since I said, “I do.” And there I was, ready to go for round two.

“Let me go,” I gritted through a clenched jaw.

“Never.”

“How dare you? After everything! How dare you?”

He whispered in my ear, “I understand your need to blame someone, and you’ve blamed me for years, so forgive me for not giving a flying fuck about your desire to have me fight you.”

I gasped. The audacity of this man!

He let me go but not before he ran his nose along the side of my neck like he was trying to inhale my scent to take with him.

“Come on,” he demanded, pretending as if I hadn’t noticed.

Taking a deep breath, I desperately tried to govern my emotions. Reel in the havoc that seemed to be taking over when I least expected it. Hate felt good. Hating him felt right. It was better than feeling...

Lost.

Forgotten.

Forsaken.

Even though he’d already turned his back to me and was on his way out of the kitchen, I nodded, following behind him. My gaze fixed on his flexed

back. He'd taken off his suit jacket; all that remained was a tight white button-down shirt that seemed to move with each step he took.

He was bigger than he used to be—more fit. Selfishly I wondered if it had anything to do with me—with Tristian, and then I remembered his words that night.

*“I don't love you. I only came here to fuck you.”*

My body physically jerked as if he was saying it all over again. Tears filled my eyes at the painful memory. He'd still been inside me, filling me, pulsing, reminding me of what we'd just done.

My heart had been within reach, and rather than hold it, he wrapped his hands around it and squeezed until there was nothing left.

And then, like every villain, he left me in a pool of my own blood, not caring whether I lived or died because, in the end—he got exactly what he wanted.

My body.

He didn't know that I'd never slept with Tristian, that I'd always kept him at arm's length even during our engagement.

I broke that vow with Romeo, and I could never take that back.

One choice.

One decision.

And I'd become his before ever becoming my husband's, and now my husband was gone.

Head high, I walked into the dining room and tried to paste a polite smile on my face as Andrei Sinacore leaned back into his chair, his sharp blue eyes seeing too much.

In his late thirties, he was one of the younger bosses in the Cosa Nostra—also the most deadly. He liked to toy with his victims and found great joy in using dangerous animals in his torture techniques. Rumors spanned far and

wide about his tiger cages and the human bones that were cleaned out on a weekly basis, all because he was trying to keep the family safe.

Myself included.

Half Russian, half Italian, he was the glue that held the very shaky peace between both families together, and while I'd always been thankful, I didn't want to see him right now, not when he was already inspecting every movement right down to the way I was breathing.

Blinking.

Trying to hold what was left of my life together.

"Sit." He nodded toward one of the chairs. My father was on his right, Romeo's father to his left. A few associates were scattered around the room, pretending to stare out the window or look at their phones when we all knew they were watching, waiting, ready to pounce if need be.

Romeo pulled out the wooden chair, his long elegant fingers a welcome distraction because I remembered what those fingers could do.

They brought pleasure, pain, heartache, hate.

Slowly I lowered myself to the chair, back straight, eyes locked on one of the most powerful bosses in the world. He was almost too pretty to be ruthless—but we all knew the truth. Sometimes the prettiest things in the world were far more warning than invitation.

He was the former, with his golden blond hair, light eyes, chiseled jaw, and full lips, but Andrei was all fallen angel, no chance of redemption, not that he would want it in the first place since he actually enjoyed his seat in Hell and welcomed sin like a long lost lover.

It's how he kept everyone safe.

At the end of the day, these men were ruthless, feared, monsters in plain sight but family over everything.

It was everything.

No matter what.

Family always came first.

“We have a few questions.” He leaned forward, his hands clasped on the table. “I know this is difficult but, you were the last person to see Tristian...”

I squeezed my eyes shut and whispered. “Yes, he was in a hurry.” I left out the part where he smelled like cheap perfume or how he’d slapped me so hard across the face it’d taken me a whole hour to try to cover the bruise that was still faintly on my cheek. The guilt in his eyes would haunt me for an eternity until he decided to bait me, betray me, put his hands on me, not with a lover’s touch. “We had been...having some communication issues.” That sounded better than fighting. “And honestly, I was so thankful that he was smiling and acting like himself that I didn’t ask when I should have.” I lied through my teeth; it was better than the truth.

Why ruin the perfect image of a man I started to think I didn’t know?

Andrei bit back a curse. “I believe I already know the answer, but I’ll ask anyway—who’s in charge of the finances?”

I frowned. “He’s the accountant; I’m horrible with numbers.”

The entire room tensed as Andrei leaned back and lowered his head like he was about to make a human sacrifice and felt guilty about it. “Show her.”

My father shared a look with Romeo, who was still standing behind me, then slowly slid a folder toward me. With shaking hands, I grabbed the manila folder.

How could something so plain terrify a person so much?

I reached into the folder and pulled out a stack of papers—bank statements, to be exact.

Highlighted at the very top was the sum of all of our accounts.

My stomach rolled. “Th-this— it isn’t. It can’t be right.”

He wouldn’t.

There was no way.

We were well off for sure; he'd been paid extremely well, and I had a trust fund from my father... But this? This enormous amount?

"Twenty-five million dollars," Andrei said it slowly like I had a learning disability or maybe because I was having trouble believing it myself.

Twenty-five million?

*Oh Tristian.*

My eyes filled with tears.

*What have you done?*

"I don't understand."

"Do you know, Eden," Andrei said with a smirk, "how valuable information can be?"

A chill ran down my spine as I tried to defend him in vain, maybe it was one last attempt to salvage his image. "He would never—"

Andrei pounded his fists against the table, causing me to jump a foot.

As he spewed, "HE DID!"

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“There are no villains or heroes. There’s just what I want and how I’ll get it.”  
—*X-Men*

*Eden*

“I don’t know what he told or who he told it to; we have no leads, only evidence and a shit confession from Tristian himself when he got in too deep,” Andrei confided.

My head jerked up. “He confessed?”

Andrei sighed. “In a way.” He schooled his features again. “We’re still looking. But because both families, the Petrovs and the Sinacores, are aware of his...indiscretion.”

I flinched.

“You need protection.”

“I have a gun.” I scowled. “I know how to use it.”

“Sweetheart.” My dad spoke for the first time since sitting down. “You don’t understand the ramifications. Tristian has put the entire family in jeopardy. At this point, we have no idea who he was working with, but it left

every single one of us exposed; not only are we having to worry about new information getting discovered—the old information has already spread like wildfire throughout the Cosa Nostra. The Five Families have long memories, and they like their pound of flesh.”

I gritted my teeth. “Sounds to me like they already got it.”

“One would think,” Andrei snapped.

My dad shot me a look so sad, so horribly telling, that I wanted to puke. It was the first time in years that I noticed the hard lines on his face, the wrinkles near his mouth, the death in his eyes. If the mafia didn’t kill him—the job certainly would, wouldn’t it? His massive hands flexed and unflexed as he laid them on the table in a way that looked like surrender.

My father was a strong man; it was weird to see him appear weak, even for a second.

Andrei patted him on the arm. “We will take care of this; you worry too much. I’ll stay in New York until she’s dealt with.”

“She’s all I have.” Dad sighed again, and I never wanted the ground to swallow me whole more than I did in that second.

“She’s more important alive than dead,” Andrei added, simply like they were talking about the weather or the latest soccer game. They spoke as if I wasn’t in the room like I was a child, or worse...

A victim.

“I’ll do everything in my power to keep her safe,” Romeo stated out of the blue.

My gaze fell upon his, and for an instant, we locked eyes.

“I know,” Dad whispered. “Because you are a good man, angry, cold-blooded, but good.”

“We can’t all be saints, can we, Romeo?” Andrei grinned over at Romeo. “Especially when it’s so much fun sinning.”



Romeo cleared his throat.

My entire body went still as I waited for the final judgment.

“Eden, Romeo will stay with you until we know what we’re dealing with. He’ll protect you from outside forces and, more importantly—the ones within.”

My jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious.”

Andrei’s eyes narrowed. “Do I look like a comedian?”

“N-no.”

“Didn’t think so,” he bit, shooting to his feet. “Romeo stays. You and your son need protection, but—” He adjusted his black tie. “More than that, when word spreads, people might get curious, and when they get curious, they tend to get lazy, if anyone wants to shut you up or discover more information on what Tristian was doing—they’ll come here, and when they do, I’ll have my black widow waiting.”

I hated that nickname.

Probably just as much as Romeo did.

“You do not catch villains by chasing them.” Andrei tapped his temple with his fingertip. “You catch them by standing still. By waiting.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked out of my house with every associate following him.

Including my father. His eyes were sad as he looked between Romeo and me, shook his head, and walked out.

He’d never been a man of great affection.

But what he lacked in physical comfort, he gave through his eyes. They always were so expressive.

He loved me.

He was scared for me.

And he was just as irritated that Romeo was going to be staying at my

house as I was.

*Damn you, Tristian!*

How dare he have put Naz and me in this position?

The click of the door shutting was like a final gunshot slamming into my chest, sending me backward into oblivion as blood sprayed all over the room.

I would have welcomed that more than the fact that Romeo would be living in my house for as long as it took.

Eating my food.

Existing in our space.

A space that used to be his brother's.

Did he think he could just step in and everything would be okay? Like a sad replacement for what we'd had? That's not how families worked or how life worked.

Suddenly furious over this decision that was made without my consent or opinion, I shot to my feet and stomped out of the dining room or at least tried—after two steps, I was grabbed and spun around, pressed tightly against the countertop as Romeo crowded every inch of space between us.

“Stop,” he hissed.

I tried yanking my wrist away, but it was useless. “Stop what?”

“Pouting.” He clenched his teeth. “I take your life and the life of my nephew very seriously. Don't for one second think I want to actually live here with his memories—with pictures of your perfect little family lining the walls. If I could, I'd burn every last one of them, so don't test me. Drop the attitude and show some thanks for living in this hell for as long as it takes because that's how I see it. A fucking living hell.” He pulled away, chest heaving. “Now, say the words...”

Anger boiled up so hard and fast I wanted to slap him again. This time for good measure. “How dare you come into my home, on the day of my

husband's fun—”

He grabbed my chin in a painful grip, forcing my jaw to close as he pulled me close, his fingers digging into the skin on my face. “I’m going to let go, and when I do, all I want to hear is ‘thank you.’ That’s it. No complaints. No threats. Don’t make this difficult. I’m not my brother. I let you hit me once, several times actually, but my patience is wearing very thin. I won’t let you do whatever you want; I’ll spank you until your ass is red if you disrespect me yet again. Now. Say. The. Words.”

Tears of pain filled my eyes as I glared; with difficulty, I got out a, “Fuck. You.”

I expected him to yell.

Instead, an amused smile spread across his features as he dropped his hand, suddenly moving in a split second. He went for my body and threw me over his shoulder instead.

I beat at his back while he gracefully carried me down the hall and into the master bedroom; kicking the door shut behind him, he tossed me onto the king-sized bed.

Shrugging out of his jacket, he rolled up his sleeves like he was getting ready to work, and I was too shocked to do anything but stare at the golden skin of his forearms and the tattoos that littered his flexed muscles with each movement of his frame.

I sucked in a sharp breath when he was finished. Stalking toward me like a graceful predator, his eyes willing me to run.

However, that’s what men like Romeo wanted.

The chase.

The adrenaline.

The final catch.

The trophy.

I sat shocked as his eyes roamed over me. My mouth trembling with a mixture of anger and curiosity warred inside.

Was he going to hurt me?

Would he hurt me?

More than he already had?

His cold blue eyes flashed before he reached for me. It was pure instinct to scramble away. He caught my ankle and dragged me across the duvet, then very gently put me over his lap. A hand swatted my ass so hard I couldn't breathe, only to do it over again.

“Stop!” Tears stung my eyes. “Romeo, stop!”

“No.” Swat. “Not.” Swat. “Until.” Another swat. “You say it.”

“Please,” I cried.

“I don't want you to beg.” He stopped spanking and gave my hair a tug with one hand while he wiped my tears with the other. “I want your submission. I want your understanding. I want you strong enough to endure even this—so I'll ask one more time—”

“Th-thank you.” It hurt to get the phrase out. Pride bruised, mind confused, I was beyond embarrassed and angry. At least he hadn't ripped my dress and hit my bare ass.

My skin buzzed where he'd hit.

“See?” He leaned over until his breath hit my ear. “It wasn't that hard, was it?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to snap at him that someone was hard, and it wasn't me. His length pressed up against my stomach, long, protruding, pulsing.

I tried to wiggle away, but he kept me there against his lap; his hand moved back to my ass as he rubbed up and down, up and down like he was comforting me.

After a few seconds of silence, I finally relaxed against him while he continued his sweet torture until his hands were in my hair, playing, twisting, tugging.

I frowned as the pull on my hair grew harder and then realized in shock that the monster had braided my hair. In my peripheral vision, I caught the movement as he reached for a rubber band I'd left on my dresser and wrapped it around the end, only to gently lift me off his lap and set me on the bed.

He got up, and that was it.

Or so I thought.

Instead of leaving the room, he went into the adjoining bathroom and turned on the water.

Minutes later, he was back with a steaming washcloth and some of my makeup remover.

What the hell was happening?

“Close your eyes,” he whispered.

I was too exhausted at that point to argue; I did exactly what he said.

He rubbed the makeup remover on my face, following with the steaming wet cloth.

My shoulders immediately went lax with the rest of my body; he rubbed the sadness of the day away from my skin in an act so gentle that had I not known it was Romeo, I would have assumed I was getting a facial.

“Open.” He leaned down, inspected my face, and then rubbed the cloth below my eyes in slow, gentle swipes.

His eyes darted to my mouth several times before he jerked back, only to return from the bathroom with moisturizer.

Seriously?

“Stop frowning,” he rasped, digging into the moisturizer with his

fingertips and dabbing it onto my cheeks. His fingers massaged the lotion all over my face and down my neck, then moved to my arms as he helped me stand and spun me around.

The sound of my zipper going down, the feel of his warm hands against my back, the cold air biting each inch of exposed skin was almost painful to endure.

What was happening?

The dress pooled at my feet.

I stepped out of it, wearing nothing but a black lacy bra and matching panties. He moved next to me, pulling all of the pillows from the bed and tossing them to the floor, then fluffed mine like a freaking maid.

“Sleep,” he ordered, gently pushing me toward the bed.

I didn’t argue.

The sheets were cold as I crawled in and drew them up.

Seemingly satisfied, Romeo gave me a curt nod then went back to the bathroom. The hell was he doing now?

The door shut.

Was he using the restroom?

I grimaced at the subtle hiss coming through the door.

Was that water turning on?

He was in there maybe ten minutes when the light turned off.

I threw my body against the bed, pulled the covers up, and squeezed my eyes shut.

The bedroom light flickered off.

I sighed in relief.

Then nearly choked on my tongue when the other side of the bed dipped.

He wouldn’t.

He couldn’t.

“I can hear you thinking,” he rasped. “I’m too tired to argue, and I’ll just end up spanking you again. Sleep, Eden.”

“You can’t sleep with me!”

“First off, I never sleep with women, ever, you know unless I’m slitting their throats. You’re the one exception. You always have been. And I’ll sleep by your side until I know you’re safe. Fucking deal with it. I have cameras hooked up to Naz’s room.”

“When did you do that?”

“Don’t worry about it. He’s safe; my men are watching over him. Now go to sleep.”

“But—”

“Eden, keep arguing, and it’s gonna be your bare ass up in the air.”

With a heavy sigh, I hugged my pillow and said nothing only to have him lean over, the heat from his body pressed against mine, as he murmured, “Good choice.”

Although I was exhausted beyond belief, it took me forever to fall asleep.

Because less than forty-eight hours ago, I’d committed the greatest sin of all.

I’d been angry with Tristian.

I’d coveted his brother.

I’d imagined him in my bed.

I’d remembered our hateful night.

And I’d dreamt of Romeo Sinacore, falling asleep with me in his arms.

Now there we were, a dream come true...

But why did it feel like a nightmare instead?

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture.” —*Alfred Hitchcock*

*Romeo*

*Then: Nine months later*

“It’s a boy,” I read in a flat tone the banner hanging across the living room.

Laughter trickled out of the joint baby shower, the house was littered with happy couples and screaming children, something that a year ago would have sent me running in the opposite direction or at least forced me to lie face down on the pavement in the middle of rush hour traffic.

Instead, there was a small twinge of pain in my chest where my heart of stone beat. The saying, green with envy, never made sense until that moment.

I felt physically sick as my eyes drank in the blue balloons, blue cake, blue confetti, and what seemed to be hundreds of tiny little blue clothes folded near the unwrapped gifts.

I’d been late on purpose.



I knew I would only be able to stomach so much, and not showing up would be insulting to the family, Eden included; after all, I would be his godparent. This would be my godson.

Worst idea Tristian had ever had, but there it was.

Part of me wondered if he did that so that his son would always be protected, never hated by yours truly. I would never touch a child. Our relationship had been strained in the last year, ever since his marriage and their instant pregnancy, instant happiness, instant family, I'd drifted away, burying my head between women's thighs some nights, slitting their throats the others. Some might say I became the hardest underboss in the Cosa Nostra.

With laser-like focus and determination to forget the woman in the other room, I'd poured myself into making more of a name so that even if I couldn't touch her, see her, kiss her, be with her, she had no choice but to hear my name until she was sick with it.

If that made me a monster, so be it.

She needed to hear my name like I did hers in my head with no end in sight. There were nights where I pictured her lips I kissed, her tongue I sucked, her pussy I stuck my dick in. Those were the times I felt the most guilt, picturing my brother's wife so I could come.

What kind of monster had I become?

"Romeo." My brother's voice interrupted my morose thoughts. He was wearing a blue shirt with the moniker *Dad to be* scrawled across the front. "Glad you could finally make it." He held out his hand.

Was it my imagination, or did he emphasize the word finally? I took his hand, completely unfazed as his fingers squeezed mine to the point of all-out strangulation before I dropped it to my side.

It was the first time we'd shaken hands in months, the first time we'd been

forced to talk, the first time we'd been in the same room together voluntarily.

"It seems like all I've been doing lately is congratulating you." My smile felt so fake I wanted to choke myself. "And a boy? I bet Mom's excited. She always did favor boys. Much to Juliet's dismay."

Tristian scowled. "I used to think that, but have you seen Juliet recently? If she's not at the house, she's out shopping with Mom, getting her hair done, nails. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if Mom took her wine tasting as a teen."

A shriek sounded as Juliet rounded the corner, ran at me at full speed, and launched herself into my arms, her glossy black hair swinging into my face. "You're here!"

"And you learned how to strangle a man, good for you." I chuckled, hugging her back.

She laughed against me, her body humming with energy as I set her back on her feet. Damn, she was growing up really fast. It seemed every time I saw her, she turned more and more into a woman.

Where had the time gone?

*Great.*

Another female in my life I needed to worry about. *Fuck.* I saw a lot of shooting and torture in my future.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," I lied through my teeth, earning a snort from Tristian.

*Bastard.*

Juliet rolled her eyes. "Mom and I had a bet. I told her you'd show, but she said you'd rather get drunk than—"

I cupped a hand over her face. "You talk too much."

She jerked away. "Don't mess up my lip gloss."

"Wouldn't dare." I winked. "Where is Ma?" I peered around her and froze.

There she stood, rubbing her pregnant belly while my mom stood by her side. I could always decipher what was behind each emotion each time she showed them.

She was happy.

Fucking elated.

And as if sensing me in the room, she turned and gave me a glimpse of a sad smile.

Pity.

It nearly hurt worse than the sorrow and anger.

She knew.

Of course, my own mother knew how much I'd loved the girl standing by her side—how many times had I imagined this very scenario until it was explained that my purpose would not be a contribution to the family by way of marrying and settling down.

No, my contribution would be death.

Murder.

Just like my brother's contribution was clearly life.

"She's so beautiful," Juliet uttered next to me.

"She is," Tristian agreed.

If they were waiting for me to say something, they were shit out of luck; I pushed past both of them on wooden legs toward the object of my love.

Of my hate.

Of my affection.

Of all my emotions.

After all, they weren't opposites, were they? Not even close.

They were like twin brothers constantly warring with one another until one day, a winner was crowned, a loser killed.

My love had lost.

So I fed my hate even more.

That was my sin.

My cross to bear.

Heavy was the crown to the one who wears it, and I carried it proudly on my head.

“Ma.” I leaned in and kissed each of her cheeks, inhaling the Oscar de la Renta perfume she always wore behind her ears.

Her jet black hair was pulled tightly back, twisted into a bun, kept there by two pins worth more than most people’s cars.

“You don’t come around as much as you should.” Ma’s red lips spread into a small pout, and I wrapped an arm around her, kissing the top of her head. “But you’re here now; that’s what counts.”

“Yes.” I swallowed, once, twice, then finally turned to Eden.

Her eyes dripped with a hatred I’d carefully built there, constructed, watered, and tended like the garden she was.

“Eden,” saying her name hurt, the one word like poison on my tongue. “You look absolutely lovely.”

My smile hurt.

Hers was nonexistent.

“Thank you, Romeo.” She turned to my mom and reached for her hand. “I’m going to go grab some fresh air.”

Ma instantly deflated. “Good idea, keep that baby healthy.”

“Always,” Eden stated before walking off, her ass swaying even pregnant in her tight white strapless sundress.

Something pinched my side.

“Ouch!” I swatted Ma’s hand away. “Son of a bitch, why so violent?”

“Why such an asshole?” she countered.

I narrowed my eyes. “I said she looked lovely.”

“You sounded half dead!”

Didn't she know? I was. At least my heart was.

“Ma.” I looked over my shoulder to make sure Tristian wasn't watching or reading my lips, then lowered my mouth to her ear and whispered, “You know why I can't.”

She stiffened. “Still that bad?”

“You have no fucking clue.”

“Language.”

I sighed. “Sorry.”

She reached for my hand and squeezed. “I'll light a candle for you. One day it won't hurt so much; one day, you'll find love just like Tristian.”

“No, thank you.” My smile was sad, my heart heavy. “I don't think I want that kind of love, Ma. I wouldn't survive it twice; I barely survived it once.”

Tears filled her eyes. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.” I tried to sound convincing. “Now, stop looking like you're ready to cry. You know I can't see you cry. Please.” I kissed her hand. “I'm going to go grab a drink.”

She smiled. “Good idea.”

I maneuvered farther into the living room where the table of treats was set up. There was enough food to feed an army and enough candy to put anyone in a sugar coma, which explained all the screaming kids running up and down the stairs with plastic swords.

Walking over to the bar in the corner, I poured two fingers of whiskey into a glass.

“Cake pop?” Came a voice behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder.

One of the caterers was standing there with a seductive grin on her face, holding out a blue cake pop. Her black skirt was short and tight, just how I

liked them, easy access, and all that.

Her heels said fuck me please, just like her knowing expression, and her blond hair was drawn back into a ponytail I'd probably pull in the next five minutes while she screamed my name.

"If I eat your cake pop, does that mean you suck on mine?" I threw back the entire contents of my glass and waited.

*Women.*

They always hesitated, not because they wanted to. Hell no. They hesitated because they had to look like they weren't after sex. Why did it matter?

Such a shame.

Such a fucking double standard.

She stood up on her tiptoes and leaned in. "Do you think it will fit?"

"Only one way to find out." I ran a finger down the side of her cheek then down her arm until I clutched her hand and started pulling her toward the nearest bathroom.

This was what I needed.

A distraction.

Sex.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“You underestimate the power of the dark side.” —*Darth Vader*

*Romeo*

Anything to get rid of this sick feeling in my stomach, in my soul, in the core of every fiber of my being, this hunger that never dissipated no matter how many women I fucked.

She let out a throaty laugh when I shut the bathroom door then slammed my mouth against hers. Instantly, her hands were in my hair. Women loved the hair. Between that and my mouth, I could easily get an orgasm or two out of her before she took my cock.

Without breaking our kiss, I lifted her by the ass and set her on the counter next to the sink, wrapping those long legs around my waist, her heels hooked around one another as she tugged me closer.

“Eager?” I teased.

“Very,” she panted, sliding her hands inside my jacket, shrugging it off me as I inched her skirt up past her hips.

I started kissing her again, tasting wine on her lips, when the door was

shoved open.

“Hey!” The caterer, did she even tell me her name? “The bathroom’s busy.”

“Clearly.” Came Eden’s pretty voice. “But this is an emer—”

The sound of puking filled the room.

“Talk about cock blocking.” I sighed.

“Shut up, Romeo!” Eden had time to yell at me before the sound of puking happened again and then a moan.

I pried myself from the caterer in a flash, tugged her skirt down, and went over to Eden, getting on my knees behind her as I gathered her hair and held it tight in my hand.

“Um, hello? I’m still here?” Needy caterer stomped a heel against the tile floor.

“Are you? I hadn’t noticed,” I replied dryly. “Leave. Now.”

“This is bullshit. Do you know who my father—”

“Gonna stop you right there, sweetheart.” I didn’t even look at her. “No matter who your father is, or how important he is, I’m the one they send after people when they want them dead, so if you want little daddy to keep breathing, you’ll leave this bathroom and forget you ever saw me.”

A huff sounded along with footsteps and a random. “Cock tease.” The door slammed.

I returned my attention to Eden as she continued to puke until tears streamed down her face.

“All better?” I asked when she finally leaned back against me.

She nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes.

I reached for a towel behind me and wiped her face, careful not to mess up what was left of her makeup.

She was quiet.



The anger gone.

The sadness just as thick, just as tense, just as suffocating.

“S-sorry.” Eden’s voice cracked. “It’s been a rough pregnancy up until the bitter end.” She rubbed her belly, her smile more scared than sad.

I let go of her hair with trembling hands, letting it fall across her bare back, placing my palm against her shoulder instead.

Touching her was like drinking the sweetest poison and not caring in the least about the end result, only the beginning.

It was a moment of weakness, one I hadn’t had since that night as she leaned against me, using my strength as her own.

“What do you need?” I asked, gently stroking my fingertips across her skin, letting them believe that she was ours to touch, ours to keep.

Ignoring the mass disappointment that would take place in the next few minutes when we went back into the respective sides we stood on during the war between our hearts.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I’m scared I’m going to be a horrible mom, I’m hungry all the time, and then I puke...” She sniffled and wiped the tears from her face.

“Eden,” God, saying her name hurt like hell no matter the situation. “You’re going to be a wonderful mom. I’m sure of it.”

She hung her head. “You have to say that, you’re the uncle.”

In a moment of pure insanity, I wrapped both my arms around her, resting my chin on the top of her head. “You’re good, Eden, genuinely good. And your ability to love is vast. You’ll be a great mom because you’re great, and he’ll watch your every move, repeat it, try again, and when he fails, you’ll encourage him, you’ll hug him, dry his tears, you’ll tell him he’s brave when he’s scared, you’ll make him laugh, show him what it’s like to stand up for himself. You’ll be a great mom because you’re *you*. It’s just as simple as

that.”

She sighed. “I hate it when you’re nice.”

I grimaced. “Me too, makes me sound like a total pussy.”

Eden burst out laughing. “Being nice doesn’t mean you’re a pussy.”

“Thanks, I’ll be sure to update my resume. Not a pussy, knows how to hold someone’s hair when they puke, and sometimes nice.”

“I forget how funny you are when you’re not being a jackass.”

“That’s offensive. I’m hilarious even when I am being a jackass.”

It was too easy.

Settling back into our typical routine.

The verbal sparring.

Teasing.

The tension that always built whenever we were silent and realized how good it would be, how good it was, how broken we left it.

“Look, Eden—”

The door to the bathroom flew open; Tristian’s murderous gaze shot to mine with such hatred that it stole my breath away.

I’d always looked up to my brother.

Loved him.

Sacrificed for him.

The woman still in my arms proved that.

Eden was the one thing capable of breaking our relationship into tiny pieces of dust or whatever was left of it after their wedding.

I dropped my arms and very slowly moved away from her and stood. Tristian’s chest rose and fell like he’d sprinted toward the bathroom; his eyes flickered from me down to Eden.

Jealousy.

Rage.

Betrayal.

I saw it all.

In a blink of an eye, I went from brother to enemy.

And even though we had done nothing wrong, it didn't matter to him; it never would. Because I was always a threat, wasn't I?

Sometimes, things were better left broken. You could only fix things so many times before it was suddenly impossible to fix what wasn't yours to begin with.

"Tristian." Eden frowned. "Is something wrong?"

His eyes widened. "I don't know, you tell me? I heard you were feeling sick and panicked, and then I find you on the bathroom floor in my brother's fucking arms."

She flinched like he'd slapped her.

I clenched my fists. "Enough, Tristian. I was in here—"

"With another woman," Eden finished for me. "Lifting her skirt past her ass and getting ready to plow another field, then I started puking—"

"Ruining my hard-on," I pointed out.

She exhaled heavily. "Yes, that. So he held my hair for me."

"Yeah." Tristian rolled his eyes. "That's exactly what it looked like, with his arms around you, his chin resting on your head, his mouth inches from yours like he was holding your hair."

It was a struggle, but Eden finally made it to her feet and stomped over to him. Her hand came flying out of nowhere, landing a blow across his cheek that was so loud it shook the room. "How dare you? I'm carrying your child."

She shoved at his chest and then walked out of the bathroom in tears.

His gaze flew to mine. "You always make her cry."

"It's the one thing I'm good at," I lied. "But this time, I'm not the reason for her tears. You are, brother."

“Bullshit,” Tristian snapped. “You’ll always be the reason for her tears because she can’t have you, and even though she has me, she still fucking wants you!”

I tensed. “That’s not true.”

“You’re such a liar.” He looked away. “Sometimes I wish…” He hung his head. “I wish—”

“What? What do you wish? I’d choose my words wisely if I were you. If you know anything about me.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Does it sound like one?” I asked, keeping my voice calm even though my body was shaking with the need to punch him for making her cry.

“I’m only going to say this one more time.” Tristian clenched his teeth. “You don’t get to look at her, you don’t get to pine for her, wonder what her kiss tastes like. You don’t get to comfort her. You don’t get to be her friend. You lost her friendship the minute her father gave her away—to me. Having you close only hurts her; it only breaks us. So I wish you’d stay away. I wish you’d just…leave.”

“You want me gone?” I took a step toward him. “Out of your life? Out of hers? My nephew’s? Is that it?”

He crossed his arms. “Even you can admit it would be better if you just stayed away like you have been.”

“So you get the girl, and I lose my brother and my best friend all in one blow? And now you want me to lose my first nephew too?” I shook my head. “That’s your fear speaking, and you know it.”

“I’m afraid of nothing.” He lifted his chin.

“That’s where you’re wrong, brother.” I squeezed his shoulder as I walked past. “You’re terrified you’ll never be as good as me. The favorite. To our family. To her. Your wife. She chose you. Married you. Remember that when

you're feeling weak."

He gritted his teeth and jerked away from my touch.

"Stress isn't good for the baby; I'm going to go out the back. Now go apologize for being a jackass; it's good practice for the future when you fuck up because trust me, you will, but as long as you love her and take care of her, it doesn't matter," I muttered under my breath. "Wish fucking granted."

Numb again, I walked out of the bathroom and down the hall, my face impassive as I snuck out the back, made my way to the car, and opened the door.

Eden was staring out the kitchen sink window when I looked over my shoulder, her eyes sad.

I gave her a quick nod.

And I left.

In that moment, I had no idea that it would be two years before I saw her again.

Those two years would build a chasm so deep between us, it would forever be impossible to cross.

I didn't just give her up to my brother. I had now abandoned her because of him.

Not only her...

*Him.*

My unborn nephew.

I walked away that day and didn't look back; if I did, I would have stayed.

Fought.

For not only her.

*Them.*

His family, which should have been mine instead.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Sweet as sugar, hard as ice, hurt me once and I will kill you twice.” —*Mr. Villain*

*Eden*

*Now*

I woke up with a start, eyes swollen, body sore from being so tense the day before. My vision was blurry as I rubbed my eyes then reached for my cell.

“Shit!” It was already eight, and Naz had Kindergarten at eight thirty.

I scrambled around the room, all thoughts of Romeo gone as I grabbed a baseball hat, pulled on a pair of leggings and a sweatshirt, and sprinted into his room. Only to find his bed was empty. Panic struck square in my chest until I heard his usual giggling and talking.

With a frown, I jogged down the hallway.

Romeo was in front of the stove, flipping pancakes while Naz clapped.

*What the hell sort of alternate dimension did I just wake up in?*

My heart squeezed in my chest.

Did Romeo know?

Did he know that Tristian used to make breakfast for Naz? It was boy time or, as Naz always said, boy day.

Then again, every day was boy day to Naz.

He clapped. “Higher, Uncle Romeo! Higher!”

“Okay, one more time, just don’t tell your mom if it gets stuck to the ceiling.”

“Pinky promise.” Naz held out his hand.

Romeo reached across the bar, hooked his pinky in Naz’s, and then tossed the pancake a few feet into the air before catching it with a plate.

I watched in wonder as he handed Naz the plate and layered a lake of syrup all over.

“You just gonna stand there or come eat?” Romeo announced, without turning.

How did he know?

I shuffled toward them. Romeo was in last night’s clothes still; his hair a bit mussed, which just added to his ridiculous sex appeal while he poured a glass of orange juice for Naz then handed me a hot cup of coffee.

“What’s this?” I asked, peering into it.

“Coffee.” His voice was casual. “I figured you could use it this morning before your massage.”

My head shot up. “Massage?”

He checked his Rolex. “Yup, they’re expecting you at nine.”

“Nine,” I repeated. “But I have to take Naz to school; I have zero makeup on, I—”

He turned around and shoved a pancake in my mouth like a complete asshole. “I’ll take him to school. You don’t need makeup. You’re perfect just the way you are. Now drink your coffee before it gets cold.”

I took the pancake from my mouth, refusing to let him know how delicious it actually tasted, and lifted the coffee to my lips, taking one small sip. “Anyone ever tell you that you’re bossy? And who’s this cheerful in the morning?”

The corner of Romeo’s mouth tilted up in a smug smile. “Seems to me like you could use a bit of bossiness. Besides, I have to stop at my house and grab some clothes.” He offered a matter-of-fact shrug. “His school’s on the way.”

“How do you know where his school is exactly?”

“Oh, I camp outside of it in my van then offer free candy during recess.” He winked.

“Very funny,” I groaned.

“Oh, can you, Uncle Romeo? My friends would think I was so cool if you had a candy van!”

I jabbed my finger at Naz. “Never repeat to anyone that your uncle has a van with candy and parks at the school.”

Romeo choked out a laugh, “Ever.”

“Aw, man.” Naz pouted. “You’re ruining boy day.”

“Yeah, Eden, you’re ruining boy day,” Romeo agreed.

I was going to strangle him to death. “Make sure he gets all the way into the school before speeding off and don’t—” I stopped talking and looked him up and down; even in ruffled clothing, he looked like walking talking sex. A wet dream you never want to wake up from. A nightmare you’d welcome any day of the week. “Just be careful at drop off, especially of Maria; she’ll get one good look at you and cyberstalk you until you’re too terrified to say no.”

“Ah, soccer moms, such easy hunting, it wouldn’t even be fair, Eden, you know that...all those repressed housewives in their expensive SUV’s, cobwebs between their—”



I clapped a hand over his mouth. “Stop speaking.”

He grinned against my palm.

I jerked it away, irritated that my skin was tingling where his lips touched.

Ignoring how close he was, I turned toward Naz. “Two more bites, then grab your backpack.”

After a huge yawn and two giant bites shoved into his mouth, Naz hopped off the barstool, grabbed his Lego backpack, then walked up to Romeo and took hold of his hand. “Uncle Romeo, can I bring you in for show and tell today?”

“Probably not the best idea, little man.” He ruffled his hair.

“But, you can show your gun!”

My eyes went wide. “There’s a no weapon policy at your school, Naz, and remember, we don’t tell our friends or teachers what Mommy and Daddy—” I stopped myself as loss swept through me. “—what your family does.”

“Oh.” Naz frowned, his eyebrows drawing together. “But it’s so cool. I mean, Uncle Romeo cleans money!”

I nearly spit out my coffee while Romeo’s grin stretched across his face. “That’s because money’s dirty, and I like things to be clean.”

I glared at him, then smiled back at Naz. “Remember not to believe everything Uncle Romeo says, all right honey?”

“Oh okay, so you’re not beautiful? Because I think you are, and Uncle Romeo said you were, but maybe he wasn’t the truth?”

“*Telling the truth.*” I corrected. “And um—”

“She is.” Romeo stepped in. “Stunning, and since you’re the man of the house, it’s your job to tell her that, all right, Naz?”

He nodded his head. “Don’t worry, Uncle Romeo; I’ll tell her, and you’ll tell her, and then Daddy will be happy in Heaven.”

I seriously doubted that, but I said nothing as Naz made his way over to

the door. “Bye. Mom loves you. We don’t want to be late!”

“Where’s my kiss?” I crossed my arms.

“Oops!” He ran back over to me, hugged my legs, and when I bent over to his level, pressed a soft kiss to my mouth. “Loves you.”

“Loves you too.” I patted his soft cheek. He smiled up at me but didn’t go back to the door.

“Naz?”

“Mom,” he said in a loud whisper. “You have to say goodbye to Uncle Romeo too.”

No, I really didn’t.

I forced a smile. “Bye, Romeo.”

“Mommmyyyy, he needs a goodbye kiss too. You always say that you have to kiss before you leave the house, just in case you don’t get to kiss again. Remember?”

Yup, strangling Romeo later. He laughed with Naz and then nodded his head at me like it was true.

Son of a bitch.

“Right,” I agreed, clenching my teeth.

I turned to Romeo and stood up on my tiptoes, bringing my mouth to the side of his cheek only to have him turn at the last minute as my lips collided with the corner of his arrogant smile.

“Mama.” Naz started clapping. “That was a great kiss! Right, Uncle Romeo? Wasn’t it your favorites?”

My heart slammed against my ribs as his dark eyes flickered to mine before answering. “My favorite of all time.” He tore his gaze from me and started guiding Naz toward the door.

“Mom’s a good kisser.” Naz didn’t miss a beat as he continued to chatter on about my superb kissing skills. Even as they opened the door and went

outside, I could see Naz's little mouth moving and Romeo laughing.

It was insane how easy it was for them.

To just...co-exist.

Especially after the fact that I'd shoved Romeo out of our lives to prevent a war between the brothers.

Right now, the only reason I had to keep him at arm's length had everything to do with protecting myself and my son. But the main reason, the main wall that had stood between us, had been obliterated the minute Tristian died.

All I had left was my hatred for the man who told me he loved me with one breath, then exhaled poison with the next.

I had to remember who Romeo was.

I had to remember who I was.

Even if that meant digging up every painful memory, every hateful experience, every rejection he threw my way. Yes, even if it meant remembering what I wanted to forget.

I fell for him once.

Loved him with my soul.

Only to have him laugh in my face.

He was nothing to me.

Nothing, but a bodyguard.

Nothing but my husband's brother.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

Then why couldn't I stop thinking about him and our future all damn day?

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Now make a wish and take a bite. One bite, and all your dreams will come true.” —*The Evil Queen*

*Eden*

*Then: Two years later*

I hadn't seen him since he'd held back my hair in the bathroom when I was still pregnant with Nazario, who we now called Naz for short.

*Romeo.*

He hadn't so much as said a goodbye, an I'll see you later, a take care.

Nothing.

Not one damn thing.

I knew in my heart it was my husband's doing. He threw his brother out of our lives without thinking twice about it. I could see the remorse in his gaze when someone brought up Romeo's name in our presence. Everyone said Romeo was just busy.

Traveling.

Working.

Killing.

He'd become more ruthless. The man I remembered was gone. In his place stood a monster I didn't know I'd ever see again. I thought about him often.

When I was alone.

With company.

In his brother's arms.

Especially in moments like these where he used to show up only for me. A handful of gifts in tow. I had no idea how he'd figured it out, but every year on my birthday, his presents were things I'd seen throughout the year that I wanted. One year it was this snow globe of The Rockefeller Center, another it was a historical novel written by my favorite author that was signed and personalized to me.

The best was when he reserved an air balloon ride over the Hamptons at dawn. He actually went with me. To see the world come alive with him standing by my side was a memory I'd take to my grave. If I closed my eyes, I could still see us there on top of the world.

The man knew no bounds, and each year he proved how much he truly knew me. Last year was the first time I didn't see him, nor did I receive anything in the mail from him. It was like he'd fallen off the face of the earth or worse...

I had.

His brother was the complete opposite of him, where Romeo was sentimental; his brother was over the top. This year I received a diamond tennis bracelet engraved with my birthday and the year that we were in as if Tristian wanted me to remember when and who gave it to me. Every year it was diamonds, luxury cars, clothes, shoes, you name it, he probably gave it to

me at some point.

That's how different the brothers were. One wanted to own my soul while the other wanted my heart. There were days where I couldn't tell the difference anymore.

I couldn't tell you how many times I contemplated calling, writing, showing up at his penthouse unannounced. I never did. I couldn't. Rejection was a bitch, and I wasn't ready to have him tell me to go home once again. I barely survived it the first time. There was no escaping my conscience. Not when it came to him. The mere fact I was still thinking about him made me feel like I was the biggest piece of shit human.

Woman.

Wife.

The more I tried to forget about him, the harder it was. It didn't help that Tristian was home less and less, and when he was, we pretended to be this perfect little family. Though in my heart, my soul, something was off. Almost overnight, his brother was out of our lives, and it gave my husband this insecurity I'd never seen or experienced before. He couldn't hear his name without tensing, spewing hate, or arguing with whoever brought him up.

Romeo became his rival.

His enemy.

The villain in our lives and this tainted love story.

I loved Tristian. However, the longer we were together, the more apparent it became that maybe I was never in love with him to begin with. I wanted to be.

I tried.

I begged.

I prayed.

When I looked into Tristian's eyes, all I saw was pain where there had

once been so much affection.

Devotion.

Love.

Something had changed. Three years of marriage, and it was like we'd turned into different people.

Wants.

Needs.

Expectations.

This future I thought we'd have wasn't at arm's length any longer; it was miles upon miles of distance away. Every time I thought we were close, we were almost there, an issue would arise, and we'd find ourselves on opposite sides of the fence, still looking toward a future we may never have.

Further and further, it flew out of our paths.

As much as I told myself not to do it, I texted him this morning.

Two words.

So many meanings.

*What happened?*

He never replied, which simply brought on more unexplained heartache.

More confusion.

More questions and no answers to them.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed with his lack of response, interest, attention, or concern. I read the text message probably a hundred times throughout the day.

Waiting.

On my twenty-fourth birthday.

At my party for him to give me something.

The Sinacore family never did anything half-ass; this event was another outlandish celebration where they proved who was in power and needed to be

respected.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight, Red?” Tristian remarked, wrapping his arms around my body from behind me. Tearing my thoughts away from the life I lived in.

I froze.

Stiffened.

There was no denying it.

No hiding.

Especially, no lying.

“Are you all right?” he quickly addressed the elephant in the room.

*Me.*

We were on the dance floor; suddenly, it felt as though all eyes were on us, and the room was closing in on me.

I spun around to face him, setting my trembling hands on his solid chest. He was wearing a black tuxedo, looking as handsome as ever. Reminding me why I fell for him in the first place.

With my eyes settled upon his, I questioned in a steady tone, “Why did you call me that?”

For a brief second, he flinched, showing how our marriage was hanging on by a thread. His gaze raked over my dress; I was wearing a light-peach strapless gown that hugged my curves perfectly; it subtly flowed out down by my knees. My hair was curled and tied to the right side of my head, with a few strands of hair framing my face. My makeup was heavy on the eyes with dark black eyeliner and thick mascara. Some blush and a soft shade of nude for my pouty lips.

In a matter of a few seconds, his stare went from endearing like he was trying to make a memory of me to defensive, sad, angry...

It happened in the blink of an eye. He challenged, “Is Romeo the only



man who can call you that, *Red*?”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me right now?”

“Why would I do that, darling? I won the girl.”

“Won? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means my ring is on your finger, so you need to remember that.”

“Tristian, what the hell—”

He grabbed my hand molding me close to his body, pulling me tighter into his strong, muscular frame. He guided my arms up around his neck with no space between us before wrapping his arms around me, proving my point.

“Just dance with me.”

I swallowed hard and nodded at his request, not wanting to make a scene when everyone was happy, enjoying themselves and the party. Sighing in defeat, I laid my cheek on his chest, and he placed his chin on top of my head.

“Why can’t it always be like this?”

“What do you mean?” I countered, peering up at his sincere expression.

“Simple. Easy. All I’ve ever wanted was you, Eden. You know that, right?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Your silence is deafening, Red.”

“Please stop calling me that.”

He scoffed out, “Now for that, I get a genuine response?”

“I honestly don’t know what you’re trying to get at. I wouldn’t have married you—”

“If my brother hadn’t given you up? Where is he now, Eden? Because I haven’t seen him in two years. I’m the one who’s been here with you. Don’t you see that?”

“Whose fault is that, Tristian? What did you say to him?”

“The truth.”

“Which is what? What’s the truth?”

“That he needed to stay away from us.”

“Us? Or me?”

“*My family.*”

“Interesting statement considering he’s your brother.”

“Fuck him.”

“Tristian!” I said a little too loudly.

He leaned, breathing into my ear, “Oh wait, I forgot. You already did that. Have you spread your legs since the last time he took what was mine?”

I shoved him, unable to hold back.

“Eden, shit.” He shook his head. “I’ve been drinking. I didn’t mean that.”

“Yeah, you seem to do that a lot.”

“Look, I’m sorry, all right?” His easy smile was back, his eyes drilling into mine like he needed me to believe him this time when it was always the same argument.

“You know what they say; a drunk person speaks the truth.”

“Then, you should start drinking so I can get it from you.”

The conflicting emotions came tumbling down on me, crippling me. I suddenly needed some fresh air, a moment to myself.

To think.

To breathe.

To cry.

I hated showing weakness in front of anyone. Before he could throw more poison, I snapped around, making my way toward the outside rose garden of the banquets where my birthday was being held, and I could be alone. Giving him my indifference the instant I stepped into the exquisite garden where intricate roses lined every step in my direction.

Inhaling a long, deep, sturdy breath, I stood in front of the fountain in the center of the garden, trying to distract myself by the water and the soft glow it gave everything around me. Usually, this view would have me awestruck and at peace, but I couldn't stop the emotions that were consuming my mind and body.

And then just like that, it unexpectedly changed...

For the first time in two years, I felt him.

*Romeo.*

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“People change. It’s just a matter of whether they die before it happens.” —  
*Orochimaru*

*Eden*

He approached from behind, and I had no need to turn around to know who it was. Had I summoned him? I supposed in a way I had. The water gurgled and splashed in the fountain as though to assure me it bore witness to our presence.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” I whispered, my heart pounding against my chest with such force it was physically painful.

“Isn’t that why you texted me this morning?” he countered in a husky, masculine tone.

Why did that simple response strike such a chord inside of me? “I texted you because—”

“You miss me,” he chimed in. “Not that I can blame you; if I were married to an accountant, I’d have blown my fucking brains out at this point.”

I wanted to reply, but what could I say to that?

Already, my lips twitched with the need to react. Romeo never censored himself; he was blunt, chaotic, unapologetic about himself, and the way he saw the world.

And that included his brother.

I heard his footsteps follow that brought him closer to where I stood in front of the fountain. My breathing hitched as soon as I felt him come up behind my shaky frame. I didn't turn around, I didn't move, afraid if I did he'd disappear like he was just a figment of my imagination.

I closed my eyes, waiting for I didn't know what. His warmth increased the closer he got, convincing me I would combust any moment. We weren't even touching, yet his presence engulfed me. Owned me. He was everywhere.

His hands.

His lips.

His love.

He leaned in just inches away, letting his whiskey breath brush against my ear. Assault all my senses. Shivers coursed through me and down my spine while my knees buckled.

I wrapped my arms around my stomach, trying to hold in the emotions that threatened to spill, comforting myself with the truths that were revealing themselves to him. Knowing he noticed. There was no way he couldn't have felt the effect he always had over me.

His touch.

His aura.

His mere presence.

“Happy birthday, Red.”

My breath hitched as I shuddered, weakened, the wall I built came tumbling down at our feet. A much different reaction than I'd had when

Tristian called me that minutes before.

I never imagined this would be my life. Forever stuck between a man who refused to let me go and one who dropped me the minute he was asked to.

“Why are you here?”

“To give you your gift,” he responded simply, like it was the easiest question when in fact, it seemed to be the hardest.

I swallowed hard, not knowing what to say or what to do. I should have left, but I couldn't get my feet to move. They were glued to the ground, cemented into this place and time where it felt so damn good to have him there with me when he was nothing but bad for me.

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly becoming dry. My head spun in a whirlwind of feelings. Battling with my heart to move or to stay grounded. Wanting to turn and face the man who was still such a mystery to me, although before I could, his actions made the decision for me.

My eyes followed the quick movement of his strong arms as they came around my body. Skimming the sides of my ribs to place his hands on the railing out in front of me that protected the fountain from intruders going into it.

He caged me in against his body, his scent, his suit.

Engulfing me.

Comforting me.

Tormenting.

It was loud.

Explosive.

Maddening.

The closer he got to me, the more I wanted to feel him against my body. Yearning to be touched in a way that I knew could soothe me. I sensed he wanted to put his hands on me, and I needed to feel my silky skin under his

calloused fingers. He didn't.

If he touched me, we'd both get burned in the flames that always surrounded us.

"Open it," he whispered, indicating his gift, a slender box wrapped in paper covered in silver foil tied with a pretty white bow.

I did, allowing my fingers to linger with his for a couple of seconds. Opening the jewelry box, I gasped as soon as I saw the rose gold locket necklace. I had my eyes on it for the last year, wanting to put a picture of Naz in it.

"How did you know? How do you always know what to get me?" I asked, needing to finally know the answer to a question that had been plaguing my mind for as long as I could remember.

"Because I know you," he emphasized, placing his hands over mine, and I jumped from his sudden touch.

I could feel him grinning, knowing he was the cause of the rapid rhythm beating against the palm of his hand. Slowly, he opened the locket with my hands in his, and that warm feeling washed over me. It had the perfect photo of Naz on the left that warmed my heart; his chubby cheeks and cherubic smile were the first things that caught my attention. It wasn't until I saw the picture on the right that felt like a bucket of freezing cold water poured down my head.

It was an image of Tristian and me from our rehearsal dinner.

I shot around and pushed Romeo away with everything inside of me. "You fucking bastard."

He scoffed out a chuckle. "I never claimed to be anything else."

I had no words. He'd rendered me speechless. All I had were emotions spilling out. The floodgates opened, letting out everything I held in so deeply. Tears began to stream down my face, falling to the ground along with my

heart.

“Why do you always want to hurt me?”

His hand rose to the side of my cheek.

I was feeling so much...

Yet not nearly enough.

“You know I hate seeing you cry. Don’t waste your tears on me.”

I didn’t say one word, terrified he would stop his caress, and his control over me would fade.

I sucked in a breath when he took the locket out of my hands and placed it around my neck.

“There. Now it’s where it’s meant to be.”

It was then that I couldn’t take it any longer.

It was then that it became too much.

His words were killing me, but his touch was destroying me.

I simply stated, asking with conviction, “Why do you want me to hate you?”

Romeo

“Does it make it easier for you?” Her lower lip trembled. I wanted nothing more than to press my mouth to hers, kiss away the sadness, and claim what wasn’t mine to claim.

“Nothing about *you* is easy,” I declared, eyeing her up and down.

Her eyes widened. “So, what happens now? You leave, and I don’t see you again for another two years? Are you here to say goodbye this time? Or



to repeat the past because I swear we're fucking stuck there."

There was so much emotion behind her gaze. I knew they mirrored mine; there was no need for words. Our eyes spoke for themselves as I took her face between my hands and caressed the sides of her cheeks with my thumbs.

My thoughts.

My words.

They all seemed to be fucking intertwined with one another. Pushing and pulling like a game of tug of war that never ended and was impossible to win.

"If we were stuck there, then you wouldn't have married my brother."

"What do you want from me?" she whispered, peering into my chest. I lifted her chin so I could once again look into her beautiful eyes. The pain in her voice was so tangible like I could reach out and touch it, obliterate it with my bare hands and replace it with something else—anything else.

"Whatever you have to give me," I answered simply, wiping away the tears from her cheeks.

"Tristian is inside, Romeo."

"It's never stopped me before."

Her lips started quivering, unable to form words. I kissed her forehead, resisting the urge to claim every last inch of skin. I knew I shouldn't have been there, but I had to see her. It had been way too fucking long.

One of my biggest regrets in my life was giving her to my brother.

"I can't lose you again," I stated the truth, hating that I sounded weak as hell.

"You don't have me now." I'd forgotten how adorable she was when she lied.

"You're in my arms, so I'll take you any way I fucking can."

A frown pinched her face as she pulled away from me, shaking her head. Breaking our connection. I stepped toward her but was quickly interrupted by

a toddler's voice shouting, "Mama!"

Both our stares darted in the direction it came from. Two chubby legs came barreling down the path like a drunken sailor. Barreling footsteps followed behind him, Tristian chasing after their son.

His glare flew from her to me while mine stayed on the little boy by her feet. His arms were extended sky high, begging to be picked up.

Eden assumed I was gone for half his little life. She didn't know that there wasn't a breath he took without me watching over him, like an avenging angel.

Tristian spewed, "Am I interrupting?"

Still, I couldn't get my gaze to move.

Refocus.

Connect with my brother, whom I hadn't seen since he kicked me out of his house.

His life.

Theirs.

Hers.

My nephew's.

With wide eyes, I stepped back, replying, "I was just leaving." Needing to get the hell out of there before I screamed our blatant truths with her staring right at me.

Tristian spoke up. "You should go inside, Romeo. Say hello to the family, and then you can find someone to go home with. You know, use women who are at your disposal until you're bored and throw them away. I think you've done enough damage here for the night."

I nodded.

He was right.

I walked away from her that night, leaving her with my brother.

And this time, with my nephew.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“The Villain is the person who knows the most but cares the least.” —*Chuck Klosterman*

*Romeo*

*Now*

It was almost comical. A week ago, I was washing blood off my hands.

This morning I was dropping off a six-year-old who didn't understand the concept of taking a breath in between words and fighting traffic with multiple minivans and angry moms in head-to-toe high-end yoga garb.

“...so then I told Jude that his Magnatiles were newer than mine, so they were better, and then I asked Mom for more Magnatiles, and she said I had to earn them, so I cleaned my room but got in trouble for shoving my Lunchable under my bed and forgetting about it, and that's how I got grounded— Hey, Uncle Romeo, do you think that—”

I clapped my hand slowly across his mouth as I maneuvered the car into the drop off lane.

The clever little heathen was still attempting to talk even with my hand in place.

I removed it.

“—do you think that it’s fair that Mom—”

I put my hand back again. “Fascinating,” I chuckled to myself. “Since it’s boy day and I’m a boy, shouldn’t I get to talk?”

Naz let out a dramatic sigh. “Sure, I guess. Even though you’re a man.”

“Your mom said to wait until you made it into the school. Do you have your backpack?”

“Check” He grinned and held up his blue and orange backpack.

“Lunch?” I put the car in park.

“Yup!” He shot me another toothy grin.

“And homework?”

His face fell. “I hate homework.”

“Yes, well, we all have our crosses to bear,” I murmured. “Yours is homework, and mine is trying to get out of the drop-off line without any of the single moms trapping me against my will.”

Naz laughed, “You’re funny, Uncle Romeo. Just drive fast, and they won’t trap you, duh!”

“Duh,” I repeated. “How had I not thought of that? You’re so smart.”

“I know.” His sigh said it was a burden to be that smart, and I nearly laughed again but wasn’t sure his fragile ego could handle it.

“Be good.” I cleared my throat awkwardly. Hell, I was seconds away from patting him on the head. Was I really that bad with kids? My own nephew even? “And um, make...good life choices.”

*Son of a bitch, shoot me now.*

Naz opened the car door then called over his shoulder. “You make good life choices too,” And then, as he hopped out of the car, he yelled, “Have fun

cleaning the money!”

I winced as several horrified parents glanced in my direction.

“Yup.” I winked. “Love you, little man.”

“You too, Uncle Romeo!”

He skipped past a few women who were currently huddled in a circle sipping Starbucks. Whispers were exchanged amongst them, and then one turned toward me and started power walking.

“Oh, fuck no.” I waited until Naz was inside the school, quickly pulling out of the drop-off line and hitting the accelerator to get the hell out of there.

It was a quick drive to the club.

Debase had been and always would be one of the clubs that stole pieces of your soul each time you visited. The original club was in Chicago, and this one had just opened a few months ago.

Owned by Andrei Sinacore, it was a front to help rescue as many women from trafficking as physically possible, but Andrei had to look like a monster in order to do so. He couldn't save everyone, which meant he had to at least keep a few of the women to serve a purpose.

None of them were tortured, but they were numbered instead of named. Stripping them of their identity. They lived out their days in luxury, but did it matter? When you weren't actually living but using your body in order to survive? Kept as though they were no more than chattel? He looked the other way, we all did, because we justified the fact that he saved at least ninety percent of them.

The ten percent he couldn't save haunted him, it haunted me, and I hated the reminder as I pulled into the parking lot. I was the underboss, so I was just as tainted with the blood as he was. At night I swear I could sometimes hear their screams, their pleas for help.

And every time, I looked the other way.

Another reason I had never deserved Eden.

When a woman asked for help—you answered the call; you didn't pretend you couldn't hear her. But that's what was asked of me, to pretend.

I pretended with the women.

And I even pretended with Eden.

*Fuck.*

I was damned to Hell.

Already in a shit mood, I got out of my car and made my way past security and into the club.

It was still early, but that didn't matter, not in a place like this. A few men in suits were scattered around the VIP section, drinking, watching while scantily clad women danced around them, clinging to poles, thrusting their tits out in an effort to get a bigger tip.

With a sigh, I looked away and went straight to the heart of the club, where I knew Andrei would be waiting. Swear that man had the uncanny ability to guess when I was going to visit; he always had a glass of whiskey ready for me as if he'd been lying in wait. If he wasn't so young and semi-likable, he'd be a threat.

Then again, he'd always been a threat to the Five Families. He had the ear of the Russians since he was half, and he controlled one of the oldest Italian families in the world—mafia royalty.

The rest of us would always be less than, regardless of our bloodlines, regardless of the kills I had under my belt. My cousin would always hold the world in his hands, and he would always suspect that I wanted the same thing, which meant playing nice, so he didn't think I was going to slit his throat one day and steal his throne.

The only positive was that he knew I didn't want that power; I was better in the dungeon killing his enemies, getting my hands dirty to not think about

the fact that I'd lost my heart, my fucking soul long ago to a woman who still had trouble looking at me.

I nodded at Ax, Andrei's personal guard. "He in?"

Ax smirked. "When is he not in?"

"He said something about—"

"Not here." Ax jerked open the door to the personal office of the Sinacore boss. It clicked shut behind me, sealing us away from the world.

The office was massive, with a black leather couch to the right. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases surrounded the room, and a wet bar stood near the mahogany desk Andrei sat at.

There were no windows.

No visible exits but one.

With several cameras trained on me along with a few guns. I couldn't see them though it didn't mean they weren't there.

"Always a pleasure," I grumbled under my breath as Andrei leaned back in his chair, his golden blonde hair like a halo crowning his head.

Long elegant fingertips gripped a glass of whiskey before he slowly slid it toward me. "Sit."

I took the whiskey in hand and sat on the black leather chair facing him. "Any news?"

His grin was a bit too menacing.

His demeanor a bit too relaxed.

I narrowed my eyes, examining his hands, his perfect posture while tilting my head. One spot of blood on his otherwise perfect white collar.

I scoffed out a laugh. "Getting started without me?"

He shrugged. "What can I say? It's Monday."

I braced myself for what would come next. Either an informant was dead, or they were about to be.



“Saved the best for last.” Another ominous grin slid over his face, and he grabbed a remote.

It had a green button.

And a red.

The red was obviously bad news.

The green meant you would die a quick death.

Naturally, he hit the red, his grin growing as the curtains behind him parted.

Dangling from the ceiling was a man. He was shirtless. His black pants wet with blood.

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

Blood slid off of his shoe, hitting the cement in an almost calming succession.

Was it sick that I got off on that? That I liked the slow calming drip?

Death was a constant—life’s North Star.

Death never changed.

Death, after enough torture, was peaceful.

I hadn’t had peace in an entire lifetime—I was a monster, wasn’t I? Because I was smiling.

I needed this like another hit from a lead pipe.

I needed the consistency.

Everything else in my life wasn’t.

And now I was living with the one woman I had to keep my hands off, keep secrets from, protect.

I was going insane, and she didn’t even know it.

Sleeping next to her. Hearing the slow cadence of her breathing, knowing

that she woke up with tears staining her cheeks. Knowing that my fucking brother was the reason for it and that I would die with his secrets too.

Fuck I hated him.

Because of him, I would never have her.

Because of his lies, he had made sure of that.

She could never know the truth.

*Ever.*

Andrei yawned and stood, tossing the remote onto his desk, shoving his hands into his pocket like we were in a casual business meeting. “He talked a bit. See if you can get anything else...I need to know who he’s working for. That’s the only thing he won’t tell me.” He checked his watch. “Five minutes, and then you know what to do.”

The monster appeared then.

Ready.

Willing.

Eager as fuck.

He took over, and I grabbed one of the knives from the wall of torture tools.

“On second thought...” I put the knife back and grabbed a club hammer earning a laugh from Andrei in the process. “What?”

He smirked. “You came to play, didn’t you?”

“It’s been a shit day,” I answered, looking away.

“Ah, having no sex does that to a man. Is she...” He continued walking toward the door. “...contained?”

“Yes,” I rasped. “And she’s safe.”

“Good, good,” he replied, opening the door. “Keep it that way. No fuck-ups, Romeo.”

I snapped, “When have I ever fucked up?”

He froze, looking over his shoulder. “Never. But she’s the one thing you can’t control, no matter how hard you try. She pulls you; she makes you both weak and strong. It could go both ways, Romeo. It could be your death or your salvation. So I’ll remind you again, no fuck-ups, it’s not just your life that hangs in the balance.”

I nodded. “Understood.”

“For what it’s worth.” He tilted his head. “She would be good for you.”

“What?” Shit! Did he know? “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “The only time your lies are shit are when they’re about her. And I said what I said, Romeo. She would be good for you, but I wonder...would you be good for her.”

With that haunting truth, he shut the door and left.

I gripped the hammer in my hands and kicked the desk. It didn’t help.

The man moaned.

I jerked to attention and slowly shrugged out of my suit coat. Unbuttoning my sleeves, I rolled them up to my elbows.

Hammer in hand again, I grinned up at him. “Having a good day?”

He moaned something else I couldn’t decipher as I circled him.

“Who are you loyal to?” I asked.

“Andrei,” he whispered. “The Sinacore Family.”

“And yet...” I grazed his back with the head of the hammer. “You’re hanging in his office half dead. Try again.”

“Let me go.” His body started to convulse.

“Hmmm, I’ll tell you what. Give me the information I need, and I’ll kill you fast. You’re already dead. If you’re truly loyal to the Sinacore boss, you’ll die honoring *him*, not whoever paid you the most money.”

Tears slid out of his swollen eyes; he opened his mouth, maybe to cry. Scream? Beg for mercy?

“Drozdov.” A trickle of blood slid down his chin, both eyes were swollen to mere slits. His mouth was bloody; he’d most likely had a few teeth pulled, compliments of Andrei. “It’s the Drozdov.”

I halted. “You’re sure?”

“They’ll kill me.” He cried harder, his tears mixing in with the blood on his face. “They’ll kill all of you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I whispered. “I’m going to kill you as a kindness, and then I’m going to kill them for thinking they could start their own family and break away from the Petrovs. There’s one Russian family, and it’s not them. Now the only question is do I send you back like this or send them something...to remember you by?”

He whimpered.

Without hesitation I slammed the hammer into the back of his skull.

His head lolled forward.

I wiped my hands on my pants and reached for the sharpest machete I could find from the wall, then honored my promise.

By freeing him the only way I could.

I swung.

The machete hit his neck, slicing right through. The rest of his body fell to the ground, and blood spewed from his neck, coating the floor.

I tossed the machete to the ground, hands shaking, before grabbing the remote to lower the contraption that he had been hanging from. I ignored the tremors in my body. It didn’t matter how many times I killed; I was still taking a human life, it affected me.

A life was a life.

A person was a person.

I’d taken this life.

This soul.

And many, many more.

*“Sangue del mio sangue, vai con dio,”* I murmured in Italian. *Blood of my blood, go with God.*

I made the sign of the cross, taking a deep breath in the process.

“Ax,” I announced into the intercom to Andrei’s bodyguard. “I’m done.”

The door opened, and I nodded to the dead body. Ax didn’t even flinch.

I gestured to the dismembered head. “Please send this extravagant gift to the Drozdovs with my condolences.” I angled my head and mused further, “Maybe add in some wine; I’m feeling generous today.”

“Understood.” He glanced around the room, shaking his head. “Always so messy...”

“I can’t help it.” I shrugged. “Did Andrei need anything else?”

“No, he’s making the rounds.”

I grabbed my jacket from the chair and got out of there.”

“Have a nice day.” Ax nodded to me on my way out.

I didn’t pay anyone any mind, hauling ass to my car. My chest was tight; all I wanted was to go back to the house and shower the sickness from my soul.

That was the thing about murder.

I could wash the blood down the drain all I wanted. However, that blood still stained my soul. It never left me. Stealing pieces of me until there would eventually be nothing left.

If I could have Eden.

If I allowed myself to have her.

To finally fucking have her...

There would be nothing left for me to give her.

Nothing at all.

It was gone.

To hell in a handbasket.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

“There are no heroes. No villains. Just people with a different agenda.” —  
*Daredevil*

*Eden*

“Did you brush your teeth?” My eyes narrowed as Naz looked everywhere but my face. At least he inherited one thing from me.

I was a horrible liar.

I wore my emotions like an armor. I’d always wished that I could lie, manipulate, be the mysterious woman with all her secrets.

But I wasn’t made like that.

I remember complaining to my dad about it one day in high school, why couldn’t I be like the other girls? He said it was refreshing that I wore my honesty with pride.

And yet, where did it get me?

I was honest with Romeo.

He’d hurt me, rejected me, pushed me away for women who lied for money and power.

Deflated, I ruffled Naz's hair. "Hey buddy, can you answer Mom?"

"Welllllll..." Naz scrunched up his nose. "It's too minty."

"The toothpaste?"

He slumped against me, wrapping his arms around my thigh. "It hurts my tongue."

"Then brush your teeth faster, and tomorrow we'll get some bubblegum toothpaste, all right?"

"Mooommmmmmmmm."

"If you don't brush your teeth, you won't get any screen time. Besides, that's Uncle Romeo's favorite toothpaste."

"Really?" He piped up. "His *favorite* favorite?"

"Yup."

With a grin, he shot past me and into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him as the sound of the faucet filled the hall.

"Liar, I hate that toothpaste." Romeo suddenly appeared.

I stumbled back and pressed my hand against my chest. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"Sorry." His grin was almost playful, which automatically put me on edge. "I wasn't trying to sneak up on you guys. Did you have a good massage?"

The hall was dark, so I couldn't make out anything but his dark suit.

I motioned for him to come back into the kitchen with me.

Naz chose that moment to zip past us with his iPad in hand. "Hi Uncle Romeo, bye Uncle Romeo, Mama, I get five more minutes and then bed."

"Three!" I called back.

"Two, one!" he yelled, earning a smile from me.

I rolled my eyes and turned to Romeo, then nearly passed out from the sight of blood.



It was spread past the collar of his shirt and seeped down the front. His skin looked perfect as usual, but his clothes were a complete and utter mess.

I stumbled back. “That’s a lot of blood.”

His easy smile was gone, replaced with a cold look that had me backing up slowly. “Be thankful it’s blood and not lipstick.”

With a gasp, I covered my mouth, speaking through my shaking fingers. “How dare you!”

“This blood.” He advanced toward me, his teeth clenched. “Stays with me forever, Eden. I don’t kill because some sick part of me finds joy in torturing good people, people that just...” His eyes flashed. “He was one of our own. So before you start judging me, know that everything I do is to protect you, to protect this family, and if that includes fucking answers out of someone, I’ll do it. That’s my job, the only thing I’m good at, so I’d appreciate it if you got off my dick and showed some gratitude.” He gave me his back and stomped down the hall past Naz’s room.

He’d just killed someone, so why did I feel like the horrible person? I slowly followed after him.

Romeo was in the master bathroom. His shirt was already off and tossed on the floor. His ridiculous chest was on full display, tattoos and all.

Of course, his six-pack had magically morphed into an insane eight-pack that my eyes were drawn to with no say on my part. He clung to the edge of the sink, his biceps flexing.

I couldn’t look away.

I should.

But he was beautiful, and I was in the wrong. I stupidly pointed at the shirt by his feet on the white tile floor and said, “I can probably get the blood out.”

Gradually, he turned his head, his eyes zeroed in on my mouth before locking on my eyes instead. “Blood and white shirts don’t really mix, Red.”

Hearing him say my nickname was familiar, comforting. If I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine a scenario just like this.

Both of us home after a long day, talking in the bathroom, getting ready for bed.

I gulped and broke eye contact. "I can at least try."

"Don't," his voice softened. "It's not worth you going to all that work when I can just buy a new one. Besides, it's my fault for not wearing black."

My head shot up, and I stared into his face. "Was that a joke?"

"Maybe." The corners of his mouth turned up.

"I don't like it." I crossed my arms.

"You're going to have to be more specific." He turned his body, fully facing me. "Are we talking about the blood? The toothpaste? The missing lipstick—"

"I'd rather it be blood." My voice trembled. "Does that make me a horrible human being? Am I a monster now that I've confessed?" And why couldn't I stop talking? "The lipstick, it's...it wipes off easier than blood, and still, I prefer that bloody shirt." I pointed to the floor. "I've never told you. You've never asked. It's always just been this thing that existed in my head, and maybe I'm exhausted, maybe I'm just having a nervous breakdown after all the stress, the funeral. But I hate it. I fucking hate it."

He moved slowly like he was afraid if he moved too fast, I'd bolt.

Which was probably accurate.

Then again, Romeo knew me well.

Too well.

He reached out, his fingertips grazing my arm as he pulled me further into the bathroom, lifting me onto the countertop. His hands dug into my hips, my legs straddled his body.

"Wash it off," he whispered.

“Wh-what?” Our gazes locked. “The blood?”

“The lipstick.” He handed me the wet washcloth, droplets of water slid down my wrist. I held it close to his face in confusion.

“There may not be any on my neck right now, but I still feel it, it’s worse than the blood, you’re right, while I’m trying to seduce, they’re trying to mark, to claim me, and even though I’ve only ever belonged to one person, it feels like theft, every fucking time.”

Tears welled in my eyes.

Was this really happening?

*Don’t trust him.*

*Don’t.*

Why wasn’t he pushing me away now?

Was it pity?

Grief?

“Here.” He touched the side of his neck, and when I didn’t move, he grabbed my hand and pressed the rag against his skin. “And here.” He moved my hand across the front of his neck, where the skin was clean. “Over here.” He ran the rag down the front of his chest.

The rag slipped from my fingers, and my palm was now pressed against his naked skin.

His breath hitched.

Jaw clenched.

He moved so close I could feel the heat of him between my thighs; the air was so thick that it was hard to breathe.

Only feel.

Him.

Everywhere.

All at once.

His eyes flickered to my mouth again. His hands gripped the counter with so much strength that his fingertips were white. He leaned forward, and every muscle in his body was flexed. Making me lick my lips, ready to meet him halfway despite all the reasons I shouldn't.

Very valid reasons.

He would only break me again, wouldn't he?

But how did you break something that was already broken and unfixable? Like a puzzle with too many missing pieces?

“Eden.” My name fell like a promise from his lips as they slowly grazed mine.

Until we heard a voice screech, “MAMA!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“If you’re not a hero, does that make you a villain?” —*Alex Flinn*

*Eden*

Naz screeched, and we both jerked apart, Romeo nearly against the wall, me nearly colliding with the bathroom mirror.

“Mama, it’s been five minutes!”

Had it though?

Because to me, it felt like an eternity, those few moments where our lips had touched.

Romeo’s lips pulled into an amused smile.

Naz rounded the corner and put his hands on his hips. “Mom, if I don’t get to bed on time, I’ll get sick, remember? You said if I don’t go to bed at the same time I’m going to—”

“I know what I said,” I interrupted.

“Uncle Romeo, Mama’s face is super red. Is she getting sick? Should she go to bed too?”

Romeo licked his lips and bent down until he was at eye level with Naz.

“You’re right; she probably should go to bed early...”

I crossed my legs.

He was driving me insane!

One minute I wanted to run him over with my car, the next, I was thinking about an early bedtime with his mouth between my thighs.

Tristian had never...I’d told him I didn’t like it.

Had I just been saving that for someone else?

For Romeo?

And why was I even thinking about that right now?

“Mama?” Naz waved a hand in the air. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Absolutely.” I cleared my throat and hopped down from the counter, then nearly collided with Romeo. He steadied me on my feet. “Let’s get you to bed, buddy.”

Romeo released me but not before squeezing my arm as if to say “later.” Did I want there to be a later? My body and mind were at complete war with each other. I led Naz into his room, said his prayers with him, and kissed him on the head. I grew up with cameras all around me, so the ones that I knew were in his room, thanks to Romeo, didn’t bother me.

Exhaustion had already hit. I went back to my room, only to hear the shower running.

“Strip,” Romeo said as he came out of the bathroom. “Now.”

“I am not having sex with you!” The nerve of that idiot! A kiss didn’t mean naked time! I could just strangle him!

His lips pressed together in an amused smile as he approached me. Leaning in close to my mouth, he whispered, “I don’t remember asking you to.”

“What?”

“Have sex.” He pecked the tip of my nose like I was a little girl, a child,

and before I could stop myself, I was on him, trying to attack, strangle maybe, who knew?

I'd finally lost it.

With a laugh, he grabbed my leg, twisting me around until he could pry me free. Throwing me on the bed next, he swiftly hovered above me.

I surrendered.

Panting.

My chest rising and falling.

Waiting.

For who the hell knew what...

"You're exhausted, Red. Let me put you to bed."

"I'm not a child." I straight up pouted.

"You literally just tried to attack me. If you were standing, you'd probably stomp your feet too."

"Would not."

"Would too." He winked, grinning in that Romeo Sinacore sort of way.

For a moment, we both stared at each other. It was like old times before everything turned confusing, frustrating, ugly.

He was the first to break our mirroring thoughts.

"I missed you, Red. A lot."

"Don't." Tears filled my eyes. "Please don't."

"You want me to lie?"

"Lies hurt less than truths."

"Eden." He kissed my forehead. "The lies are what separated us, the truth hurts, but it's the only thing that will eventually set you free."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing has changed. I'm still no good for you."

"Yet here we are. In the same place we've always been. You say that lies

are what separated us, but now truths are separating us as well? I don't understand. What are you keeping from me?"

"What I have to in order for you to move on."

"Move on from what?"

"*Me.*"

That one word hurt more than laying my husband to rest.

He pulled me to my feet, making quick work of slipping my shirt over my head.

I stood there in a trance.

Stunned.

Angry.

Happy.

Guilty.

My leggings came next, then socks, panties. My bra somehow came off. He was picking me up into his arms and setting me in the steaming shower.

I flinched when he followed.

Squeezed my eyes shut when he started rubbing his hands all over my body, washing me, cleansing me. It felt like a holy moment, one where you don't speak your confession for fear that you won't stop once you start.

He led me under the water.

I kept my eyes closed.

He scared me.

I scared me.

What was happening?

It was as though I was having an out of body experience; I was there, but I wasn't.

I couldn't believe he was cleaning me like it was no big deal when it was a huge one. Still, it felt comfortable being there with him. I wanted to open



my eyes, but I was afraid of what I'd see.

What I'd feel.

When I was already feeling everything.

I always had Tristian standing between us, we both did, and now... now there was nothing but this chasm of pain between us.

Mistakes.

Regrets.

Memories we could never change.

“You're the only woman I've ever wanted but couldn't have.” He came up behind me, pulling my back against his rock hard body. “That's my truth. Telling you that doesn't fix anything, doesn't change anything. It just makes me angry, and it makes you sad. I'm fucking exhausted from making you sad, Red.”

Cold air hit me in the back as he stepped out of the shower. I let him go; it was just easier that way. Nothing was ever simple between us. Except... walking away.

Later that night, long after he'd fallen asleep, I thought of his words.

Did that mean he still wanted me?

Still cared?

Did that mean he was here for more than just protection?

Or was it because his only competition was dead in the cold hard ground?

With a curse, I threw off the duvet, grabbed a sweatshirt, and left my bedroom.

Thought after thought assaulted my mind, and on my way to the kitchen, I noticed the light to Tristian's office was on. Before I knew what I was doing, the door was creaking open. Legos littered the floor in an explosion of color.

“Naz,” I whispered.

He missed his hero.

And it would be my life's goal to make sure he only saw Tristian as that. Despite being one of the biggest lies of them all, it'd be a lie I would gladly tell.

The truth was sometimes too painful to recognize; it left scars where a lie sometimes left a smile.

I started picking up the Legos around Tristian's old desk. How had Naz gotten so many in here in the first place?

A few toppled over onto a piece of paper.

I glanced at it, then did a double take.

What the fuck?

My heart dropped.

My breathing hitched.

I was lost all over again.

With a shaky hand, I brought the paper up to my face, having to take a seat to keep my legs from giving out on me. In my hands was a wire transfer for twenty-five million dollars into a savings account with Naz's name on it. More money that I couldn't trace, that I didn't know about it. When would it end?

In what world did an accountant make that sort of money? And why put it in Naz's name?

We were wealthy.

But not that wealthy.

Not even close.

"Tristian," I whispered to myself. "What the hell have you done?"

I jolted out of my skin when I heard Romeo roar, "What are you doing?"

Like a kid caught doing something wrong, I hid the paper behind my back.

"Goddamn it." He stalked toward me and held out his hand. "Now."

"You didn't say please."

He narrowed his gaze at me. “Please give me the paper that made your face turn white so I can fix whatever the hell my brother fucked up.”

With a sigh, I handed the paper over.

If he was surprised at finding more incriminating evidence, Romeo didn’t show it; instead, he folded the paper and moved past me, his eyes searching documents on the desk before he dumped out one of the Lego containers that Naz had pulled in there and shoved every last piece of paper into it.

“Wait!” I grabbed his arm.

“No.” Romeo’s jaw clenched. “Information is guilt; if you know, then you’re part of it. I’m not going to stay up all night and read these to you; I’m not going to tell you what they mean. Especially when it’s not any of your business.”

He walked out of the office. A cold chill took over my body.

Romeo didn’t come back to bed.

I wondered all night where he went. If he wasn’t in my bed, then it meant he was in someone’s.

Was it for pleasure or information...

On what I just stumbled upon.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“I wanna be the villain. Villains have fun.” —*Donal Logue*

*Eden*

*Then: One year later*

“Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Naz! Happy birthday to you!” the whole family sang to our son, who was growing at a rapid speed.

I blinked, and he was turning three years old, reminding me more of his father day after day. He was the cutest, most kind-hearted little person I’d ever met. Everyone was obsessed with him, especially his grandparents. Despite the fact that my father was a made man, you wouldn’t think so if you saw him with his grandson. Don’t get me started on Tristian’s mother. She babysat every opportunity she could get, often scheduling things for me like a massage or a day at the spa just to have some alone time with Naz.

I welcomed the love they brought into our son’s world.

“Mama!” Naz exclaimed, kissing my face, getting cake frosting all over

my cheeks.

I happily finished cleaning him up before I searched around the room, finding his father at the bar, serving himself a drink.

*Shit. I thought we talked about this, Tristian.*

“I’ll take him.” Tristian’s mom grabbed Naz out of my arms. “Go handle your husband,” she announced, catching me off guard.

I didn’t respond, too focused on the task at hand. All I thought about was how I was going to handle this in front of all these people. It was getting harder to hide this side of Tristian that no one was supposed to know about. At least that was what I thought, but there was his mother proving me wrong.

“Tristian,” I muttered under my breath, bringing his gaze to mine. “I thought you weren’t going to drink today. You promised, remember?”

He didn’t hesitate in his brute reply, “You promised a lot of things too, Eden. In front of God, remember?”

He tilted the rest of the drink back, the large solitary ice cube bumping against his lips before he wiped them with the back of his hand in one familiar movement.

I shook my head, not understanding. This was what my husband had become, throwing jabs at me every chance he got. Most of the time, I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about because he was belligerently drunk. What did he need to get drunk for when, according to him in public, he had the perfect life?

I opened my mouth to respond, though I caught myself when I followed his curt nod behind me. In one swift turn, I was locking eyes with his brother, who was greeting a few associates by the door.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I spoke the truth, facing Tristian again. “You’re drinking because Romeo showed up to his nephew’s third birthday party? How old are you right now? You’re acting like a child.”

He was in my face in a split second, his eyes full of rage. “Did you invite him?”

I stepped back, placing my hand on his chest to steady my composure. He was throwing me all out of whack. “I did the invitations with your mother. She knows who we need to invite. God forbid I forget one important person and start a war with the families. She must have invited him.”

“Then, I’ll need to take it up with my mother.”

“How about you take it up with your wife? You said you weren’t going to drink today, and here you are standing at the bar, fixing yourself another whiskey on the rocks. It’s your son’s birthday. Can you behave yourself? We have videographers and photographers taking footage of today. The last thing I want is for Naz to look back on the memories only to see his father hammered.”

As soon as the last word left my mouth, Tristian added more whiskey to his drink, eyes locked on me the entire time. He lifted his drink and gulped it down in one swig. Slamming the glass on the bar when he was done.

“It’s one drink,” he argued, already serving himself another.

Actually, it was two going on three, all within a span of five minutes.

I couldn’t help myself; I wasn’t going to let him ruin this for Naz. I snatched the bottle out of his hand, only to have him come at me. Before he was able to grab my arm, the person I least expected stepped in between us.

Placing his hand on his brother’s chest, Romeo interrupted, “Is there a problem?”

Tristian didn’t miss a beat, spewing, “Yeah. *You.*”

“Good to see you too, Tristian.”

“I suggest you take your hand off me and run along to find one of your whores for the night. My wife and I were having a private conversation, so mind your own fucking business.”

Romeo cocked his head to the side, and I stood there, just shaking mine. How had we come to this?

“Looked more like an argument to me,” Romeo stated flatly, unfazed by the temper Tristian had developed.

His fuse was getting shorter as the days were becoming longer.

Romeo declared battle, countering, “I’m not leaving unless Eden tells me to.”

Tristian glared at him. “Of course, always have to be the hero, don’t you, dear brother?” He shoved his arm off his chest. “Get the fuck out of my face before I—”

“Boys!” their mother interjected, tearing apart the blatant standoff. “Enough.” She grabbed Tristian’s shoulder, handing him Naz. “Look at your boy. Now be the man I raised you to be and celebrate the day with your son.”

Tristian passed Naz over to me, pompously walking away without once looking back.

“How long have you known?” I questioned their mom, bringing both her and Romeo’s worried stares over to me.

“A mother knows everything. You’ll learn that with Naz,” she reaffirmed, peering from my gaze to her son’s. “Please make sure your brother stays in line. If your father sees him disrespecting the family, it won’t be pretty, and I don’t want that for Tristian.”

Romeo gave a grim nod. “Neither do I.”

She smiled lovingly, kissed his cheek, and strode away.

I looked down at the ground, not wanting to meet Romeo’s intense gaze but feeling him take us in with an expression I couldn’t quite place.

“Uncle Romeo,” Naz greeted, throwing his body into his arms. He wrapped his arms around his neck and hugged him close to his body.

It warmed my heart, seeing that our complicated relationship didn’t affect

his love for my son. I hadn't seen Romeo much in the last year, although I knew anytime Naz was with his parents, he would spend time with him in their home. It was obviously enough to make an impression on Naz; he never chooses anyone over me.

"Hey," I said when he caught me staring at them.

Romeo didn't waver, asking, "How long has he been this bad?"

Not surprising me in the least.

Romeo

She knew what I was talking about, but still, she tried to cover for him. "He's fine. We're fine."

I called her out, she was trembling, and we promised no lies. "You know you can't lie to me, right?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth."

"Funny request coming from you."

"I didn't come here to fight with you."

"No? Just break up our fight then?"

"I thought everything was fine." I smiled, playing coy. "*He's fine. We're fine.*"

"Can I please have my son?" She reached for Naz.

"No." I held him back. "He's good with me."

"Naz, come to Mommy."

He leaned his head on my chest, wrapping his arms harder around my



neck. She noticed who he wanted to stay with, and I felt a sense of power that he chose me over her.

“Fine.” With a stern glare in my direction, she made her way outside, following after Tristian, I assumed.

I was long past the jealousy. Besides, I held her son firmly in my arms and the necklace I gave her last year for her birthday hung firmly around her neck.

I was still in her heart, and that was good enough for me.

The day went on with normal festivities; we ate, we drank, and Tristian didn't leave Eden's side. Later, after Naz was tucked away asleep in his bed. Tristian decided he was going to bring everyone's attention over to him.

Everything stopped.

*Everything.*

My breathing hitched; I swear to God, my heart stopped beating in my chest, only for a second. A surge of panic flooded my body, my mind, and my soul at precisely the moment my heart started beating again.

Louder and harder in my chest.

Eden looked over at him, eyes wide and full of fear. “Tristian,” she pleaded in a hoarse tone. She cleared her throat and begged him to stop with that look in her eyes.

The one I recognized; she'd shown them to me several times over the years.

He didn't even get it. He couldn't read her at all, not like I could. Or maybe he did, and he simply wanted to hurt her, fully aware he'd be hurting me too.

*Two birds, one fucking stone.*

“You promised, don't do this,” she added with the same desperation in her voice.

Tristian's smile beamed with resent, right down to Eden. It was obvious he was drunk as shit and couldn't care less about the person he'd sworn to love and protect.

At first, it was like a movie. When you knew something bad was about to happen, the anticipation of knowing what was coming was stronger than the ability to stop it.

I couldn't stop it.

I couldn't stop this.

His hand tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and his fingers brushed down her cheek. "I just want to tell our friends and family who the woman I married truly is."

*Aw hell.*

Which was exactly where everything ended up going that night.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I have no interest in understanding sheep. Only eating them.” —*Hannibal Lector*

*Romeo*

A quick grimace crossed her face. It was subtle, but I noticed.

I noticed everything.

The entire room became heightened to some sort of cosmic energy. I knew everyone was there, that it wasn't just Tristian, Eden, and I, though that's how it felt. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, knowing this wasn't going to end well. It wasn't going to start that way either.

My glance slid to Tristian, and he fucking grinned. His eyes darted around the room, and he smiled with bright white teeth. Teeth I wanted him to swallow after my fist knocked them down his fucking throat if he was getting ready to announce what I think he was.

Once my eyes landed on Eden's, it was all over. I didn't need to turn to the clinking to know I was right. Tristian raised his champagne glass in one hand and a fork in the other.

The metal clanked off the glass, mimicking a ringing bell. “Hello! I’d like to have your attention!” he announced, making sure all eyes were on him. Everyone’s but mine. The entire room silenced at an eerie speed as he spoke, “Have I told you how happy I am to be a father? You see, a family is all I’ve ever wanted.”

My gaze stayed intensely absorbed in Eden’s. Hers stayed fixated on mine. This trance was different than anything I’d ever felt with her before. We’d been doing this dance with our eyes for as long as I could remember.

This one was definitely different.

This one held so much emotion.

So much hurt.

Pain.

Regret.

This one would destroy.

Tristian thanked the room for being quiet and continued on with his speech. “I would like to start off by saying that I love my wife very fucking much. She is all I ever wanted. This life. Our son. She’s mine. To this day, I think I love her more than I did when we got engaged, married. Became a family. I have done everything I can for her. I’ve given her my heart and soul. Hell, I’ve given her every new car she could ever want, every designer purse.” He chuckled. “There is nothing on this damn planet that this lovely woman wants for. Except...” He reached for her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and tugging her close to the side of his body.

Our eyes stayed locked together; nothing or no one for that matter could ever break that between us.

I had that.

It belonged to *me*.

I knew the second the words fell from his lips, that would be it. Our glass

house would shatter around us. The last tether would be cut for good.

“Does my wife love me?” Tristian snidely questioned. “More than she loves m—”

And just like that, the rope was cut in two.

Except it also sliced...

My heart in two.

“Tristian!” I chimed in. “I think you’ve had enough to drink!”

“And here comes my baby brother, the hero to the rescue!”

Juliet added, “I think Romeo is right. Can someone please take the mic from him, please?”

Well shit...

I guess not only did our mother know what was happening, but our baby sister did as well.

Tristian pushed away one of the associates when he tried to grab the microphone out of his hand.

Did he have a death wish?

In six long strides, I was yanking the mic out of Tristian’s hand myself.

“Always the fucking hero,” he belligerently snapped.

I grabbed ahold of his head from the back of his neck and whispered in his ear, “You won’t even remember this in the morning, and by then, the damage you’re trying to inflict will already be done. It’s not her I’m trying to save; it’s you.”

I didn’t allow him the chance to fight me; I gripped onto his arm and dragged him into his office. Pretty much throwing him on his ass.

“What the fuck, man?” I snarled through a clenched jaw. Before I could shut the door behind me, Eden followed us in. Slamming the door behind her.

“How could you be such an asshole?” she roared, getting in his face. “Do you have any idea what you could have done? It’s our son’s birthday party!

Do you have no decency?”

“Decency?” he repeated, obviously offended. “You want to talk to me about decency?”

“Yes! I do!” she bit back. “I’m sick and tired of you blaming me for something I haven’t done!”

“Haven’t done now? Or haven’t done since we said our vows?”

“For the love of God, Tristian! What are you accusing me of?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about!”

“Then just say it! I’m sick of playing these games with you! Just say what you want to know!”

“Eden, don’t—”

Interrupting me, Tristian seethed, “DID YOU FUCK MY BROTHER, YOU WHORE?!”

I fell back from the impact of his words, his question, his wrath.

Eden’s fist was in his face, cold clocking him right in the jaw. His head swooshed back from the force of her assault.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that again!”

With his hand on his mouth, he moved around his jaw, realizing she had just hit him. He gripped onto the front of her dress, and that was when I stepped in, made him let her go.

“She didn’t fuck me, Tristian,” I lied, having enough of this. She didn’t need to pay for my sins. “There. Feel better now? Let it go.”

“I’ll let it go when you let *her* go,” he asserted, standing tall and proud. “She’s my wife, and I’ve waited long enough, don’t you think?”

Eden affirmed, “It’s in your own head, Tristian. When are you going to let this obsession go? I’m married to you. We share a son. What more do you want from me that I’m not already giving you?”

“I don’t believe Romeo for a second; I want to hear you say it. Tell me,

say the words. Did you fuck my brother?”

Her eyes widened as if she was standing on trial, and in a jaded way, she was.

We both were.

I never imagined it would be my brother who was handing out our execution.

“Here’s your chance, Eden. Tell me the truth.”

With her stare solely concentrated on him, she uttered, “What does it matter? I married you, didn’t I?”

“Is that a yes then?”

“Eden, don’t—”

“Mind your business, Romeo. This is between my husband and me.”

I stayed silent, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He was going to lose his shit; there would be no coming back from this if she told him the truth. Our lives would be forever changed, our paths forever altered.

This would be the moment he’d lose himself, and there’d be no hope for him.

She stepped toward him, once again getting close to his face. “Tristian, I love you. You know that I love you. Why does it matter to you? I married you. We’re a family. I’m here. I’m right here. Standing in front of you, begging you to let this go and just let us be happy. You’re punishing me when I chose you.”

“Chose me, Eden? Or settled for me?”

*Eden*

I couldn't do this anymore.

I was exhausted from trying to save my marriage. Trying to pretend like I hadn't already lost him.

I think he was gone before we even said, "*I do.*"

This wasn't the man I had grown up with. The one I was supposed to live happily ever after with. Spend the rest of my life by his side. This person was someone I didn't know, recognize, or want any part of. This wasn't the home I wanted to raise Naz in. It was unhealthy, and he was too young to see it for what it was, but soon we wouldn't have that leisure.

The last thing I wanted was for him to think this was what love was supposed to be.

It wasn't.

Not even close.

"What more can I do to have the old Tristian back? Huh?" I basically pleaded. I wasn't on my knees, although it felt like I was. "Please..." I reached for him. "Come back to me."

"You didn't answer my question, Eden. Did. You. Fuck. My. Brother?"

I inhaled a deep, solid breath.

This was my chance to set us free, in hopes that it would be the end of his drinking.

His anger.

This downright uncertainty we were both living in.

I gave him what he wanted, explaining, "It was before we were married."

I could feel Romeo burning a hole in my back.

If Tristian was shocked, he didn't show it in the least.

He didn't show me anything.

"When?" he simply asked.

"I just told you. It was before we were married. You got what you wanted,



what you've been adamant about knowing. Now, can you please let it go?"

He stepped back, away from me. Making his way toward the door.

"Careful, Eden... words can be sharper than knives, and truths can slice you open."

He took one last look at me, shifting his eyes toward Romeo.

Surprising us both, he spoke with execution...

"The night of our dinner rehearsal, you left your jacket in her suite. May want to ask her what she did with it. It was a nice fucking jacket."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“I’m not a monster, I’m just ahead of the curve.” —*The Joker*

*Romeo*

*Now*

“Can someone please explain why nobody fucking took care of this?” I threw the box onto Andrei’s desk and waited. His eyes narrowed in on the associates that were scattered around the office. “Oh, I apologize. Am I interrupting?”

“Well, we were planning world domination, but sure, go ahead, get pissed about a box.” Phoenix Nicolasi stepped out of the shadows. Hell, things must be bad if he hopped on a plane out of Chicago to get here. He was their boss and basically the only man in the Cosa Nostra who dealt in secrets.

He knew everything.

About everyone.

He had folders on every associate, every boss, every captain. It wouldn’t even shock me if he had a fucking folder on every world leader. It was his

currency, so the very fact that he was there at that meeting meant he was either having a friendly visit with Andrei, or he was revealing more secrets that would get someone in that room killed.

“Ah, Phoenix.” I held out my hand, and he shook it. “Business or pleasure?”

He licked his lips and grinned, then ran a hand through his wavy brown hair. “I’m a married man. It’s always business.”

“Are you saying I’m not pleasing?” Andrei scoffed.

Phoenix just rolled his eyes. “Course not, it pleases me greatly to see you pissed like you are right now. See? Pleasure it is!”

Andrei clenched his jaw and turned his icy blue stare toward me. “What’s this?”

“This is everything we’ve been trying to protect Eden from. There were bank documents. She saw more than just what we allowed her to see.”

Andrei slammed his hands onto the desk. “The hell, Marco? You were supposed to deal with this! Burn anything that leads back to Eden! Were those not my exact words?”

The guy who stepped up was in a full black suit, looked to be around mid-twenties, and if my calculations were correct, about five seconds away from shitting his pants. “I don’t know how I missed it; we swept his computer, the rest of the files and—”

My fist flew before I could even tell my body to restrain itself.

Because it was Eden.

Because it could have put her in danger.

Because it could have broken her heart.

From the very fucking grave he rested in.

Men moved out of the way as my left hand followed my fist, grabbing onto his pristine black collar and tugging him across the floor until I was near

the only wall that didn't have books displayed.

I kicked him in the stomach, sending him into the drywall, his head knocked back with a resounding crack. I caught Marco as his body slumped forward and punched him again, this time in the nose. Blood instantly started spurting down his lips.

He stumbled next to the bookcase, trying to get his bearings, and knocked over a vase that was placed on the second shelf. It crashed to the floor.

"Hope that wasn't a family heirloom," I said, reaching for him again, knocking my head against his twice before his eyes rolled to the back of his head.

"Meh." Andrei waved his hand. "It's replaceable. Do continue."

I shoved Marco to the ground and put my heel on his throat.

"Motherfucker, next time you won't be so lucky." I spat in his face, pulling my foot away, then adjusted my shirt, tucking it back into my trousers; I cracked my knuckles.

I stepped over the body. "Always a pleasure, Andrei."

"That was him being lucky?" someone whispered under their breath.

My lips twitched.

"They say he's both lover and fighter, sinner not saint. Take a look around, gentleman," Andrei exclaimed. "And remember, to piss off a Sinacore is to sign your own death sentence."

I hesitated at the door, turned, and nodded my head at Andrei, earning a respectful nod back as I made my way through the club.

A sense of peace washed over me.

The last remaining piece of evidence would be dealt with.

The men saw what would happen if they fucked up.

And my blood lust was cooled—for now.

I spent the rest of the day working, making sure Tristian's tracks were

covered. Day quickly turned night by the time I was walking through Eden's front door. She was standing there with a black apron covering an enticing knit black dress. Leaning over the table.

I couldn't take my eyes off her smile as she adjusted the food like a pretty picture.

It was suddenly ruined by a loud screaming at the top of Naz's lungs that he nearly starved to death, but I still smiled at the scene.

At what should have been.

Could have been.

What I fucking gave up.

And for what?

A dead brother?

An equally dead heart?

I wondered in that moment what it would take to earn a seat in that pretty picture.

Or if it was too late altogether for a man like me, a sinner like me, to sit with the saints.

No, not saints...

Angels.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“The Villains are all parts of me. For years I’ve been wondering what it would be like if all these negative elements were forced onto the main character’s side. I can understand a character with that kind of anger.” —  
*Hayao Miyazaki*

*Eden*

Naz was clapping his hands in glee, then did a little knuckle dab with me like I taught him before pulling out his seat to grab his orange juice. “Mama, do you think that Uncle—”

The door clicked shut with Romeo walking in, his jaw clenched, eyes averted for the first time in, maybe ever. He was watching the table, maybe the food? Was it because he was hungry, or was it something else?

I’d wanted to apologize for the other day when he walked in with all the blood. Was it ironic that tonight he was covered in more?

How was that even physically possible?

He leaned against the door in a way that reminded me a bit of Tristian early on. How I used to look forward to him coming home after a long day at

work. I remember thinking that it was enough. I'd been in love with Romeo, but I'd started to love Tristian in a way I didn't love his brother; the guilt had slowly dissipated as we found out we were pregnant, and then all of a sudden, things started to shift after Naz was born.

He had changed.

I stayed the same.

I made the meals.

I waited for him to come home with that same smile on his face and was welcomed with dark circles under his eyes and secrets he refused to tell.

"Looks good." Romeo cleared his throat and awkwardly walked into the room, both hands clenched into tight fists with stains of blood that I knew were most likely a mix of his own and someone else's. "I'll just go wash up."

"Is this going to be a habit?" I asked as he walked past me.

He froze, lowering his head like he was ashamed, and whispered, "The blood. Absolutely. I'll hurt anyone who threatens you."

I sucked in a breath; he kept walking.

Heart pounding, I felt like I was going to fall over when Naz casually walked over to me and murmured in a loud voice, "Is Uncle Romeo hurt?"

"Y-yeah, bud." I ruffled his head. "He must have gotten in an accident, but he'll be okay, don't worry."

"Okay." Naz shrugged and went back to the dinner table. "He better hurry, or I'm taking all the meatballs."

With a smile, I joined him, trying to calm the tremble in my hands at his confession.

Was Romeo serious?

Was my life in danger?

Naz's?

I sighed and took a seat, piling the spaghetti on Naz's plate. I'd made

something simple, Naz had begged to make his favorite meal for his Uncle, and I didn't have the heart to tell him no.

After all, a five-year-old didn't understand why it felt wrong to play perfect family at the dinner table when we were anything but that.

It was everything I'd had at the beginning.

Nothing I had at the end.

Most of the time, I'd had an empty seat across from me, a glass of wine in my hand while tears streamed down my cheeks. Nothing could stop the fear in my heart.

Now? I had hope.

What a dangerous word to rely on.

"Sorry." Romeo was back in minutes. I'd yet to touch my own plate, but Naz was half done with his. Most of the sauce was on his face, dripping down his chin. Naturally, he chewed with his mouth open as he talked to me about his day.

"It's okay, Uncle Romeo; I was just getting a head start because I'm so hungry. Mom says if I don't eat, I won't be big and strong like my dad, and I want to be big and strong like him. Hey! You're big and strong, Uncle Romeo. Do you eat broccoli?" He made a face.

Romeo chuckled, reaching for his wine glass. "Every day, three times a day. It's what gave me these."

He was wearing a simple white shirt that clung to his body like the many women he'd screwed, so when he flexed, I was surprised the shirt didn't rip down the middle and just fall at his feet.

I'm sure he was used to that.

Clothing falling at his feet.

Women.

Nuns.



Plants.

How could anyone resist him?

“Holy cow!” Naz gaped. “Uncle Romeo, you’re huuuuge!”

I choked on my sip of wine when Romeo gave me a quick look as if to say, huge everywhere, you should know.

“So if I eat my broccoli, I’ll look like that too?” Naz dug his fork into another meatball and shoved it in his mouth.

“Yup, but it only works if you do your homework and listen really well to your Mama. Otherwise, the broccoli dies on the inside and makes you mean.”

Naz’s face fell. “Mean like a bully?”

“Yeah, like that.”

“W-was Dad a bully?”

Romeo paused, wine glass nearly to his mouth. “Why would you say that?”

“Because he screamed—”

“Hey,” I interrupted. “Stop talking with your mouth full, okay? Finish your meal so you can get to bed on time; I’ve already let you stay up past your bedtime so you could have dinner with Uncle Romeo.”

“That’s because he’s my new hero!” Naz announced. “I thought about it, and Spiderman really isn’t that cool. He doesn’t carry a gun—” *Dear God, save me from this child’s over shares.* “—and when I get scared, I think Uncle Romeo’ll come help, so that makes him a hero, right Mom?”

When I got scared, he always helped.

I didn’t say that out loud.

I just nodded my head, muttering, “Uncle Romeo will always be there for you, Naz.”

“Us!” He thrust his fork into the air. “For us, right, Mama?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Romeo beat me to it. His hand found

mine under the table and squeezed, locking eyes with me as he said, “Always.”

The rest of dinnertime passed by pretty quickly. Naz talked about school, Romeo didn’t talk about the blood, nor about cleaning money, much to Naz’s disappointment. While I put Naz to bed, Romeo did the dishes without me having to ask him to do them. I imagined his back muscles flexing every time he wiped a plate. He didn’t like using the dishwasher for some reason.

I was beyond exhausted by the time I was done and was intrigued to find Romeo already in bed, the lights off when I walked into the master suite.

I quickly washed my face and grabbed my black satin shorts with a long-sleeve black shirt before climbing into bed. It had been a long day.

Hell, it had been a long month.

Year.

Years actually.

Freezing, I scooted closer to the bed and nearly died when I hit Romeo’s warm body.

Slowly, I inched myself away only to have him wrap an arm around me and tug me against him.

Instantly, I relaxed as his breathing deepened like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Holding me against his heart.

Tears welled in my eyes.

Was I that starved for affection?

That a simple spooning he wasn’t even aware of made me cry?

I swiped the tears under my burning eyes and tried to clear my mind. I was nearly asleep when I heard a scream.

I jolted up in bed.

Romeo already had his Glock in hand. Naz bounded into the room and

jumped between us. “Monsters!”

“What?” I pulled him close.

He was shaking like a leaf. “I saw monsters in my closet.”

Romeo, clad in nothing but low-slung black sweats, got up out of the bed, gun in hand, and popped his neck. “I’ll take care of this. Do not leave this bed until I come back.”

I nodded, and he left.

Naz gasped. “Mama, he’s gonna kill the monsters.”

I held my son close, wondering if it was really a figment of his imagination or if there was real danger in our house.

Five minutes later, Romeo was back. “Found the monster...”

Naz gasped again. “You did?”

“Yup, a squirrel right outside your window, thought you looked fun and wanted to play.” He smiled at Naz and pulled him in for a hug, careful to keep the gun away.

Over Naz’s head, he murmured, “Bad dream, all clear.”

I let out the breath I didn’t realize I had been holding, mouthing “Thank you.”

Romeo put the safety back on his Glock and tucked it into the nightstand next to him with one hand. Pulling Naz against him in a sitting position, he asked him, “You want to sleep here tonight?”

“REALLY?” Naz nearly took out the room with his yell. “You’d actually let me? Dad always made me go back to my room, and sometimes... sometimes, I got scared and didn’t sleep.”

If the man wasn’t dead, I’d kill him for that one confession alone.

“Naz.” I put both hands on his shoulders. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

He sniffled, “I thought you might get in trouble.”

Not him.

*Me.*

What else had my son seen? I'd originally thought I did such a good job protecting him, making sure he saw the hero every time I dealt with the monster.

"Hey." Romeo fell onto his back.

Naz copied him.

Both guys with their hands behind their heads, staring up at the ceiling, shooting the breeze.

"Let's try to get some sleep. No matter what, you can always stay here if you need to. Sometimes it's nice to have people chase the bad away."

"Thanks, Uncle Romeo." Naz yawned.

Then Romeo yawned.

Both of them smiled at each other, and I nearly looked away when the small dimple in Naz's cheek made itself known.

Romeo frowned a bit. "Hey, I never noticed that before," He reached out and touched Naz's face, then pointed at his. "Family trait, I suppose."

"Cool, Uncle Romeo! I have one part of you and one part of my dad now. He said I got his hair and brains!"

"That you did." He laughed. "Now, let's sleep."

I was the last to lie down.

The last to turn on my side and pull the covers up.

The last to probably even close my eyes as the past came back to haunt my future.

When it came to Romeo Sinacore, it always would, wouldn't it?

We weren't meant to be... then why was he sleeping in my bed like we were one big family?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“I’m a villain, and villains don’t get happy endings.” —*Mr. Gold*

*Eden*

*Then: One year later*

“What the fuck?” Tristian roared. “Where’s dinner?”

“I’ve been checking out schools all day for Naz, Tristian. Remember? I reminded you last night.”

There was no recollection in his annoyed glare, which was directed right at me.

“Of course, you don’t remember. You were drunk again,” I rasped under my breath, walking toward the kitchen. “I’ll make something quick for you.”

“Don’t bother,” he demanded in a rough, stern voice, a voice that was almost always accompanied by the smell of whiskey on his breath. It was starting to trigger me in the worst of ways, all because it was his drink of choice, all because he turned to *it* instead of me when he was frustrated. Whiskey held his secrets...

Not his wife.

Not his brother.

Not his son.

I couldn't believe he was taking this tone with me after all the bullshit I had put up with this last year alone. I forced myself to keep my emotions in check, knowing it wouldn't do me any good to react.

It never did.

"Who are you wearing the robe for, Eden?" he questioned, standing in the living room of our home with me.

Chills ripped through my body, freezing every nerve and muscle and leaving every part of me unable to move. It didn't help my disposition, although there was no controlling the emotions he was pulling from me. The only sounds I could hear were my pounding heart, and my thoughts and memories hammering through my mind. Taking me back to another place in time. Ever since the night in his office where I'd told Tristian the truth, and he left, he hadn't come back home the same man.

Day by day.

Month by month.

Shred by shred.

It seemed as if there was nothing left of him.

And soon, there would be nothing left of me as well.

"Why are you asking me that?" I questioned, unable to keep my body from trembling at the audacity of his offenses.

My mind incessantly shifted for what felt like the tenth time, watching Tristian make his way to the bar. Nothing could have prepared me for the string of events that happened next. One right after the other.

Not my past.

Not *our* past.

Not his anger or his hatred.

Or his love for me that destroyed us both.

My vision tunneled; all the blood drained from my face as I continued to watch his every step.

His every move.

Until he began searching for what I already knew was missing.

For a few seconds, time seemed to stand still. No one moved, including me. There was an undeniable sense of awareness penetrating through the room when he demanded, “What did you do?”

The despair in my voice recoiled off the walls that were now caving in on me. My heart jackhammering its way up through my throat. “Tristian, please...” I begged, for I didn’t know what.

Our pain mixing as one, belonging together. Entwined through the past and the present, the good and the bad, his darkness, his demons, through the life and future we never had.

I didn’t stop my tears. I couldn’t. Not with him.

Not right now.

For the first time in all our lives, I was scared...

Of. Him.

Truly.

Blindly.

Madly.

He glared at me, fully aware of what sentiments he was pulling out of my body.

His truths were killing me far more than all our lies put together.

“Eden, I asked you a question, and I expect an answer. What. Did. You. Do?”

“I dumped all the liquor down the drain; that’s what I did.”

“You know I can just buy more, right?” he countered, in a condescending tone I didn’t appreciate it.

“Not in this house.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You heard me. You won’t drink in our home anymore.”

“Is that right,” he declared in a sharp pitch that set my nerves further on edge.

“Yes. That’s right. You won’t drink in our home *again*,” I repeated, accentuating the last word.

“And who’s going to stop me? You?” he mocked in a patronizing voice. “Last time I checked, *I* pay the bills, *I* provide the roof over your pretty little head, *I* buy you those clothes, those shoes, the fucking jewelry you never wear! *I* do everything for you, and still, you can’t even spread your legs for me.”

I gasped, stumbling back from his verbal blow. “Oh my God, Tristian. Who are you?”

“I’m your husband! Have you forgotten it already?”

“No! Of course not!”

“Don’t you raise your voice to me, or I’ll—”

“You’ll what? Huh? You’ll put your hands on me? It can’t feel any worse than hearing you speak to me like this! Like I mean nothing to you! I don’t even know who you are anymore! The man I married, the one I fell in love —”

“Bull-fucking-shit! You never loved me!”

“Tristian! Have you lost your mind?” Several tears formed in my eyes as I took in his accusations and what they meant to me.

To us.

Showing my vulnerability, I let him witness me cry without blinking the



tears away like I usually did. I wanted him to see them, feel them, feel *me*.

My heart.

My soul.

My life.

He was holding it in his hands.

*Me*.

All of me.

Every last part of me.

“Actually, my dear wife, I finally see clearly.”

I shook my head, hanging on by a thread. “Why do you keep doing this to us?”

I broke down, my chest locking up. My eyes blurred with fresh tears, barely allowing me to see his handsome face. My lungs caved in, and I was suffocating in my own misery.

In our love.

In everything he’d ever meant to me.

Uncontrollable tears streamed down the sides of my face. My chest heaved, rising and falling with each rigid breath, with each beat of my heart, with each word that escaped my lips. I stood there, trying to hold onto our lives, to our memories, to the future that we may never have.

Had we been damned from the start?

In one swift motion, he chucked his empty glass to the wall beside me. It shattered instantly, sending shards of glass in all directions.

I jolted out of my skin.

He looked at me.

But it was no longer him.

I didn’t know the man staring back at me.

And I was beginning to think I never had.

Even though he was intently glaring right at me, he didn't say a word. He just stood there in the shadows, once again lost in his own purgatory in a way I'd never witnessed before. I took him in, his unruly hair draped over his face, obstructing his view, only being able to see through the slits in the strands.

It didn't matter. I could still see his dark, cold, beady eyes penetrating deep into mine, igniting a profound reaction within my heart. The fury he'd been drowning in only fueled the way he was seething at me. It was then I realized he wasn't looking at me.

He was looking through me.

I don't know why, but I found myself wanting to stay lost in his eyes, enraptured in the blaze that was searing into my skin. As much as I was terrified by what might happen, I couldn't look away; I was trapped by his catastrophic hate.

He was luring me in with his dominating stare, pulling every emotion from my body like it belonged to him as if we were the only two people in the world. Every passing second between us was another thought, another emotion, another memory for both of us. We were physically there with one another; our minds were somewhere else entirely.

Making me question what or who *he* was truly seeing in front of him.

Were we back in his office?

Had we ever left that room?

"Tristian—"

"Come here," he ordered in a stern tone. Overpoweringly struggling with whatever was taking his whole world captive in his mind.

I wanted to move, to walk away, and never look back, but I couldn't get my feet to step in any direction. My heart screamed for me to go to him, although my body declared war, determined to ultimately win the internal

battle erupting inside of us and all around us. Awakening every last demon that had laid dormant for so many years.

Him.

Me.

*Romeo.*

I clenched.

Locking up.

Staying firmly rooted to the place I stood.

I surrendered to my hesitation for however long I could, seeking refuge within myself. Still, I stayed put. Willingly held hostage in his haunted composure.

In his tormented gaze.

In his seedy demeanor.

And he knew it too.

He was getting off on it.

The power.

*Over me.*

He cocked his head to the side, reading me like the back of his hand. “You scared of me, *Red?*”

I stood taller, angling my chin up. Challenging him. A hint of amusement passed through his eyes, but he blinked it away, and it was gone. Making me think I’d possibly imagined it, needing to cling onto some sort of connection with him.

My heart was lying out in front of us as I started to walk toward him. Each step precise and calculated, each stride more unsettling than the last. I felt like I was making my way over to a stranger, unable to run away.

Wanting.

Needing.

Waiting.

Holding my breath with every last fiber in my being. I couldn't breathe the entire fifteen steps it took to get to him.

I knew because I counted them.

It was the only way to keep myself from passing out over the sensations I couldn't control for the life of me.

Cautiously, he eyed me, taking in every last curve of my body and inch of my skin. Almost as if he was trying to memorize me, engrain me into his heart and soul.

*Where was I before this?*

There wasn't one nook of my figure he hadn't taken in. Anxiously, I waited for his eyes to stop and look deep into my gaze. All it would take was for him to sincerely look at me for one second, to see how I felt inside. To put an end to this.

The way he was treating me.

Talking to me.

Looking at me.

Making me feel abandoned and frightened.

Triggering shivers to course down my spine and back up again. He must have noticed the shift in my demeanor because his eyes finally connected with mine.

Right when I was standing in front of him, he slipped his fingers through the knot of my robe, untying it. Ever so slowly opening the silk, similar to unwrapping a present.

Was I his gift?

Or his nightmare?

My eyes never wavered from Tristian's as he began skimming his fingers along my collarbones to the sides of my breasts and over to my beating heart.

He lingered there for a moment, continuing to slide them down the center of my ribcage until placing his entire hand over my pussy.

I sucked in a breath.

“Do you have any idea what I could do to you?”

Before I could respond, he leaned forward, close to my lips. Wrapping his arms around my waist. He held onto me for dear life, so tight, so hard, so strong.

So fucking unnerving.

My heart pounded harder against my chest.

Beat.

Beat.

Beat.

All the blood bled from my body, and my stomach dropped to the ground when I felt cool metal against my chest.

Not just my chest.

Over my heart.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.” —*Dark Knight*

*Eden*

“Oh my God, Tristian. What are you doing?” I jerked back. “Where did you even get that? Why do you have a gun, and why do you have it pointed at me?”

“What, Red? You scared now?”

“What are you saying? What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m just trying to see if I could make you love me.”

His whiskey breath assaulted my senses. *I knew it.* He had been drinking before he got home. “You’ve been drinking.”

“You drive me to drink.”

“Tristian, you don’t know what you’re doing. How drunk are you?”

“Enough to where I’m finally seeing you the way I need to.”

“Put the gun down. I’m your wife. Do you hear me? I’m your wife, Tristian.”

“You’re my wife when it’s convenient for you.”

Tears flooded my eyes, and I instinctively stepped back, but he gripped onto my hair from the nape of my neck, roughly yanking it back. It felt like he was trying to tear my hair out. My eyes widened, and I would have sworn my heart stopped.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, barely above a whisper, though a huge part of me already knew the answer.

“I told you. I’m trying to make you love me.”

“I do love you.”

“LIES!” he shouted, making me jump from the sharp tone in his voice.

“You’re scaring me. Please put the gun away, and we can talk. Your son is in this house. He’s here right now. Don’t do this.”

His eye glazed over, and he let me go.

One by one, I took in everything he wanted me to see, not knowing what I wanted to focus on more. Hours seemed to pass us by, our past colliding with our present and destroying our future.

Nothing could have prepared me for this.

Not even me.

*Or Romeo.*

I stumbled on my footing, desperately trying to catch my bearings. My body quivered, creating goosebumps all over my flesh.

I couldn’t breathe.

I couldn’t fucking breathe.

The walls were caving in on me.

The room was spinning faster and faster, harder and harder, around and around, over and over with no end in sight. My whole world tilting on the verge of crashing. Abolishing everything in our path. I couldn’t stop any of it. My emotions went from one to the other, feeling empty.

Terrified.

Ashamed.

*Guilty.*

I gazed up at him with pleading eyes and a devastated expression, but he backed away with caution. I didn't know if it was for my protection or his. As his eyes searched for mine, for a few moments he had returned to me.

He was Tristian again.

*My Tristian.*

That was the first time I'd seen him all night.

It was the first time I'd seen him since I told him the truth in his office.

It was the first time in what felt like an eternity that I wanted to run to him, seek shelter in his arms, in his embrace, in his heart beating in the same symmetry against mine. I wanted to show him how much I loved him.

I still loved him, right?

After all this...

What he'd done.

What I'd done.

How sorry I was, hoping he'd understand. I could get through to him. Feel him as my husband, who used to be my very best friend. He meant everything to me. However, nothing could have saved me from this type of darkness he inflicted in my heart and soul.

I was frustrated.

Bewildered.

Not knowing what to do or how to do it.

Memories of our childhood made itself known. The boy I had grown up with. The one who'd protected me. Confided in me. Stood by my side. He was in every year of my life. I'd never imagined he'd turn into this monster, this demon, this violent man who put his hands on me while holding a gun



over my heart.

Had he always been this way?

Was he trying to seek revenge for always being second to Romeo?

Hurt me?

Embarrass me?

Break me until there was nothing left for him to ruin?

I thought about all of this in a matter of seconds, minutes, hours...

I didn't know. It all tumbled together, forming one big cluster of what-ifs, and where did we go from here?

Should I leave him?

Raise Naz in a broken family?

He didn't deserve that. He was a good boy, the best boy; he needed his mother and father together. I wouldn't raise him to believe love didn't exist. I'd seen what divorce could do to children, experienced it with friends. They weren't the same. Something inside of them changed, and I wouldn't do that to Naz.

He was a victim in all this.

My mind spun.

I wanted to scream.

To run.

To hide from the truth staring me right in the face.

I opened my mouth to say something, anything...

When we heard, "Mama!"

My petrified stare flew to my boy.

"Mama!" he yelled again, running into the living room in his pajamas.

I didn't hesitate for one second; I hurried over to him and picked him up. Not looking back once, I hauled ass out of the house into the garage.

Placing Naz into the passenger seat of my SUV, I ordered, "Naz, get into

your booster seat for me, please.”

“Mama, what happening?”

“Nothing, baby. Just please get into your seat and buckle up as fast as you can,” I pleaded, trying to make my voice sound calm when I was freaking out. I opened the garage as Tristian stormed out.

“Eden!” Tristian banged on the window, bringing both our attention over to him.

His eyes went from me to the lock on the door. Instinctively, my hand hit the lock before he could open the door.

“Eden! Unlock the door!”

“Mama! What happening?” Naz asked, his voice sounding like mine.

“Baby, please put your seatbelt on.”

“Eden!” Tristian banged on the window; he was going to break it.

With a shaky hand, I turned on the ignition. Throwing my car into reverse, I got the hell out of there.

Tristian didn’t back down, continuing to bang on the window until I heard a sickening cracking sound.

“Don’t do this! I’m sorry! Eden, I’m sorry!”

“Mama! I scared, Mama! I scared!”

“It’s okay. I’m here, Naz. We’re almost out of the driveaway.”

Why did it have to be so damn long?

“Eden! Stop the car and open the fucking door!”

“Mama!”

With each bang of Tristian’s fist against the window, it mimicked my rapid thoughts, my shuddering core, my crushed heart and soul. He chased us down the driveway; it was hard to speed out of there, the design of our driveaway was too narrow, and I couldn’t hit the gas as much as I wished I could. Until I was finally able to throw the gearshift into drive and hightail it

down the street.

Leaving behind Tristian.

Our home.

The one I had made us out of so much hope and possibilities.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Every villain is a hero in his own mind.” —*Tom Hiddleston*

*Eden*

Only when I had driven a few blocks with no sign of Tristian following me did I dare to take a deep breath. Did he even realize what he'd done? Did he understand what had just happened? I shook my head. Even if he ever did, it would be too late. I wouldn't be able to trust him again.

Not when Naz's life could be at stake.

I drove to the first place I could think of, and in less than ten minutes, I was pulling into my parents' driveway, seeking refuge in the house I had grown up in.

Naz was crying; I couldn't stop him from crying. I wanted to break down myself. Quickly, I unstrapped him from his booster seat and ran awkwardly toward the front door, clutching him against my chest. I still had a key because, in the words of my father, “*This will always be your home.*”

“Dad! You here? Dad!” I screamed, unable to control my voice. “Dad!”

“Eden, what's going on?” he questioned, darting into the foyer from his

office.

He took one look at me and grabbed Naz out of my arms, immediately calming him.

*Great. Now I was a bad mother too.*

I stood there in a daze, confused by the turn in events.

How could I have let this happen?

I swear I blinked, and I was sitting on the couch in my father's office with him sitting in front of me on a chair.

“You need to tell me what happened, Eden, and start from the beginning.”

“Naz? Where is Naz?” I panicked, getting ready to stand up and search for him, but he stopped me. Placing his hand on my leg.

It was like *déjà vu* all over again. Except, nothing could compare to the way this was mutilating me inside.

Carving.

Cutting.

Slicing me up into tiny little pieces, making me bleed from the inside out.

I would never have expected Tristian to have it in him to completely fucking destroy me. Bury me alive beneath his wrath at my deceit. He was blinded by his rage, by my presence, by his love for me.

Was it love?

Loathing?

Punishing us both.

I needed to keep going.

I had to remain strong.

I dug my fingernails as hard as I could into the palm of my hand to keep from breaking apart. My only saving grace was that my father was with me. I had to keep reminding myself of every last promise he'd ever made me. Every last word he had ever told me.

He'd protect me.

He'd always protect me.

I was his little girl.

"He's with the housekeeper. He's all right."

"Oh, my God," I whispered. My heart still felt as if it were beating a mile a minute.

"Eden," he reassured in a comforting tone. "You're safe. Naz is safe. Now tell me what is going on, so I can handle it."

"Handle it? What are you going to do?"

"Depends on what happened."

For a split second, I contemplated if telling him the truth was the right thing to do.

"Eden, even if you don't tell me, I'll find out. It's best if I hear it from you instead."

Who knew which would be worse, me telling him or him finding out on his own. Either way, once I told him, Tristian's life would be in danger. My father wouldn't stand for abuse. He was a lot of things, but he never put his hands on my mother.

In one breath, I choked out, "It's Tristian."

His eyebrows lowered, his gaze narrowing in on me. "What about him?"

"He's... I mean... he was... drinking... been drinking... a lot," I stammered, not knowing where to begin.

His serene gaze went from my face to my disheveled hair, to my robe that was still open.

Lips compressed in a hard line, he reached over and closed it for me. "What did Tristian do to you, Eden?" His jaw tightened, his hands fisted, his expression morphed from worry to hatred. "Did he hurt you?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I couldn't find the words to tell

him what had happened. I think a huge part of me didn't even realize the extent of our altercation. It had all happened so damn fast.

Dad muttered something in Italian under his breath while he reached for his cellphone inside his suit jacket.

"What are you doing?" I asked, petrified with his reply.

"Handling business."

"No!" I snatched his phone out of his hands. "He's my husband."

"What did he do to you, Eden?"

"He'd been drinking before he got home. He's been drinking a lot, Dad. For years now. I've tried to pretend like it wasn't a big deal until I couldn't ignore it anymore. I dumped out all the liquor from the bar in our house. He came home..." I shook my head, reliving it all over again. "He was angry I hadn't cooked dinner, I told him I'd make him something, but it didn't matter. Nothing I do ever does."

My father's anger intensified with each word that escaped my lips.

"When he realized there wasn't any liquor left, he just... blew up. I've never seen him like that before."

"Did he lay a hand on you?"

"No," I lied.

"Eden..."

"What are you going to do?"

"What any father would do."

"Father or made man?"

"Makes no difference."

"It does, and you know it."

"How long has this been going on? You said years. How many exactly?"

I wanted to tell him the truth.

It was on the tip of my tongue.

Ready.

Willing.

Able.

*Just say it.*

I wouldn't.

I couldn't.

I turned him into what he'd become.

This was my fault.

*Right?*

Why did it feel like it was?

If I'd never opened the door to Romeo that night, then we'd be happy, right? Our life would be normal? Living happily ever after?

*I did this...*

I had no one to blame but myself.

Which had me stating, "You can't hurt him, Dad. You just can't."

"You think I'll be the only one who'd put him in his place? If his father finds out that his son has laid even one finger on your head, he'll do it himself."

I exhaled a deep breath, aware of how much truth that statement made. "He was drunk."

"That's no excuse."

"He didn't hurt me. He scared me."

"And I'll make sure to return the favor. He won't scare you again if he knows what's good for him."

"Daddy, please... for Naz."

"All the more reason."

"I can't deal with this. You need to listen to me. You can't hurt him."

Out of nowhere, a familiar voice boomed through the office, "He won't,



but I sure as fuck will.”

Shaking me right down to my core. In that instant, I realized the reality of my world.

This wasn't the end like I expected...

This was only the beginning.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“If only there was someone out there that loved you.” —*Scar*

*Romeo*

I listened until I couldn't listen anymore until my blood burned with a rage so hot, so deadly that I was having trouble seeing in front of me.

*Tristian.*

Fucking Tristian.

He had everything.

Fucking everything!

And this was how he treated her? Treated his son?

My gut twisted with an anger so foreign that I knew if I didn't walk out of that room soon, I would decimate it; there would be nothing left of it, nothing left of Tristian but dust as he returned to the very ground he had come out of.

I wouldn't say his last rights.

I wouldn't send him to Heaven.

I'd damn him to Hell, and I'd do it with a smile on my face and anger in my soul.

It wouldn't matter if I damned myself in the process. All that mattered was that Eden was safe, that she got her retribution, that fear was no longer pretending to be love.

God, had I done this?

Was I the reason she was sobbing on the couch?

"I sure the fuck will," I repeated in case no one had heard me.

Eden gasped, her eyes going wide with fear, then horror, and ending in shame as she turned away like she didn't want me seeing her at her worst when she believed I'd only ever loved her at her best.

*Wrong.*

How very wrong she was.

I would take her any way I could have her.

Blind.

Broken.

Half dead.

Aged.

She was mine.

Always had been, always would be, and it took me years to admit it to myself.

I had done what was best.

For my two best friends.

I'd handed him gold, and he had treated it like dirt.

Nobody harmed what was mine; it didn't matter that his ring was on her finger—she owned my soul, and mine recognized hers as one thing.

*Ours.*

Blood protected blood even if the person who needed protection couldn't be the one to do it.

Tears rolled down her pretty cheeks as she sat trembling in her small spot

on the couch. I'd never seen her so disheveled, I'd never seen her so scared.

And what was worse?

The light I'd so often seen in her, the one I'd treasured, the one I'd thought holy and sacred... was gone.

Vanished like the mist.

That fucker had blown it out.

How had this gone so wrong?

I crouched down on my haunches, my Glock in my shaking left hand at my side as I reached up my right hand and gripped her chin, turning her head from side to side. "Are. You. Hurt?"

She wouldn't meet my eyes; I made her, not out of anger but out of fucking need to know she would be okay. I needed it more than air, more than my own soul. I *needed* her to be okay.

I wouldn't survive anything but.

Finally, my girl lifted her eyes to mine.

I would rather suffer a million cuts.

A thousand tortures.

Dying over and over again only to be resurrected and killed again, then see the look she had on her face.

"No," she finally whispered, "I'm not hurt."

I didn't release her chin right away; instead, my thumb caressed down her jaw as I promised, "I won't kill him, you have my word, but he needs to be punished for thinking he can touch you in any way that hurts you."

I released her then.

She looked down at the hardwood floor.

With a curse, I stood and stomped out of the house in a frenzy of rage, and I hopped in my car. I jammed my foot on the accelerator so hard my leg hurt.

It took me less than nine minutes to make it to their house and see that the

lights were off, and his Mercedes wasn't parked out front.

"Where are you...?" I mumbled to myself, recalling the conversation she'd had with her father.

He'd been drunk.

She'd thrown out all the alcohol.

A bar?

The one shit hole that was closest to this neighborhood, our bar, the one that held all our good memories. I didn't want to accidentally kill him during happy hour for being a jackass, and that was bound to happen if he opened his mouth.

I sped off, continuing to see visions of Eden's tear-stained face, getting more pissed as I drove, and before I knew it, I was in front of the old dive bar staring down Tristian's black Mercedes and plotting pain.

I killed the engine, got out, and slowly walked along the perimeter of his car, my knife held in my right hand as I drew a nice line into the expensive paint.

*Piece of shit.*

When I was done, I folded the knife and shoved it in my pocket. People were scattered outside smoking, groping. I sneered and yanked open the heavy wooden door.

Tristian was at the bar with a familiar face.

A woman.

Their heads were too close together.

Their lips even closer.

Tristian was clearly drunk off his ass, but even drunk, he knew better. He leaned toward her and placed a hand over hers.

She stood, murmuring something in his ear while he slid a hand down her lower back, pulling her between his thighs. He briefly expressed something

and sent her on her way.

With a curse, I made my way through the crowd and sat on the empty stool next to him. “Playing with fire.”

Tristian did a slow double take and downed the glass of whiskey. “Mind your own fucking business.”

“You know the rules, brother,” I practically spat out the word; what weight did it even carry anymore? “No touching another man’s wife, no looking, and definitely no abuse of your own.”

The woman he had just been with started back toward him again, her eyes zeroed in on Tristian like a fucking snack.

“No.” I held up my hand. “Turn your ass around and go sit the fuck down.”

She gasped while Tristian shot to his feet and swayed a bit. “You can’t say that to her!”

She had brass balls; I’d give her that. She stepped forward, falling into my arms like she was a damsel in distress. I didn’t fall for her bullshit, shoving her away.

I sneered, “You disgust me. You’re defending that woman. And yet your wife flees her own home in fear? Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I shoved his chest. “Now sit your ass down before I do it for you!”

“She’s not yours to protect, brother.” He lifted a finger to order another shot. “Remember who she married.”

“I protect family. And in a way, I’m protecting you. Fuck this up, and it’s going to be your head rolling down the street. You’re lucky I’m here, not her father, not Andrei, not *our* father! You’re breaking all sorts of rules, which means... there will be consequences.”

He gave me a sideways glance and tried to bolt in the other direction, but he was slower than hell. I grabbed him by the back of his shirt, then picked

him up and slammed him against the bar top. Glass went flying around us, and people immediately scattered.

“Hurt her again. Threaten her again. Make her afraid, again, and I’ll personally take out the hit on your life, not because I need the money, or because you’re my brother and I should make it fucking quick, but because I want to be the last person you see before your descent into Hell because that’s where men like you go.” I threw a right jab into his gut, causing him to keel over. “So you remember...who holds your marker.”

With that, I kneed him in the face. He fell to the grimy floor, groveling in pain. I left him there, coughing up blood. Cussing me out like the drunk he was.

I always thought Tristian and I were different, but I was wrong.

We were pathetically the same.

Neither of us willing to grasp the gift that we’d been given.

I had given her to him.

And he was too chicken shit to accept her.

Just like I had been.

Both of us.

Fucking idiots.

Bastards who didn’t deserve to breathe the same air as her.

She loved us both.

And it still wasn’t enough for us to love ourselves enough to fucking receive it.

I shoved the wooden door open and stepped through. Gravel crunched beneath my shoes as I walked toward my car, making the call I’d been dreading to make since I saw the woman at Tristian’s side.

“Yeah?” Bartollo, Eden’s father, answered on the first ring.

I didn’t hesitate in stating...

“We’ve got a big fucking problem.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“In an evil society the villain is the hero, because only the villain can speak the truth.” —*T.J. Kirk*

*Eden*

*Now*

I tried not to think of what he would do to me if he found out, but I couldn't get the vision of those bank statements out of my head or the fact that Romeo had just taken them like he owned them.

The chances were slim that he took them to his apartment, though when he'd left his keys on the counter, the temptation had been too intense.

If Tristian was hiding those documents?

What else was being hidden from me?

Had Romeo just taken the box to his house?

For reasons I really didn't want to explore, I knew that Romeo wouldn't be that upset if he caught me in his apartment. After all, wasn't that where he took all the women he seduced?

Would I just be another victim if he caught me?

I was lying to myself if I thought I was anything but his brother's widow—someone he'd once loved.

Tarnished.

Forgotten.

Naz was spending the weekend with his grandparents and a few of his friends in their neighborhood. He'd begged me; the timing couldn't be more perfect. I had dropped him off and watched him sprint into the house like his heels were on fire.

I still laughed at the sight.

He said I was his favorite.

Until he saw Papa or one of his friends that had nerf guns, and then all bets were off. He was gone in a flash.

With a sigh, I clenched the steering wheel and pulled into Romeo's penthouse parking garage. His was on the top floor, and I couldn't help but remember what had happened last time I was here.

His drunkenness after my engagement.

The almost kiss.

I gave my head a shake, turning off the engine. If he was keeping something from me, I deserved to know it.

I'd suffered for it.

Endured.

Been handed over, tossed away, and abused because of this life, so why didn't I deserve answers? Out of everyone, they belonged to me.

Everyone said it was for my protection, but I called bullshit. I'd been a part of this life for a long time, and something felt strangely off about Tristian's death, about Romeo staying with me. Maybe it was my own guilt over lying in the same bed I'd shared with my dead husband. The fact I

craved it, liked it, used to dream about it when it was Tristian who pulled me close.

“Shit.” I hit the steering wheel then made the choice.

I got out of the car.

I walked into the building.

I waved the keys in my hand at the guard.

I hit the penthouse button.

I walked in.

I tried to escape the memories of being in that elevator with Romeo, but it didn't matter. Romeo had always been a part of me; he always would be.

In ways his brother never had been.

Never could have been.

His brother had my heart, we were best friends, he made me laugh, he made me feel safe.

Romeo made me feel unhinged, crazy like I was seconds away from strangling him then kissing him. He was dangerous, not a sure thing, and yet knowing what I now know...

He was surer than the sun rising every day.

More than the moon in the sky every night.

More constant than breathing.

Romeo, for all of his faults, thought of others before himself; he was fiercely loyal, sacrificial almost to a fault.

I swallowed the dryness in my throat, stepping into the penthouse hallway, and walked toward his solid black door.

I shoved the key in and turned.

The memories were like ghosts, lurking, haunting with each step into the darkness. They washed over me like a holy baptism that had me frozen in place.

This man.

This place.

I sucked in a shaky breath and squeezed my eyes shut. How had we ended up like this? And how the hell did we even begin to fix it?

No time to open up Pandora's Box, I finally found the strength to move through the apartment and start my search, and I knew just where to start.

His office.

My white Adidas tennis sneakers squeaked against the black marble floor that was so clean a person could eat off it. I guess one got good at cleaning when blood was a daily thing.

Stupidly, that thought had my lips twitching at the times he'd come home covered in blood, not lipstick, like he wanted to prove to me that he was on a different path, one of revenge and retribution.

Not of seduction.

Sex.

Fucking.

His office door was open. I walked in and flicked on the light.

Had I not known him, I'd think the office belonged to some old man with a whiskey fetish. I walked by the crystal decanters that were filled with the brown liquor that used to make me want to vomit. For some reason, in this office, in this scenario, I smiled.

Maybe because they were full.

My fingers trailed the simple wood until I reached the stained black table.

It was massive but clean.

His desktop computer was asleep; his chair had clearly not been sat in for a while.

The blinds were closed.

The room was somewhat dark, making this entire moment seem that much

more unnerving.

I moved to sit in his chair and did a small spin, stopping myself with my shoe as something caught my eye.

A USB drive was shoved into his computer.

Narrowing my eyes, I grabbed the mouse and woke up the screen.

Password protected, of course.

On a whim, I typed in my name, thinking it a bit vain and stupid, and nearly fell out of the chair when the computer roared to life.

The desktop showed file after file of things I probably shouldn't be looking at.

But the USB?

It was labeled: *Finished contracts*.

Curious, I double-clicked several names, and aliases started appearing on the screen, pictures, names, ages, families they were a part of, and most importantly, the cost of the contract.

When it was finally done loading, I clicked on the last month.

Hands shaking, I slowly read through the contracts and landed on Tristian Sinacore.

Dead.

Knife.

Contract: Closed.

Amount: Undisclosed.

Before I could investigate it further, a shadow fell over the desk.

"The hell are you doing, Red?" Romeo roared in a deadly voice. "Because to me, it looks like you broke into my computer. You don't trust me? Why dig around for what's already been solved?"

Slowly, I lifted my chin. "You took any evidence of his death away. Why wouldn't I be curious?"

He snapped, “Do yourself a favor, Eden. Stay out of the fucking family business before you get yourself hurt.”

“Is that a threat?” I gasped.

Eyes cold, he just shook his head, answering, “It could be, to the right people, but never to me.” He moved, and I flinched away.

With a frown, he continued raising his hand until he lifted my chin and then tilted my head to the side.

Below my ear was the only bruise I still held, the only one I knew he hadn’t seen after washing off my makeup that night.

I’d done a good job with waterproof foundation. I’d done an even better job keeping my hair down. “What the fuck is this?” he hissed.

“As you said...” I jerked away from him and stood, hovering over his desk, my hands pressed into the wood, “Mind your own business before you get hurt.”

“You flinched,” he whispered. “I would never hurt you.”

I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut. “And yet, it seems to be the only thing you’re good at, hurting me, hurting yourself. Maybe one day you’ll decide what you want, but I doubt it.” I slammed the keys onto the desk, hating his hurt expression after I shoved past him, leaving him alone in that empty office, that empty penthouse with his dark thoughts.

With his truth.

He’d just awakened the one person he could never say no to.

*Me.*

# CHAPTER THIRTY

“Being a villain is great. Even though I’ve only gotten to do it a few times.”  
—*Shawn Ashmore*

*Eden*

*Then: One year later*

The last year was a rollercoaster of emotions, to say the least. Twelve months had come and gone since the evening Tristian held a gun over my heart, and since then, he’d changed again. Although his moods shifted rather quickly. He at least tried to resemble the man I once knew.

We both did.

For Naz.

For us.

For our family to stay together.

I started having intense flashes and sparks of emotion when it came to certain things. It mostly happened when I was around Tristian. The sentiments he sparked within me were familiar yet foreign.

But I swear it was so much more than that.

I began having dreams about him in ways I never had. Horrible dreams where I woke up panting and breathless. He never noticed, or if he did, he pretended like he didn't. I'd stumble out of bed, walking around the house in a daze, unable to find sleep again.

The dreams were different every night. Sometimes, I relived that evening we didn't talk about. Except, it would end with Tristian actually pulling the trigger into my heart. What was scarier was that I felt the bullet pierce through my chest.

It felt real.

Every. Time.

Night after night, I dreamed about the same thing, only different. The dream that terrified me the most was Naz walking in a few minutes prior to when he did, seeing his father aiming a gun at his mother. When Tristian saw him barreling into the living room, it didn't stop him from pulling the trigger. Naz watched me die. I bolted straight up on our bed, sweat dripping off every inch of my skin.

That nightmare wasn't the worst one I'd had. The dream that didn't allow me to find sleep for days was the one where Tristian aimed the gun at our son instead. My mind wouldn't go any further. I'd wake up before Tristian even had the chance to pull the trigger on our boy, and then I'd go puke my guts out in fear that I was seeing a future I couldn't prevent. A future where me and my only reason for living were in danger.

Each nightmare felt more real than the last, making it hard to decipher what was my reality or just an illusion in my own head. It was all-consuming, almost unbearable some nights. To wake up in pure panic and sweat, sitting up in my bed, panting.

Hyperventilating.



Feeling as if I was dying inside.

Remembering what my soul wanted me to forget. There were times I'd lie back in bed and hug my pillow, pressing it tight against my body, immediately feeling comfort like I was embracing an actual person.

Which didn't make any sense when my husband was soundly sleeping beside me. Other times it felt like I was going crazy, my mind battling within itself. It was becoming nearly impossible to avoid the nightmares. Nothing worked.

Not warm milk.

Not exhausting my mind and body until I couldn't stand anymore, and I'd pass out instantly once my head hit the pillow.

I'd still find myself in that same spot in the living room with Tristian pointing his Glock at me. It was overpowering to experience, not knowing if it was real or imaginary.

I was extremely grateful that one thing had returned to normal, though. Tristian didn't drink at home or in my presence. I welcomed him back with open arms, trying for the life of me to make us work.

The more time I spent with him, the more I wanted to just go and be with him. Wanting to feel safe, secure, wanted. Needing to feel some sort of light in this darkness we had created. At least when he was with me. When we were together, I thought about the old Tristian, seeing glimpses of him. Often wondering if he was truly there or if I was imagining that too. I hated that I second-guessed myself, wondering if he'd always been like this, but I hadn't seen it, or worse, thinking that I was the one that caused him to change.

I worked so hard to keep Romeo out of my mind. Other than that evening last year, it was like he'd dropped off the face of the earth. I debated on texting him more often than not, just to know that he was all right. Also, resisting the urge several times to ask his mother if she'd heard from him,

afraid of the response I'd get. Was he with someone? And why did it feel like a knife was getting shoved into my chest whenever I thought about it? There were times when I would catch myself thinking about Romeo, hoping he was safe. Praying he was alive.

And not in some woman's arms.

It was a selfish thought; he deserved to be happy. I couldn't help it like I couldn't control my nightmares of Tristian. They were there.

I was stuck.

Frozen.

Standing in the living room, a huge part of me never left.

Pieces of me were scattered around our home.

Tristian's office.

The living room.

Even our bedroom.

*Our bed.*

We hadn't made love in I didn't know how long. We hadn't had sex, and he hadn't pushed me to do anything I wasn't comfortable with. He was being patient with me, and I thought that was the old Tristian rearing his head, but he'd changed so much I was afraid to hope for that, afraid to believe that the old Tristian was back.

There I was, waiting for him to come home. Wearing a pretty yellow sundress, his favorite color, and style on me. It was our anniversary.

Our fifth anniversary.

What milestone had we reached?

Silver? Or was it gold?

I had to do something to get me out of this heavy place.

I left Naz with my parents, wanting to have the evening alone with Tristian. It was way past dark by the time he opened the front door, and I was

waiting in the same haunted living room for him. Desperately trying to knock away the memories in this room like I'd done the past year alone.

"Hey," I announced, causing him to lift his gaze and lock eyes with me.

I could tell he was a little taken back by the way I was dressed, and I silently hoped he couldn't smell the bottle of wine I'd downed and hid to be able to go through with this.

Narrowing his eyes at me, he searched my face, for what I didn't know.

"You're late," I declared, not knowing what else to say.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hurt that he'd shown up this late into the night.

Did he remember?

Did he forget?

I couldn't tell anymore.

Why should being married for five years feel like talking to a stranger?

He just nodded while walking toward me. In five long strides, he was standing right in front of me. Reaching up to sweep my hair away from my face, never letting his eyes waver from mine. It was only then that I smelled women's perfume.

Simultaneously, he reached into his suit jacket pocket and pulled out a distinctive teardrop-shaped blue bottle. "Do you think I'm like my brother now? For you," he stated, reading my mind and where it went. Handing me the fragrance I must have smelled. "Happy anniversary, Eden Sinacore."

I breathed a sigh a relief, not hesitating for one second, fully aware if I did. I wouldn't go through with this.

Leaning in, I kissed his lips. Softly at first, wanting, needing to take away the memory of that night when he'd held a gun over my heart.

We were standing in the same spot, and the irony wasn't lost on me. Deep in the core of my being, I knew it wouldn't matter.

That night would forever haunt me.

And possibly him.

I felt as though it was the least I could do was to try.

Allowing my touch to speak for itself.

In a matter of seconds, my kiss turned into something else entirely. Something we both wanted but had yet to make happen.

“Eden,” he rasped against my mouth. “What are you doing?” Feeling the urgency of my lips claiming his for the first time in, I didn’t know how long.

“Happy anniversary,” I simply stated in between kisses. Not wanting to stop the emotional havoc I was inflicting. “My gift to you... is *me*.”

“Eden...” he groaned in a husky tone.

“Take me to bed,” I demanded before I lost the nerve.

I didn’t have to tell him twice. He scooped me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. He carried me into our bedroom, where he laid me down on the bed, hovering his huge frame over mine.

Looking deep into my eyes, he breathed out, “I’ve missed you. Please tell me you know that?”

A sharp pain stabbed my chest where my heart used to be, the space he had once shared with his brother and then owned, only to forget again. “I think I do.”

He winced.

“It’s been a hard year. A rough few years.”

“I know, Eden.” Laying his forehead on top of mine, he asked, “Where did we go wrong?”

“I don’t know anymore.”

“I truly am sorry about that night.” He shook his head while I held onto the sides of his face.

“I don’t want to talk about that. Just make love to me.”

I let him go to sit up enough to take my dress off, throwing it onto the floor. Leaving me topless and exposed, wearing only my panties.

He'd seen me naked before, but right now, it felt like the first time all over again. I was so anxious lying there, waiting for him to do what he pleased with me. My heart sped up to an insanely rapid pace, threatening to erupt from my chest. Maybe it was the lost expression on his face or the fact that I was in his arms; it also could have been from knowing he was going to touch me, feel me, see me for the first time in what felt like an eternity.

"I've always loved you, Eden," he praised in a sincere tone, now standing above me at the edge of the bed. Pulling his shirt over his head, he revealed his hard, toned, muscular body.

His eyes shifted, taking in every last inch of my body. Getting a good look at me. Really studying me. "Spread your legs for me, honey."

I timidly obeyed, willing my already shaking legs to move.

To open.

For him.

Anxiously waiting for what I knew was to come. He released a loud growl that escaped from the back of his throat, adding fuel to the flames already burning inside me.

Dragging us both with me.

Grabbing onto my thighs, he pulled me to the edge of the mattress. With one hand, he grabbed the back of my neck, keeping me close to his body. Exactly where he wanted me to be. I moaned when his lips crashed into mine, bucking my hips off the bed, arching my back. Silently requesting him to keep going. He smiled against my mouth, pleased by my subtle request.

Willing to give me what he wanted, what I craved, what I had been waiting for. Kissing me long and hard. My hands shook when I moved hastily to his belt, undoing it as fast as I could. Shifting my hands to unbutton his

slacks next. Using my feet to help him slide them down, along with his boxers.

He caged me in with his arms around my face, gripping the back of my neck again, not wanting to lose our connection.

“I’ll always love you, Eden. No matter what, I’ll always love you.”

I closed my eyes, my mind and heart battling against each other. His hold tightened on my neck as he angled his dick into my opening with his other hand. Gently, he began to thrust inside of me, resting his forehead on mine, causing our mouths to part in sync from the feeling of becoming one.

He stopped when he was fully inside of me. My arms went around his neck as he slowly started to thrust in and out.

“Fuck... you feel good,” he groaned, thrusting harder. “Mine. You’re mine... do you understand me?”

I grimaced, but he didn’t see it, too caught up in the moment, in us. Everything he was saying was like hell on earth.

I had asked him to make love.

Not claim what was already his.

Tears welled.

My throat ached.

I would always and forever be merely a possession to him, and it felt like he was pointing the gun at me all over again.

*You can do this, Eden. He’s your husband. You’re a family. Naz deserves a family.*

I repeated it again and again in my head. Hoping, praying, begging it to be true.

That it would feel right.

Nothing about this felt that way.

Tristian grabbed my leg, angling it higher. He was much deeper this way,

making me clench and tighten around his shaft, which earned me another loud, ravenous growl in return. He never once let up his hold, continuing to move at a hard and fast pace that had me weakening beneath him. Feeling every last inch of him moving in and out of me. His hitting my G-spot perfectly had me panting, moaning, screaming...

All at once.

I tried to push through the unease my mind was conjuring up. Struggling to push away the thoughts of someone who wasn't there.

Someone I envisioned.

Pretended to be with.

In this moment, it was Tristian who was making love to me.

I didn't dare say his name.

It hurt too fucking much.

His body was so wrapped up in me, we were tangled together on the black silk sheets. He kissed me deeply, headily; I knew he was savoring the new sensation of our skin-on-skin contact. I started to move my hips forward as he thrust in. Our bodies moved in time with one another, getting faster and harder with each second that passed.

It felt like I was on edge the whole time.

About to jump off a cliff.

Into my death.

Where I wouldn't be with him, but with his brother instead.

I was literally trying to fuck Romeo out of my mind.

My heart.

My body and soul.

"Fuck," Tristian growled, rotating his hips more demandingly.

I was close to losing it...

All of it.

My sanity.

My truths.

My future.

The past wanted me.

It all intertwined, mixing with the pleasure and the pain. I couldn't take it anymore. In one swift motion, I let go.

"I'm coming..." I panted against his mouth.

Kissing me passionately, he sent me over the edge, and I took him right along with me. He hid his face in the crook of my neck, kissing my sweaty skin.

Making a single tear roll down the side of my face when I heard him repeat...

"Mine."



# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“I am the product of my circumstances. I am the product of my decisions.” —  
*Bane*

*Eden*

*Now*

One hundred and sixty-eight hours.

Seven days.

One week had passed since Romeo had discovered me in his office.

Since then, he'd kept to himself, which was very unlike him. Especially since he made himself at home in my house.

What was he trying to keep from me?

“Mama, are you okay?”

“Hmm...” I replied, caught off guard as I pulled into Naz's school.

“You have that face.”

“What face?”

“The one where you're thinking. Uncle Romeo says you scrunch your

nose and bite your lip when you're thinking really hard about something."

My hands trembled. How did he know everything? Why? "Is that right?"

"Yep. He says that your eyes get glossy when you're upset, and they kinda are right now too. Am I in trouble?"

"No. You're the best boy."

He smiled.

"What else has Uncle Romeo told you?" I searched for answers I would probably never get, but I craved the information. Or maybe I just needed to know who I was to him, not that it would change anything. He gave me away, which means even if he could have me—he wouldn't attempt it.

"That you love with all your heart, but I already knew that one because Daddy said it too."

I winced. I couldn't help it.

"Do you miss him, Mama?"

I nodded, unable to form the words to lie to him. Visions of Tristian holding that gun, of him claiming me when I asked for him to love me filled my head to the point of dizziness.

"Do you think he misses us?"

"Of course. He misses you the most, though."

His eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"I'm your mom; I know everything."

"Do you think Daddy is back to being himself in Heaven?"

I parked the car, waiting for the lane to begin again as my brain whirled with questions. "What do you mean?"

"Daddy. Do you think he's himself with God?" Such an innocent question, such a difficult answer. How did he even notice the slow shift Tristian had taken? It was so subtle even I had trouble digesting it.

"Naz." I looked over at him. "I don't understand what you're asking me."

“Well... Daddy was different. He changed a lot.” He shrugged. “He didn’t want to play with me that much, and when he was home, he was always so grumpy. And he yelled at you a lot. I don’t know why. You were always a good mama. Uncle Romeo says that he was stressed, and sometimes that changes people.”

I jerked back, never expecting him to share that.

“Naz, why haven’t you ever said something to me before?” My heart cracked in my chest. I’d failed as a mom, hadn’t I? This entire time I thought I was shielding Naz; instead, he felt and saw everything.

“About Daddy?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t want to make you sad. Your eyes were glossy a lot with Daddy, so I didn’t want to make you sadder. I’m a good boy, right?”

“Always, baby.” I got teary-eyed; there was no helping that either. “Your daddy didn’t make me sad.”

“No?”

“No, bud.”

“Okay. That makes me happy because I miss him a lot. I hope he doesn’t forget about me.”

“That could never happen. You’re too unforgettable.”

His eyes lit up. “That’s what Uncle Romeo said too, Mama.”

Of course, Romeo said that, and I knew in my soul he meant it. “See... everyone knows.”

He smiled wide, the worry residing from his gaze.

“You have a good day at school, okay?”

“I will, Mama. You have a good day too.”

I ruffled up his hair, pulling my car up to the teacher who was on car duty that morning. She opened the door, and Naz jumped out as happy as could be.

He waved back and was on his way, running toward his friends who'd been waiting for him.

I sat there in a haze for a few seconds until the blare of the horn honking behind me brought me back to the present. Still mulling over my conversation with Naz, I pulled into traffic shaking my head.

How long had Naz noticed a change in Tristian's personality?

I thought I was doing a great job at hiding the truth from him, now I felt as though I had failed him as well. The guilt consumed my core while I drove out of the school parking lot. Trying to control the shame I was suddenly overwhelmed with.

When my phone rang, I reached into my purse and answered it. "Hello."

"We need to talk, Eden. Can you come to my office?"

"Hi to you too, Dad."

"It's important."

"I'm on my way." I sighed at his seriousness.

He didn't respond; he just hung up. Which was weird for my father; he was never short with me like that. Fifteen minutes later, I was pulling into his driveway, walking into his office.

"What's with the short phone call?" I questioned when I saw him sitting behind his desk with an expression I couldn't place.

He nodded to the chair in front of his desk, and I sat in it. "You're freaking me out; what's up?"

"We're dropping the case for Tristian's death, and we won't be pursuing his killer."

"Wait, what?"

"You heard me, Eden."

"Not correctly. I think you just told me you're not looking for my husband's killer anymore."

“I did.”

“I don’t understand.” I shook my head. “Why not?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“None of my concern?” I shot up. “How is my husband’s death not my concern?”

“Eden, calm down.”

“Not until you tell me what the hell is going on!”

“There is nothing to tell you. It’s business.” He was so stoic, like we were talking about dinner, not death.

I pushed him further. “So, his death is related to business then?”

“I didn’t say that,” he snapped.

I put my hands on my hips. “Yeah, you did.”

“Eden, sit down.”

I did as I was told, trying to keep my shit together when all I wanted to do was scream at him. I was tired of everyone treating me like I was a porcelain doll that was going to break.

“What is going on? I have the right to know.”

“We’re protecting you.”

“From what exactly? Is my life in danger? Is Naz’s?”

“Not anymore.”

“What does that even mean? Can you please stop with the cryptic messages?”

“It doesn’t matter how upset this may get you. We don’t involve wives or children in our business. You were born into this life, Eden. You know how it works.”

I stared, jaw slack. My own father was not only lying to me but brushing me off!

“This is bullshit,” I yelled.

His eyes flashed. “Because you’re angry, I will let that slide, but I don’t need to remind you that I’m your father and won’t tolerate you speaking to me in that manner.”

“Oh my God!” I stood, needing to pace the room. Back and forth I went, reeling in my emotions. “Then I’ll pursue my own case.”

“Excuse me?” his tone was lethal, his expression murderous.

I turned to face him. “I said, I’ll pursue my own case. I’ll find who murdered Tristian. I already saw—”

“—you need to forget about what you saw.” He leaned back into his black leather chair, folding his hands together on top of his desk. “I understand you’re upset.”

“I am more than upset! He was my husband! His murderer deserves to rot in prison.”

He was quiet and then, in a low voice, expressed, “We took care of it.”

I jerked back again; it was like one hit after another. “Then you know who killed him?”

He didn’t say a word.

Not one word.

“Dad! Answer me. Do you know who killed him? My son is going to be raised without a father. I deserve an answer.”

“He has Romeo,” he said, so simply I wanted to scream.

My body flew back as if he slapped me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Eden, you’re my daughter. I know everything.”

He gave me a look that I was more than familiar with. Making me roll my eyes and take a deep breath. I looked down at the floor, not wanting him to see the expression on my face. I was scared it would give away how I was feeling.

“Is that why Romeo is in my house? You think he’s just supposed to step

into Tristian's shoes, and we're supposed to be this happy family now?" How dare he, how fucking dare he!

"I don't know, Eden. You tell me."

My head was spinning, my heart was racing, my stomach was tumbling.

I couldn't stop it.

I couldn't stop this.

My mind and my heart wouldn't let me as they collided into one terrifying thing. My heart continuing to beat rapidly, hammering in my head and making me feel dizzy.

Lightheaded.

Overwhelmed by everything that was suddenly happening. Everything he was suddenly saying. Feeling like I was being mentally torn in three directions.

His.

Mine.

Tristian's.

My mind was in overdrive, putting up one hell of a fight with my heart.

"You don't know what you're saying," I stated, still not meeting his eyes. Scared it would give me away.

"I never say what I don't mean. Romeo is in your home to protect you and Naz."

"From what?"

"Everything."

"That makes no sense."

"Your husband is gone; I don't need to repeat to you what our life is. I will always protect you, and my grandson and the only man I trust to do the job is Romeo."

"For how long?"

“As long as it takes.”

I was afraid of that. “What?”

“Eden, I’m done having this conversation. I told you what I needed to say, and you needed to know. There is nothing left for me to say to you. You can go.”

“I’m not finished.”

“I have business to attend to,” he informed in a calm voice that basically said, leave as polite as possible.

“Dad... please.” I peered deep into his eyes. “Please tell me what’s going on... I’m going crazy over here.”

I couldn’t breathe.

I couldn’t move.

I could barely even stand.

My eyes pooled with tears, taking in the memories flooding my mind. Each one unfolding in front of me, playing out one by one as I made my way around the room. He wouldn’t answer.

*Give me the truth.*

*Tell me anything I desired to know.*

This was my life...

Men protecting me from the monster who lurked in the shadows. But what happens when the monster lurking is also the prince? The hero? The one you want to save you? How do you even begin to protect yourself from that?

“Please... first it’s Romeo with taking everything from Tristian’s office away from me, then I go to his penthouse to find files of Tristian on his computer. What is going on? Please...”

My request was cut short when my mom started calling for him from the speaker in his office.

He pressed the intercom button. “I’ll be right there.”



“Daddy...”

“I’ll be right back.”

He left, leaving me alone. It couldn’t be any more perfect. My feet were moving on their own, and before I knew what I was doing, I opened one of the drawers, seeing nothing that would be of use to me. I reached in, moving everything to see if I could find something that may answer all my insecurities.

Nothing.

Nowhere.

I couldn’t find one fucking thing.

Staring up at the ceiling, I breathed out, “God, please help me.”

As if answering my prayers, a cellphone dinged with a text message. Not just any cellphone...

My father’s.

I walked toward it, feeling like this was the moment where the truth would make itself known. I didn’t know why, but each step that brought me closer to his phone had me questioning everything. Until finally, I picked up his phone. Swiping it over, unlocking his screen with the code he had used since I was a little girl.

Written in plain sight was the truth.

Never in a million years did I think...

The truth wouldn’t set me free.

Instead, it buried me alive.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Stuck in a generation where loyalty is just a tattoo, love is just a quote, and lying is the new truth.” —*Mr. Villain Quotes*

*Romeo*

She was late.

And I was turning into one of those annoying as hell people who constantly checked their phone and looked out the kitchen window for her SUV.

Nothing.

Naz’s school had been over for hours, and it wasn’t like her to just keep him out.

He was always starving after school, so unless she took him to eat and then shop, which he hated, something was wrong. I’d called her father only to get a grunt on the other line, which made me wonder if I should put on a cup and pray she didn’t have good aim.

Things had been better.

When I had found her in my apartment, I was more surprised at first that

she'd taken the initiative to look into things, and then annoyed that the only thing my brain could focus on was that we'd been alone in my apartment and that my bed hadn't seen any female in it—ever.

I never brought women back to my place.

The very thought that Eden had been a mere few feet from my bedroom, from christening that mattress, had me both unsteady with need and fucking hard as nails.

Hell, even her yelling at me hadn't made the lust go away. If anything, I wanted her all the more for it.

I loved her anger.

Missed it.

Missed the fire I used to see behind her eyes, the fight that somehow lessened every year she was married to my brother like he somehow stole pieces of her personality until there was nothing left.

At this point, I'd probably welcome a good kick to the balls. At least then I'd know she still felt, she still cared, she was still my Eden.

*Mine.*

Headlights flickered in the distance.

I bolted toward the door only to stop a few feet away from it. What the hell was I doing? With a curse, I turned away and braced my hands against the kitchen counter, counting the seconds until the car's engine turned off.

I measured the steps she took to get to the door—nine.

I sucked in a sharp breath at the twist of the lock.

Tried like hell not to look up when she walked in and clicked the door shut behind her; she locked it as if she was trying to keep someone out when all she ever should have been worried about was letting me in.

Eden peered up then stopped in her tracks like she was frozen in place; her eyes darted behind me to the living room and then back to me again.

Her keys fell to the ground in a loud crash, and I couldn't tell if she was angry or terrified.

"Eden?" I tilted my head. "Is everything okay? Where's Naz?"

"Safe," she snapped while something flashed in her eyes before she picked up her keys and very slowly walked into the kitchen.

She walked right past me.

Which pissed me off.

Hadn't things been better? "What the hell do you mean safe?"

I reached out and grabbed her wrist, keeping her from going past me.

"Let go," she whispered, still not looking at me.

"Eden, what happened?"

A tear slid down her cheek. "Nothing."

"Talk to me." I squeezed her wrist then tugged her against me until both hands pressed against my chest. "I can keep him safe. I have been keeping him safe, you too, so why isn't he here? Why are you lying to me?"

She tried pulling away. I pinned my arms around her body and held her close, so close I could feel her heartbeats, measure her small breaths.

"Let go." Another tear slid down. "Please."

"I don't understand." I shook my head. "I'm here to protect you, and you're looking at me like I'm going to murder you any second. I would never touch you or Naz, you know that—"

"Good to know we aren't on your list of people to kill." Ice dripped off her words. "I won't ask again, Romeo, let go."

"Red—"

"Don't you dare!" she yelled, her eyes flashing. "You don't have the right to call me that, to claim me, protect Naz or me. You don't have the right!"

Desperate for answers, I kept her close, my mind trying to piece together what could have possibly happened to get her to this state. "Eden, I can't

protect you if you don't tell me what's wrong. Did someone hurt you?"

Her laugh was humorless. "That's rich since it's always you! You hurt me! Over and over again. You protect me. You reject me. You give me hope. You take it away. You lie while you smile, and you do it constantly until I believe you. Until I lie to myself in order to love you! I hate you, Romeo! I hate you!"

"You still love me?"

"Let me go!" she roared.

My heart slammed against my chest as she struggled against me. "I would do anything for you, anything!"

"I know!" She burst into tears. "Because you did!"

Cold chilled down my spine. "What?"

"Let me go before I scream!" She struggled against me. "I can't even look at you, I can't touch you. I can't, I can't, Romeo, I just can't—"

"Calm down!" I pulled back and cupped her face. "I will always have you —"

"Until you're bored! Until my name comes up. Is that it? Until I'm no longer useful? What happens when I age? Is that another get out of jail free card? Is that how this works? You claim me until you no longer want me, and then I die?"

"Die?" I shook my head. "What the fuck, Eden, did you miss the part where I said I'd do anything for you?"

"I know what you did!" she screamed, nearly loud enough to break glass.

I dropped my shaking hands to my sides. My entire body went numb. "What are you talking about?"

"I. Know. What. You. Did." She spoke with conviction.

"Red, you're not making any fucking sense. You're talking in circles. I can't keep up with you."

“No! I can see very clearly for the first time, and I know what and who you are. Finally! After all these years, I know who you truly are, Romeo Sinacore!”

I shook my head. “Eden, I’ve never pretended to be anything I’m not. Especially with you.”

“Bullshit!”

“I’ve done everything for you. Everything.”

“Oh, I’m fully aware. Don’t you worry about that.”

“Can you stop speaking in code and just spit it out already.”

“I know who killed Tristian.”

I stumbled back. I could see it in her eyes.

All these years.

All this time.

I was protecting her from me.

Only to have her figure what I was capable of, destroying both of us when she seethed...

“YOU!”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“What we call evil is simply ignorance bumping its head in the dark.” —  
*Henry Ford*

*Eden*

*Then: Right before the funeral*

It seemed all I did in that living room was wait. It used to be for Romeo. Then it was in fear of seeing him. And now? Now it was for my own husband. I both wanted to see him and wanted to be left alone.

But it was time.

It all came to a head. I finally saw the evidence I needed.

They said time healed all wounds. Was that true? Was it false?

More lies.

No truths.

I made my way out of the living room and walked into his office. Thinking about the times when I used to look forward to coming in here after a long day. Tristian would be at this desk, working late with a drink at his

right hand. I'd announce dinner was ready, and he'd pull me into his arms and kiss me like I meant something to him.

I had been a partner.

Not a pet.

Now I felt as though he'd owned me and used it as a manipulation while he went out and did exactly what he accused Romeo of.

In Tristian's quest to win my heart, to beat his brother, he actually managed to become worse, and I knew I would never forgive him for it.

For only thinking of himself, when all I'd ever asked of him, was his love.

It should have been so easy.

Instead, he couldn't see past this invisible competition between him and the guy who gave me away. He couldn't see that I had made my choice that day because, in his head, it was an ongoing thing and always would be. He would always have to fight to win me; no matter how many times I tried to convince him, I'd already been won.

The front door shut just as I sat in his leather chair.

I used to spin in this chair.

He'd laugh and playfully tell me to get out.

We'd kiss.

I imagined Tristian would now just tell me to get out while on his way to shower off whatever skank he'd just slept with.

I had followed him.

Women's intuition was wholeheartedly a powerful emotion. It overcame me, and before I knew what I was doing, I was watching him get out of his car and into another woman's arms. I watched them all morning.

Tears burned the back of my eyes.

Why?

Where had we gone wrong?



Since when did the safe choice turn into your worst nightmare?

“Eden?” Tristian called down the hall.

I took a deep breath, replying, “Your office.”

Footsteps sounded. I blinked, and he was standing there, filling up the doorway.

The man who used to be my best friend.

The man who had said he’d love me in sickness and in health.

The man who had claimed to be the better choice.

The man who had promised never to let me go.

The man who had hated the person his brother had to become for *The Family*.

The man who no longer had my heart.

The man who had singlehandedly crushed my soul.

“Why are you in my office?” He braced his hands against the door frame, his biceps visible through the black button-down shirt. His black slacks were tight against his thickly corded thighs.

He’d been working out a lot too.

I should have known. All the signs were there. I saw it with my own two eyes.

“Why am I in your office?” I repeated in a condescending tone. “I sent Naz to my dad’s for a sleepover.”

He scoffed. “Still doesn’t tell me why you’re in my chair.”

“A question for a question?”

From the moment I learned the truth of what he was doing, it felt like I never existed in his life; it was as if my memories of him, of us, were just a figment of my imagination.

Our connection.

Our family.

Our love.

Meant nothing to him in the end.

The man who had wanted me.

Who had been raised with me.

Protected me against all else.

*Cheated on me.*

Two wrongs didn't make a right, but in that exact moment, I left behind the woman he married.

She was gone, and I had no idea where she was anymore, or if she truly ever existed to begin with. I'd once thought she would be with him forever. Tristian looked at me in the same way he always had. Bringing back hope and fear like she was still there...

Living.

Breathing.

Lurking under all that resentment.

Waiting to be brought back to life after his betrayal.

He looked at me like nothing had changed between us.

When in my reality, everything had.

I had to keep reminding myself of the way he'd treated me; otherwise, I'd fall for his words, and then what?

More lies?

More pain?

More bullshit that would never end.

It was a vicious cycle we were spinning in.

He still looked at me like I was his whole fucking world, while I stared back at a man who had become nothing but a stranger now.

It was all overwhelming.

More than anything, it was undeniably confusing.

I couldn't decipher what was the truth and what was more lies anymore. He would say anything to get what he wanted.

*Me.*

I had to stay strong.

No matter what.

We. Were. Done.

He cursed. "Really, Eden? It's been a fucking long day, and you're sitting there trying to flirt? Can we talk tomorrow—"

"I saw you. At your office. With her."

His face paled. "What?"

"The woman who wears the same perfume you got me for our anniversary last year. I saw her. Kissing you. I saw you stripping her. I saw you..." Tears filled my eyes. "Fucking her like any good cheater does to his mistress."

"Eden, listen—"

"NO!" I jumped to my feet. "You listen! I gave you everything, and you cheat? What the hell, Tristian—"

He burst out laughing and clapped his hands. "Wow, I should pay you for your performance. Everything? You? Are you fucking kidding me right now? Is this a joke? You came to our marriage bed fresh after fucking my brother!"

"That was years ago, and I apologized again and again. I'd been drinking and—"

"Nice." He held up his hands. "Whatever, I'm going to bed—"

I finally snapped. "I'm leaving you."

He froze halfway to the door, still turned away from me.

"I can't be with you if you're cheating. I won't. I'm better than that. Naz deserves better than this. You're never home; you're literally fucking a woman under my nose. I can't. I won't."

He turned to face me, lips twisted in a snarl, fists clenched. Rage evident

on his handsome face. “You think I’ll actually let you go? After all of this?”

“You think you actually have me still?” I hissed, ready for a war.

He barked out a laugh. “I’ve always had you, and I’m fucking keeping you. You’re just tired. Go and—”

“No.” I grit my teeth. “I’m taking Naz, and I’m leaving.”

His nostrils flared, and he was in my face before I got the last word out. “Like hell, I would ever let you take my son from me!”

Maybe I’d been pushed too far.

Maybe I was just exhausted.

Hurt.

Done.

But I finally spoke the truth, yelling, “He’s not your son!”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“A woman doesn’t realize how precious her voice is until she’s been silenced.” —*Ursula*

*Eden*

Tristian backhanded me across the face so hard that my body flew back, and I tumbled to the floor. I didn’t have a chance to catch my bearings; in less than a second, he was gripping onto the front of my shirt, holding me in front of his face.

My head spun.

My body trembled.

I saw stars.

Bright.

Big.

Blinding stars.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” he roared in a voice I’d never heard.

If I thought I had been terrified the night he’d held a gun over my heart, it

didn't even come close to this. Nothing compared to this paralyzed state of panic I felt in this exact moment where his rage had completely taken over his reasoning.

"Tristian," I whispered, as if his name was a sin off my tongue.

"Tell me!" he seethed, his face turning a daunting shade of red. "What the fuck did you just say?"

"You need to calm down." I hated how weak I sounded.

How my lips trembled.

How I didn't recognize this woman who was lying on the ground with her husband holding her captive.

"Calm down? Calm down?" He shook me.

Hard.

Fast.

Long.

I had no choice but to let him.

He was bigger than me. Stronger. Angrier than I'd ever seen him.

"You want me to calm down when you just told me that Naz isn't my son?! Then who the fuck is his father, Eden?!"

"Tristian, please... you're hurting me."

He let me go, but not before he shoved me away from him. Causing my head to smack against the wood floor.

"You fucking bitch! You stupid fucking whore!"

My stomach churned, my mind reeled, and my body felt as if it was falling the fuck apart.

I was hunched over, placing all my weight on my hands and knees. Breathing in fresh air with tears streaming down my face. There was an unbearable amount of weight sitting on my chest from what was happening.

I didn't expect it would come to this.

Me terrified of my husband.

The man who used to be my best friend.

My family.

The one I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with.

“Fuck! Motherfucker!” he growled, pulling his hair away from his face.

Through a daze, I watched as he wreaked havoc around his office. Leaving a path of destruction in his wake. Swiping the contents off his desk, he shouted, “I loved you! I fucking loved you!” He tore the large picture of us off the wall, chucking it at the door. “I fucking loved you!” It shattered to the floor, marring our faces with nothing but glass and debris. Item after item flew through the air, striking the walls, the door, the floor, breaking into pieces.

“Please stop! Please!” I begged, but my words went unheard.

Nothing could stop him.

Especially not me.

“How could you do this to me?!” Tears streamed down his face.

A vase whooshed by my head, crashing behind me, sending me to cower in the corner. This wasn’t the end; this was only the beginning.

*Would I wind up dead? Please, God, protect me.*

“I trusted you! And you betrayed me!”

My mouth was opened, spewing my own poisons. “I trusted you, and you cheated on me! I trusted you, and you held a gun over my heart! I trusted you, Tristian, and you just fucking hit me!”

My words only heightened his wrath; he went after anything he could find. Knocking over the coffee table, the couch, the pictures on the walls, our life.

Our family.

Broken.

Everything we created together, he was destroying in a flash. When he pulled the tv off the wall and chucked it across the room, I backed into the corner further. Nothing but tears blurred my eyes, my body churned with the desire to fall apart.

I was stupid to not bring my cell phone in that office, just like I was stupid to trust he wouldn't lose his mind and hurt me.

"Tristian, stop! Please! Just stop!" I broke down to the point of hyperventilating. Hugging myself, trying to hold what was left of me together. "Please, I'm begging you!"

He abruptly turned at the last second as another painting shattered to the ground. Walking through the chaos caused by his turmoil and my betrayal, he grabbed me again.

"It's Romeo, isn't it? He's Naz's father, isn't he?"

I cried hysterically, and it didn't stop him from once again shaking the shit out of my body.

"All these years! All this time! How could you do this to me?"

I opened my mouth to speak.

To say something.

Anything.

I couldn't.

Not one word left my mouth; he backhanded me across the face yet again. My head whipped back so hard I thought he was going to break my neck.

"Look at me! Fucking look at me!"

"I can't," I whimpered, unable to move.

He let go of me, and my lifeless body fell to the floor. Crouching down close to my face, he sneered, "I've done everything for you, and this is how you repay me. Spreading your legs for my fucking brother only to wind up pregnant. Well, I'm going to tell you one thing and one thing only... Eden



Sinacore. *My* wife. The mother of *my* child. You. Will. Never. Leave. Me. Do you understand me? NEVER.”

My eyes widened the minute he spoke with execution...

“I’ll fucking kill you before you ever leave me.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“The soul that has conceived one wickedness can nurse no good thereafter.”—*Sophocles*

*Romeo*

*Then: Four days later*

“Who are you sleeping with?” I asked, pausing for a moment.

What was her name?

Tasha?

Natasha?

Who the fuck cared.

“I wouldn’t want to piss him off,” I added. Lying was part of the process.

I didn’t give a shit who she was deep throating as long as I got my answers in the end.

“Tristian,” she replied with no hesitation. “But he’s been really busy lately, especially since the Russians decided to turn and—”

“Wow,” I interrupted; “You’re just full of surprises, is that it? I fuck you

hard enough, and you sing like a goddamn canary?”

She threw her head back and laughed; her fake brown hair slid off her shoulder before her ember eyes locked onto mine. “You have a certain reputation for bringing the little death, Romeo. How could I say no? Especially if it means that I get another night in your arms—I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. Just don’t stop what you’re doing with your dick inside of me.”

“Hmm, you drive a very, very—” I thrust deep “—hard bargain.”

I didn’t let up. The slapping sound of my balls against her ass echoed around the room, along with the wet sucking noise of her pussy soaking down my shaft.

I waited until she was on the brink of the edge.

Hanging.

Ready.

Eager.

“Who’s he working for?”

“Tristian?” Her back arched off the bed.

“Yes.”

“The highest bidder. You know who that is.”

I thrust with more determination, hitting her G-spot.

“Oh, Romeo...”

Her mouth parted.

Her legs shook.

Her core locked up.

“I’m coming...” she breathlessly moaned.

“No shit.”

Her cunt clamped down on my cock.

“I think I’m in love with you.”

They all loved me; it was part of my charm.

I gave her a devious smile. “Thanks for the fuck.”

Our eyes connected, becoming one. Before she loudly gasped.

Toes curling.

Chest seizing.

Heart stopping.

I watched as blood oozed out of her mouth and down her chin. Getting lost in the symmetry of her death.

I did what I had come to do.

Fuck her senseless.

And then...

I slit her throat.

It was done.

Finished.

I wiped my knife across the white sheets, now stained red. This would be the end.

My finale.

My benediction.

I once swore to myself I'd never use my body to gain secrets, that I'd find a different way, but somewhere along the way, that changed, and I became this man I didn't even recognize anymore.

Her eyes were wide open in shock, her mouth hung low as a trickle of blood dripped down her chin.

*Natasha Drozdov.*

Wife of Ivan Drozdov, the new leader of the Drozdov Family. Only none of us would accept him, and they knew it. We didn't try to hide the fact that they were a sorry excuse for the Russian mafia. Five years ago, they'd broken away from the Petrov crime family in hopes of starting their own powerful

hand.

They'd tried.

They'd failed.

They continued to try.

I just never imagined they would drag my brother into their own demise.

Without the support of the Five Families, they had a shit time trying to gain momentum. It didn't help that every single family had an alliance with the Petrovs, which meant that their enemies were now ours too.

And Natasha?

I had recognized her that night at the bar when I kicked Tristian's ass. I thought I'd gotten through to him.

I was wrong.

So fucking wrong.

She was a fucking pawn my brother had used, not realizing the longer you played with fire, the more it burned your skin until there was nothing left of you but ash.

Now she was dead.

I told myself it was necessary because it was. Though I was still having a hard time wrapping my head around it.

My brother's betrayal.

His treatment of Eden.

I didn't know who he was and what he stood for anymore.

After tonight, I was terrified I wouldn't know who I was and what I stood for either.

It was necessary.

I had to do it.

There was no way out of it.

This was my life.

From beginning to end.

Inhaling a solid breath, I pulled out my cellphone to check the time. In three minutes, I would alter several lives, including my own, but the future was already decided.

Game.

Set.

Match.

I swiped past the time and clicked on my pictures, finding the file titled family.

Hundreds of photos of Naz filled the screen as I scrolled through them.

Eden assumed I was gone for half his little life. She didn't know that there wasn't a breath he took without me watching over him, like an avenging angel.

Fallen.

But still inherently good.

I would kill to keep them both safe.

Which brought me back to my current place and time. This situation I was in. Setting my phone on one of the glass tables, I pulled out a chair.

My knife was still in my left hand.

No longer carrying blood.

Maybe that was my own kindness, that when I took his life, I'd do it with fresh steel so he could see how much of his blood I'd spill, so I could count the ounces with a smile on my face, knowing that I was ending this once and for all.

It was either them or him.

And for the first time in my life—I chose Eden over my brother.

I chose her life over mine.

I chose her sanity.

Her safety.

Her future.

The sound of a key card sliding into the door hit me like a bullet between the eyes. I leaned back in my chair, gripping my knife so hard.

The door opened slowly.

It closed just as slowly.

And there I sat.

*Waiting.*

To kill my brother for the sins he had committed.

Tristian didn't see me right away when he walked into the room. Just another reason he wouldn't make it as a made man. He should have known something was wrong the minute he was inside this room.

Instead, he was thinking with his dick.

The power.

The money.

The control.

It was a high in itself. Tristian had always been weak, coming in second place to me. My fingers twitched to end him right then and there. Forcing him to tell me all his secrets until he was sick with all the truths.

"You're late," I announced from my spot in the corner.

I lurked in the shadows like the Grim fucking Reaper. Switching on the light, I sat there on purpose, wanting to see every single expression on his shit-eating face.

The minute he smiled at me, I knew he was too far gone.

Poisoned by his own thoughts.

Infected by the need to prove something to himself, to the world, to me.

He had everything already in the palm of his hands, I knew... because I was the man who had given it to him.

I felt sad in that moment.

Devastated that he still didn't get it.

Would he? If I let him live?

He'd had it all.

Now it was my turn to take it back from him.

Tristian folded his arms across his chest. His pristine black shirt was tucked into his black pinstripe slacks like he was ready for a business meeting and not a quick fuck with the boss's wife.

"Does Ivan know you're fucking his wife?"

He shrugged, still not realizing what he had done.

To us.

The family.

His own flesh and blood.

"I should have known you'd figure it out one of these days. Took you long enough, Romeo."

"Well." I stood. "Give me a little more credit, brother. I figured something was up one year ago when I saw you with her—" I nodded to her dead body "—that night at the bar. I had you followed, and ever since then, let's just say I could write a book on all the betrayals you've been involved in. You're not just a rat; you're a liability that needs to be put down, like the dog that you are." I grinned. "Except, you were never useful in the first place, were you? Is that why you did it? Sold Family secrets to the Drozdovs? Was the money worth it? The power?"

"You don't know shit!" Tristian gritted his teeth; his eyes were wild, out of control. Almost knocking me on my ass when he claimed...

"You made me do this! You have no one to blame but yourself!"



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“Be the kind of guy that when he wakes up the devil says, ‘Oh shit! He’s up!’” —*Mr. Villain*

*Romeo*

“Holy fuck! You really believe that, don’t you?” I barked out a laugh. “I have given you everything! I can’t protect you anymore! And quite frankly, you don’t deserve my love for you! I was blinded into believing you did!” I flipped out my knife, blatantly showing him my intentions.

He jerked back, understanding my simple yet graphic demonstration. Narrowing his eyes at me, he stated in a matter-of-fact tone, “You wouldn’t kill your own brother. Despite your threats, you don’t have it in you. You just said it yourself, so put the knife away and forget about what you think you know.”

I saw nothing but rage as I braced myself, allowing my breaths to even out before I gave myself away.

I wanted to destroy him slowly, not lose my temper, and shove my knife directly into his heart.

Too fast.

That was too fast.

He deserved the opposite of that.

He deserved the worst of the worst.

He. Touched. Her.

He. Hurt. Her.

He was going to kill her.

Not only her but my son.

The one I fucking let him raise as his own.

“Knife, bullet, or choking?” I asked casually. “Your choice. I am a gentleman, after all.”

Tristian clenched his jaw.

“You see...” I started pacing. “She told me everything. Apparently, I do fuck them and kill them, but at least I get the information I need first. All you had to do, Tristian, was take care of your family, and you couldn’t even do that!”

I saw my brother transform from someone I knew to the monster I always protected him from.

*Me.*

Except in this moment, he made me look like a saint.

I didn’t hesitate, spewing, “Tell me the truth, and maybe I’ll grant you some leniency and kill you fast and not slow.”

A cocky grin crossed his face.

“I’ll start it for you. Why? Was it the money? The power? Why would you want to go down this road?”

He shrugged. “I just told you. It’s all your fault. You should have never fucked my wife and knocked her up with what was supposed to be MY SON!”

“I let you raise him, did I not?”

“Oh fuck you, Romeo! So you knew? You knew Naz was yours?”

“I didn’t at first. Not until I met him. Saw him with my own two eyes. It’s why I stayed away until I couldn’t anymore.”

“You son of a bitch!”

“Save the dramatics and tell me what I want to know.”

“I loved Eden!” he sternly exclaimed. “I still love her!”

“You have a shitty way of showing it. Twenty-five million for her head. Twenty-five million for Naz. How do you even know Ivan Drozdov?”

“He was at my wedding. He asked me to cook the books for him, and I thought it would be a good way to make extra money for my family.”

“I see.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah. He used you, and you fell for it like the pussy you are. How did Eden come into play?”

“That was your doing.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“That night in my office during Naz’s birthday party when I found out about you and Eden. I set that plan in motion. Knowing that eventually you would win, and she’d leave me for you. I wouldn’t let that happen. You weren’t taking her from me, so I made sure of it. I went to Ivan and made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. If he paid me twenty-five million dollars, then I’d kill Eden, and he’d make me a made man.”

Hearing him talk about Eden as if she was nothing made me see red. Through a tight jaw, I snarled, “You’re an idiot. You do realize he was going to turn on you, right?”

His eyes lowered, genuinely caught off guard by what I just said. “What do you mean?”

“Well, for one, he knew you were screwing his wife. He lied to you. He was going to rat you out after you killed Eden to gain alliance and respect from our family, you stupid fuck!”

His face paled.

“I didn’t think you’d have it in you. And Naz? What kind of monster kills his own son?”

“He’s not mine. He’s yours.”

“You raised him, Tristian. He thinks you’re his father!”

“I wasn’t going to do that until I learned the truth a few days ago!”

“And that makes it okay?!”

“I wanted to hurt you! I wanted you to feel like I have every single day of my life! Eden wasn’t ever mine, was she? She was just a consolation prize to the family accountant while she pines for the hero she’ll never have! It would have been better for you to just marry her; that way, she’d have you, and I could be the one fucking her behind your back!”

“Watch it,” I snapped. “It was only once, you know that, and I—”

“She was a virgin.” Tristian’s eyes locked on mine. “It’s how I knew. She came to my bed already claimed. I was trying to respect her wishes, respect her father. And she, apparently, was saving herself for you.”

I nearly dropped the knife as I remembered that night, the blood in the hotel room when I went back to talk to her, to apologize, only to find her already getting ready for her marriage to my brother.

I’d glanced at the bed, left a rose for her, and saw blood, but I thought I’d been too rough with her. Never once did I think she was a virgin. She’d been with Tristian for years up till that point.

*Now I was the idiot.*

“Ah, so the great Romeo Casanova doesn’t know everything. I’m actually shocked.”

“It changes nothing.”

“It changes fucking everything!” Tristian roared. “You stole from me! Don’t you get it? I had nothing! Not even her! Not Naz! I hate you! I hate you!”

“I’m used to people hating me,” I rasped. Deathly calm stole over me as I held out my knife. “Make your choice.”

“You can’t kill me.”

“Trust me, Tristian. You’re lucky I haven’t already.”

He charged me with his full body, slamming me into the wall, but I spun him around and kneed him in the balls. The smell of whiskey was faint on his breath as he swore and fell to his knees.

I swiped my knife across his chest; the blade went through his shirt, connecting with soft skin. All I saw was Eden’s face. All I heard were his physical threats against what was mine.

What had always been mine to protect.

Mine to love.

Tristian held his chest with both hands as blood started to ooze from the gaping wound over his heart.

“You’re weak,” I said through clenched teeth. “You were too weak to take what you think was yours because I led you to believe that! What’s worse is that I let myself believe that you were the better choice!” I sliced through the air distracting him. He covered his face, and I kicked him into the wall.

He slumped to the floor in a bloody heap. I pressed the heel of my shoe against his right hand. “At least I know my demons, every last one. While you? You pretended to be the white knight when you were the fucking monster the entire time.”

“Get off me!” he roared, trying to shove to his feet, but one arm was pinned while the other was held against his chest, trying to stop the bleeding.

“No.” I knelt down, pointing my knife at his hand. “One finger for daring to touch her in a way other than love.” I sliced down, cutting the tip of his finger clean off while he screamed in pain. “Another finger for betraying me. Your family. Your brother!” I sliced down on his middle finger while he squirmed beneath me. His eyes rolled to the back of his head.

I waited until he recovered and was staring at me, glassy-eyed but aware.

“And one more finger...for betraying yourself.” This time, when the knife came down, he looked at me, really looked at me, like he was seeing me for the first time.

Slowly, I saw the fight leave his eyes, replaced with a sickening fear that permeated the room.

He suddenly knew I would be the judge, the jury, and the executioner of his life.

His only brother.

The man he had once called his best friend.

“You’ll have to kill me,” he growled.

“I know,” I reaffirmed in a voice void of emotion. “Because if I don’t, the Russians will.”

Tears filled his eyes.

I shook my head in disgust. “You’ve been suffering in a pool of misplaced jealousy while you pushed the only person you’ve ever truly loved away.” The knife clattered to the floor. “I hope that the betrayal on her face, the fear, the sadness in mine... I hope that’s what you see when I take your last breath, and I hope to God you ask for forgiveness in this life before I send you to the next. Pray God is merciful because I won’t be.”

With a cry, Tristian shoved at me, but he was too weak. I slammed him back against the carpet, both of my hands around his neck, while he struggled against me.

His hands clawing at mine, scratching, dying for relief while I looked into his eyes and squeezed.

Harder.

Firmer.

I took his life with my bare hands.

For our family.

For Eden.

Especially for my son.

A solitary tear slid down my cheek, splashing onto his face. I couldn't help it, whispering, "Forgive me."

His eyes widened and then shut completely.

His feet stopped moving.

His body went lax.

No more struggle.

No more fight.

No more air that he breathed.

I held onto his throat for a few more minutes until I knew for sure that he was dead and wasn't coming back. I waited. Remembering all the times I had been there for him.

I had loved him.

I still loved him.

He was my brother.

My best friend.

And now, he was dead.

I stood, stumbling back. Realizing what I'd just done. I'd go to Hell for this if I wasn't already headed there before. It was worth it.

She was worth it.

So was my son.

The last thing I saw before leaving that room and calling for cleanup was the moisture clinging to my brother's face.

In his last moments, I wondered...

*Did he cry for himself?*

*What could have been?*

*Did he cry for us?*

*Did he cry for her?*

Or were those last tears selfish ones where his last thoughts were that while he rotted in Hell...

I'd be taking my Heaven.

Her.

Naz.

*Mine.*



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“I’m sorry that you had to make me the villain of your story in order to stay in the light and keep the onlookers in the dark. Paint me however you need to paint me so the guilt doesn’t feel so heavy. I am light as a feather!” —  
*Stephanie Bennett Henry*

*Romeo*

*Now*

She’d screamed at me.

I’d said I wanted her fight back.

I didn’t want it directed at me.

Now we were at a standstill. She said she knew, but she didn’t. Not really. She didn’t know the blood that was on my hands.

She didn’t know why.

She shoved herself away from me until her back was to the wall, her eyes wild. “You killed Tristian, didn’t you? Just admit it! Say it!”

I opened my mouth, shutting it before opening it again. Whispering, “Who

told you that?”

“Nobody! I saw it on my dad’s phone. So don’t try it, Casanova, don’t even think about seducing your way out of this or lying. I’m sick of your lies! Just for once in your life, give me the truth. I deserve the fucking truth!”

The truth meant I lost her.

The truth meant setting her free while burning myself alive.

It meant not seeing Naz again.

It meant walking out of her life when all I’d ever wanted was to be in it.

I would have taken anything.

Any crumb of attention I would feast on.

Instead, she wanted the truth, when all I ever wanted to do was lie to her, to keep her safe.

To keep his memory safe.

To create this illusion that everything was perfect when, in reality, it was all completely fucked.

“The truth,” I repeated.

“God, you can’t even do that for me, can you? You say you love me, you’ll protect me, you’ll keep me safe, and yet you can’t even trust me with your truth, you can’t even—”

“It was fast.” I locked eyes with her. “It was necessary.”

She gasped, throwing her hands over her mouth like she was afraid the sob would be too loud if she didn’t mask it with her fingertips.

I took a step toward her. “You want the truth still?”

Tears slid down her cheeks at her slow nod.

“Despite asking for Tristian’s forgiveness before he took his last breath, I liked it. I reveled in his death even though it pained me to have to kill him. He was my brother. I sacrificed you, Naz, myself... for him.”

She averted her eyes.

“Nope.” I was on her then, my hands jerking her fingers away from her mouth; I caged her against the wall, cupping her jaw with my hand. “You want the truth, you get all of it. Next time remember that.” I dropped my hand. “Look at me.”

She met my eyes. Her lower lip trembling. I just wanted to kiss it away, to take away the pain, to tell her that I had to no matter what.

Would it have changed things if I was honest in the beginning?

Probably not.

But there was something to be said about being honest in the end. Maybe that was why they called them happy endings. It wasn't that everything worked out perfectly. It was that when the story finally closed, you knew you had done everything you could to own up to your truth. And in the end, how could that not be happy? When you've said your peace, it was your only choice. Sadness and anger were for liars.

I was done being a liar. Being forced to lay it at her feet, a sacrifice I'd never come back from. I might as well slit my wrists and stab my own heart, watching myself bleed.

“My truth,” I rasped, “is that, no matter what, I will always fucking put you first. You and Naz. Even if it means I kill my brother.” I shook my head. “My truth? My truth is the night you came running to your father with Naz, I went out and looked for him. I found him at our dive bar with this woman I thought I recognized.”

“You knew he was cheating on me?”

“Not at first. But once I started doing some digging, I realized who she was married to. One thing led to another, and it took me a year to figure out the truth of his indiscretions.”

“What did he do?”

I nodded toward the couch. “You're going to want to sit down before I tell

you the rest.”

Her expression quickly turned to worry; she looked like she might pass out. I helped her toward the sofa, crouching down in front of her so I could stare into her eyes.

She was going to need all the support I could give her with what I was about to disclose.

“Romeo, you’re freaking me out. How bad was it?”

“Enough for me to kill him.”

Her eyes widened, and I kissed the inside of her wrist, wanting to feel her pulse against my lips before I ripped the ground out from under her.

“He was going to kill you for twenty-five million dollars.”

Her mouth dropped open, her face paled, and I never wanted to take away the hurt in her eyes more than I did in that moment.

“What...” she whispered all in one breath.

“He was cooking the books for Ivan Drozdov without our knowing. When I found out, it was just a domino effect. Tristian told him that he would kill you if he made him a made man and gave him twenty-five million dollars.”

“Wow. I saw the wire transfer. I guess now I know my worth.”

I grabbed her chin. “You’re worth all the money in the world.”

Her eyes lit up.

Hope.

I hadn’t seen it in so long.

“Ivan was using Tristian. Once Tristian killed you, Ivan was going to turn on him and save face to our family by telling us what he was capable of for a title and money.”

“He was sleeping with his wife?”

“Yeah. That’s what made Ivan turn on him.”

“I can’t believe this.” She shook her head. It was evident she was

overwhelmed, and I couldn't blame her. It was a lot to take in, and it was about to get much worse. "He was going to kill Naz for twenty-five million as well."

"Oh my God!" She shot straight up, I went with her. "You can't be serious?!"

"I'm so sorry, Eden. He only just decided that a few days ago, when he found out Naz was mine."

It was blow after blow that I was delivering, and I hated myself for it, but she needed to know the truth. I knew Eden, and she wouldn't stop until she got to the bottom of it. It was better for her to hear it from me, the man who'd actually killed him.

The force of my statement had her stumbling back, but I caught onto her waist.

"You know?" she muttered in a low tone.

I nodded.

"How long have you known?"

"Since I first met him. It's why I stayed away. I thought Tristian was a better example of a father. I never imagined he'd stoop that low."

"I don't know what to say..."

"I made a choice. I chose you. For the first time in my life, I chose you, Eden, and I won't apologize for that," I paused, wanting my words to truly sink in. We both know he wasn't himself anymore. The old Tristian died a long time ago; I just killed his shadow to prevent him from killing you or my son."

Eden swayed on her feet, her hands moving to my shoulders as she righted herself. But she was unable to hold her body up, and her knees crumpled. I held onto her waist harder.

I could do that for her.

“I killed him,” I repeated. “I killed him to save the only two people I’ve ever loved. And I’d do it again. To keep you safe, I’d burn the world, Red.”

I tightened my grip, catching her before she collapsed into a heap on the office floor, lifting her into my arms, sitting her on my lap instead while tears streamed down her face in rapid succession.

“Would it have mattered?”

I held her tight. “Would what have mattered?”

“Had you chosen me the first time, would we still be in this predicament? Would he still be dead?”

I hesitated. “I don’t know, Eden. All I know is what’s done is done, and we’re responsible for our own choices, our own mistakes. As humans, we’re compelled to own up to the good and the bad. In the end, I don’t think Tristian was able to do that, so he dug deeper and deeper until he couldn’t see his way out, and then he used the end to justify his present actions. He used his jealousy of me and love for you as a weapon.”

Her breathing had evened out as she laid her head against my chest.

“Does it make me a horrible person, then?”

“Does what?”

Her hands shook as she wrapped her arms around me and clung to me like her life depended on it. “That I feel safer in the arms of my husband’s killer? That I’ve always felt protected even when I couldn’t see you because I knew you wouldn’t let anything happen to us. That—” She sniffled. “That I kept your son from you for five years.”

My chest twisted with pain.

“It got harder and harder the older he got. His mannerisms, down to the way he narrows his eyes and stares to the side when he’s thinking really hard.” Eden pulled back, her eyes blurry. “I didn’t know what to do!”

“Eden—”

“You’d said you just wanted to fuck me, and I was marrying your brother. So many times, I told myself not to walk down that aisle, that we had something, that you were pushing me away. And then the more I thought about it, the more I realized that in your stupid head, you had no choice. You were convinced I was safer without you in my life when I’ve only ever been safe because you’re in it. I let Tristian raise him as his own because I was scared of what would happen if either of you found out the truth.”

I listened to every word she was sharing, eager to see where she was going with this. I’d often wondered why she never told me, especially at night, when I was alone in my cold penthouse, thinking about her and what could have been in my bed. It had become more difficult to be around Naz the older he got. I could see everything she was saying about him.

My son didn’t even realize it, but he was exactly like me.

“I was going to leave him,” she blurted out of nowhere. She grabbed her shirt and lifted it up to her cheek, wiping away the makeup.

It was only then that I noticed what she was hiding underneath it.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“Heroes are imaginary, but villains are real.” —*Best villain quotes*

*Romeo*

With the backs of my fingers, I skimmed the nasty bruise that was healing on her cheekbone.

“The last time I saw Tristian, he hit me. I followed him to his office that morning, and I saw him with that woman... with Ivan’s wife, I guess. He looked so happy. I don’t think I remember the last time he looked at me the way he was looking at her. It hurt. A lot.” She bowed her head; however, I held up her chin. Making her gaze at me.

“No more shame between us.”

She thought about it for a second. “I decided that day I was going to leave him. That I couldn’t stay with him just because I didn’t want to break up Naz’s family. This last week has opened my eyes to so much I didn’t see. Naz knew what his father had turned into, and it makes me feel like a horrible mother. How could I not protect our boy?”

“Loyalty is a powerful emotion, Red.”



“I was so blinded by my anger with Tristian blowing me off once I confronted him. He didn’t care about what I saw, what I felt; I didn’t know the man that was screaming at me. And I hadn’t for the last year.”

“What happened that night you went to your father’s house?”

Her eyes went wide again, almost like she was reliving it all over again. “He was drunk. He was upset I had dumped out all his liquor. Before I knew what was happening, there was a gun in his hand and over my heart.”

My head jerked back. If he wasn’t already dead, I’d kill him. Part of me wanted to bring him back to life just to kill him again.

“Eden, you should have told me.”

“I thought I was doing the right thing. I’d betrayed him, and I thought I deserved it. I wanted to tell you about Naz. I swear it. I was going to tell you after I left Tristian, but you ended up taking care of it. When I told him the truth about Naz, he lost it and attacked me. He left me on the floor in this office, beaten, scared... I never imagined that he wouldn’t ever come home again.”

“This was never his home. You were never his home. Neither was our son.”

“Our son. You say that so easily? You’re not upset with me?”

I shook my head. “No. I could have said something to you, but I once again chose my brother as the better man for you. I was wrong. If I could go back to that night I claimed you, I would have never left you. Please tell me you know that?”

“I do now.”

“From the first time I laid my eyes on our son, I knew he was mine. The way he looked at me, the way he smiled. The dimple. I expected Tristian to confront me about it, but he never did.” I cupped her face with my hands. “This life, it takes pieces of your soul away, and if you’re not careful, you

turn into someone you don't recognize anymore. Tristian wasn't meant for this life, and as much as I'm loathe to admit it, that's the reason I thought he was better. I imagined myself coming home to you only to have you resent everything I did and all the reasons I did it."

She glared at me through her tears. "That wasn't your call to make."

God, she was pretty. "I know that now."

"I still hate you." Her words held no punch. If anything, I almost took it as a compliment and, for some reason, found myself smiling as she locked eyes with me.

"I know."

"And I may have prayed your perfect hair would fall out or that you'd age horribly so that when I saw you again, my heart wouldn't skip in my chest, but I think even if all those things had happened, I would have still been drawn to you when I knew I shouldn't have been."

I tilted her chin toward me, joking, "I hate you too." Trying to lighten up the mood.

It was heavy.

I didn't want to see her tears any longer.

Be the reason she was sad.

Upset.

Heartbroken.

I wanted to be the man she deserved.

The father Naz needed.

I yearned to be with him.

My loves.

My whole world.

My family.

She smiled. "I know."

“I’m sorry for everything, Red.”

She looked down, then reached for my hands. I questioned if she saw blood there like I did despite the millions of times I’d cleaned them.

Did she see the souls I’d taken?

Did she know these very hands strangled the life out of the man that was out to kill her?

Did it matter?

It did.

It always did.

Because it was Eden.

And everything she thought mattered.

Slowly, she lifted my hands to her face, cupping her cheeks as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I missed this.”

“Can I ask you something?”

She tilted her head. “Maybe...”

“Did I hurt you? That night?”

“What night?”

“When I ruined both of our lives and tried to push you out of my heart, my soul. Did I hurt you?” I searched her eyes for any hint of emotion. Hating myself that I didn’t know at the time that I had selfishly fucked her, knowing I was losing her. I didn’t think at all to take my time to truly cherish the only woman I wanted to cherish.

To love.

To own.

For now and forever.

Her face flushed. “N-no. I mean, yes... at first it hurt, but I didn’t want to tell you, not when I finally had...” She averted her eyes. “Not when I finally had you. Not when I’d waited so long to taste your kiss. Feel your hands on

me. Your dick inside of me. That night at the bar when you became captain all those years ago and you left me with Tristian. It was you I wanted to take me home. It was you I wanted to start a relationship with. It's always been you. I've loved you my entire life, Romeo Sinacore. I knew what you were doing; I could see it in your eyes." She lifted her face and pinned my gaze with hers. "I think that's what hurt the most, how easily you gave me up. Gave me away."

These confessions were breaking my heart. I had to remind myself we were long past that, and she was in my arms. I made so many mistakes, and I was sure I wasn't done making them.

But for her.

For Eden.

My girl.

My Red.

The mother of my child.

I'd try to not fuck it up.

I waited too long for her.

This was always how we were meant to be.

Together.

No matter what life would throw at us.

"I survived six years off the way I felt when I was inside of you, Eden." My voice cracked as I slowly pushed her down against the couch, my body hovering over hers. "But somehow, in these last few minutes, I've forgotten the way my ex-best friend used to feel, I forgot the way you used to press up against me, and I think I need reminding of why it was so hard to push you away in the first place..."

Her body trembled beneath mine. "Because I'm addicted to a Casanova like you?"

“No... because I’m a sinner, stumbling, bleeding into the garden of Eden, it’s the only place I find my salvation... In you.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and I lowered my mouth, pressing a brief kiss against her lips. “I lied that night I took your virginity, and it was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my whole life.”

I spoke my final truth against her mouth, “I love you. I’ve always loved you, and I always will.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“See, madness, as you know is like gravity, all it takes is a little push.” —  
*Heath Ledger’s, The Joker*

*Eden*

It didn’t feel real, the words he said, the way his lips felt against mine. He finally said the words I’d been dying to hear my entire life.

I used to dream about this.

When things were bad, I’d imagine Romeo storming into our home, taking Naz and me away, telling me he was wrong.

That he’d been wrong.

I was his.

I had only ever been his.

We’d kiss.

And life wouldn’t hurt so much anymore.

I wouldn’t flinch in fear whenever Tristian gave me a condescending look of hatred for not being good enough. For not being what he needed.

Wanted.

Couldn't live without.

Romeo's eyes searched mine; he was asking a question without speaking.

I answered without even breathing as I pressed my mouth against his, parting my lips, inviting him in, welcoming him home.

To me.

To us.

We were finally one again, and there was no place I'd rather be than in this moment lost with him.

In him.

He was my everything.

This felt right.

It finally felt right.

*Us.*

I clung to the front of his shirt for dear life while he welcomed my kiss, his eyes completely focused on me. His heated gaze was almost to the point that I looked away.

I turned my head slightly, only to have him grip my jaw roughly with his fingertips and bring me back to his hypnotizing stare.

"You." Awe and determination washed over his face, almost as if a hunger began burning inside of him.

I needed Romeo like I needed my next breath.

My next beat of my heart.

My next...

My next...

My next...

I'd always needed him.

Wanted him.

Craved him obsessively.

I pondered in that moment how I'd actually survived this man until his calloused fingertips burned into my skin. His full lips parted.

I knew I was about to become fully lost in Romeo Sinacore, praying nobody would find me, or there'd be a way out.

With one last piercing look, he devoured my mouth; he stole my soul.

He put my heart back together.

We became reborn through the flick of his tongue.

Through the deepening of the kiss.

Thought his hands near my breasts.

Touching me.

Tugging at my shirt and bra.

Tossing them to the floor.

Leaving me topless and exposed.

Groaning, he trailed kiss after kiss down my jaw, my neck, until his lips rested in reverence against my chest. Could he hear how fast my heart was beating?

For him?

Always and only for him.

Over and over again in a cadence so violent that it was painful.

Overwhelming.

Mind-blowing.

He was barely touching my body, and I was already wet for him.

Swiftly, he slid me off his lap and picked me up, wrapping my legs around his waist. His purposeful steps took us down the hall, bumping into the walls as our tongues tangled with each other. Not able to get enough of one another. One hand gripped my hair and pulled while the other kept me pressed against his length.

His girth.



His cock.

The heat of his erection was almost my undoing, and I moved my body greedily up and down against the steel of him.

I needed him.

*Now.*

I couldn't wait, feeling as though I was already bursting for him

He chuckled against my mouth, stumbling into the bedroom while, like a woman possessed, I continued to move against him.

"So greedy," he laughed, gently laying me down on the bed.

I reached for him, only to have him pull away; his smirk was going to be my kryptonite. He slowly, provocatively undid the buttons of his shirt.

I nearly yelled when he hesitated at the last one, his eyes filled with humor that I wanted to strangle him for, prolonging what we both had been waiting for.

Eager.

Ready.

To get on with it.

My body tensed, thighs clenched as an almost painful throb pulsed between my legs.

With a whimper, I watched the shirt float to the floor. His hands moved to his belt and then the button on his slacks.

Our tongues tangled with one another as he flicked open the front of his trousers.

I couldn't keep my eyes off him.

He was beautiful.

Dangerous.

Wicked.

*Mine.*

All mine.

“Do you remember the night before your wedding?” His husky voice washed over me like worship.

Holy.

Everything.

“Do you?” he pressed.

I nodded, unable to look anywhere but his full lips, the dangerous gleam in his eyes. “Yes.”

“This time, I’m going to take you slow, Eden. I’m going to bury myself so far inside you that you see nothing but heaven. Every part of me was made for you. Owned by you. I’m going to make love to you for the first time in my life. It’s only ever been you, Red.” His pants fell to the floor, the rest of his clothes followed, discarded as he made his way onto the bed, the heat of his body nearly singeing me with each predatory movement. “Say my name.”

“Wh-what?”

“My name. I want it on your lips. I want it to be the only thing you scream when you nearly blackout from my dick. I need to hear it, I need it, Eden, I can’t—” Part of his control cracked when his mouth crashed into mine, only to pull back. “I can’t be without you. Not now. Not ever. I can’t—”

“Romeo,” I tasted his name on my lips; it was sweeter than any wine, any kiss.

Any moment in time.

We were poetry.

We were music lyrics.

We were a happily ever after, not a to be continued.

“I’ve only ever been yours. I just need you to keep me this time.”

His eyes flashed. “Never again, Eden. I’ll burn the entire world and send it to Hell before anyone else touches you. You’re fucking mine!”

A fierce expression of yearning crossed his face, his features as his erection bumped against my thighs.

I gripped him, needing to touch him, compelled by him. Waves of pleasure crashed over me as his eyes rolled to the back of his head.

This Casanova.

This man who dealt in seduction and secrets was succumbing.

Succumbing.

*To me.*

## CHAPTER FORTY

“Wisdom is the knowledge of good and evil, not the strength to choose between the two.”—*John Cheever*

*Eden*

His muscles flexed, jaw clenched. I stroked him up and down, loving the feeling of the velvety smooth skin, of how hard he was for me, how ready.

“Eden.” He shook his head. “I promised slow...”

“I don’t need slow.” I fused my mouth to his in a fast hard kiss and then pulled back. “Fuck me, Romeo.”

His eyes snapped open. “What?”

“Fuck me. Love me. Own me. Just take me before I grab the knife you always carry in your pants and slit your throat with it.”

His lips curled into a smug smile. “My girl just got violent.”

I gripped his ass with both hands. “Now.”

“Yes.” His hands tore at my leggings; before I knew what was happening, I was completely naked, my hot skin fusing to his as he took a nipple into his mouth and sucked.

Long.

Hard.

My hands fisted the sheets, his hand came down pressing me into the mattress. He continued to suck, his tongue swirling around my nipple, his body molded to mine.

Made for each other.

Soul mates.

Two people becoming one.

Tears rimmed in my eyes; my nerves stretched to their limit.

To the max.

I was feeling too much.

A frenzy took over; heat flooded my core.

His hands spread my thighs open, and then he was gone, his tongue sucking me off, fucking me with his mouth, showing me everything Tristian never did.

His fingers followed, massaging my swollen clit. He gripped my thighs again, his mouth never leaving as he draped my legs over his shoulders, jerking me down the bed.

I let out a scream, squeezing his head with my legs.

Hard.

Fast.

I couldn't control it.

He was barely down there for a minute until he had me screaming out his name.

Loud.

Proud.

Panting.

I orgasmed with his lips still around my clit. His fingers found that sweet

spot inside of my core.

And I fell apart.

Over and over.

Again and again.

I tried to stop him, I'd had enough, but he wasn't having it. He gripped onto my thighs and made me come all over again.

I was dizzy.

Dazed.

Happy.

Drunk on love.

On him.

One leg was brought down, and he was there, teasing my entrance, making me want to strangle him.

"Romeo," I said through clenched teeth.

"Just making sure you could still talk," he teased. "I'll know you're spent when you can't even scream my name anymore." He inched further into me, my mouth parted on a scream. "God, I hope your voice is hoarse tomorrow, so every time you say my name, I'm reminded that you spent half the night screaming it while I fucked you, claimed you. Made love to you."

"Romeo, I need you—"

He filled me to the hilt. I was so full I wanted to stay still, just lay there and feel our bodies pulse in sync with each other. He pulled out only to drive back in. I was already on the edge of falling, and I knew it was only a matter of time before he followed. He started a rhythm that had me very much screaming his name.

Moaning.

Groaning.

Scratching.

Thrusting.  
Harder and harder.  
Faster and faster.  
We came together.  
I finally announced to the world who owned me.  
Who would always own me.  
Romeo Sinacore.  
Assassin.  
Made man.  
Father of my boy.  
Most importantly...  
*Mine.*  
Finally, all damn mine.

Romeo

I'd spent the better part of my life using my body to gain secrets. While most made men had their weapon of choice, I used my brain and my cock, never once thinking twice about what I was doing, only focusing on one thing.

The information.

And keeping everyone I loved safe.

Suffice to say, the first time I'd had sex with Eden, it wasn't making love; it was angry fucking, it was hello, and at the end, it was a hellish goodbye that damn near broke me in half.

I'd thought I'd been given a taste back then, however small and angry, I'd

had her in my arms, I'd taken her virginity. I'd claimed her with my body even when my heart screamed for me to leave her alone.

"Romeo." Eden was stretched out beneath me, her red hair splayed out across the white sheets, her lips parted, sexy uncontrollable moans escaping past her swollen lips.

I'd caused that.

I moved again, realizing that for the first time in my fucking life, I was taking my time; I wasn't calculating how I was going to slit her throat when we were finished.

If anything, I wanted this moment to last forever.

The feel of her heat tightening around my dick, sucking me dry, had to be one of the best feelings in the universe.

I used to ignore the women I slept with.

With Eden, I couldn't help but want to remember every tiny little thing, the way her fingers dug into my back, the way she clawed, moaned, panted.

I gripped her leg and pulled completely out of her, only to sink back home.

"I don't want this to end," I whispered in reverence as we locked eyes. The world felt small then.

Only two people existed.

Me and her.

Our pleasure.

The joining of our bodies.

Minds.

Souls.

"Promise me." I clenched my teeth, trying to keep my orgasm at bay. "Promise."

A tear slid down Eden's' cheek, colliding with the silk sheets below her.



“Keep doing that, and I’ll promise you anything.”

I barked out a laugh that quickly turned into a growl when her heels dug behind me, pulling me against her so tight that I saw stars. “Promise me forever.”

Her back arched up off the bed; I took full advantage, jerking her against me as my hips moved wildly, in perfect sync with her lush body.

I took my pleasure and gave Eden hers.

“Forever.” She bit down on her lower lip then squeezed her eyes shut like it was too much, only to open them and say in a hoarse voice, “Forever in your arms. Forever in your life. Forever yours. I’ve never been anyone else’s.”

“Then let go.” Our foreheads touched. “And let me catch you.”

She screamed my name, and my hips rolled one last time. Both of us lost complete control.

Both of us marked each other.

This was the third, fourth, maybe fifth... fuck, I lost track of how many times I already made love to her this night.

I wasn’t done.

Nowhere near finished.

I was only getting started.

I planned to keep her in this bed for the rest of the week, making up for lost time, thrusting my seed so far into her that she’d give me another baby.

I wanted that more than anything.

This time we’d do it right.

Besides, Naz needed a sibling.

I shook my head, shoving the memories of Tristian out of my head.

“Don’t,” Eden ordered, reading my mind. “Don’t let him ruin us when we’ve just begun. He’s not worth it.”

“I loved him. He was my brother.”

“Who turned into your enemy.”

“That’s the hardest pill to swallow.”

I pressed a hungry kiss to her neck, my teeth grazing her soft skin like they wanted to bite down, mark her on the outside as well as the inside.

“I love you. I love you. I love you.” I meant it, kissing her deeply, our kiss slow, both of us still panting.

Eden smiled up at me, and it was like looking directly at Heaven, at the sun, at the beauty of the world.

I was lost.

And then found.

Broken but not forgotten.

A sinner.

She was a saint.

My angel.

The good to my bad.

Her eyes filled with tears. “Romeo, do you love me?”

“I’ll say it until you believe it, and then I’ll say it again and again, so you feel it. I love you. You’re mine, Eden. Mine.” I stared deep into her eyes.

“And all I’ve ever wanted... was to be yours too.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“I love the way your foul little mind works.”—*Jafar*

*Romeo*

*Now: Six months later...*

“I hate school.” Naz had been repeating that same mantra all through dinner, though strangely enough, he’d always loved school. And now he was repeating it after brushing his teeth, mumbling it under his breath while he got on his Batman PJs.

Frowning, I went into the bedroom I shared with Eden.

*Ours.*

Home.

We’d moved out of her old house soon after we came together. I sold my penthouse and decided to buy a house outside the city.

Years ago, I would have said the quiet suburbs were my worst nightmare.

Now, I found that I preferred the quiet; I preferred this family, this family that was real, which was mine.

Eden was in the bathroom, wearing black silk shorts and a tank that left little to the imagination when she wasn't wearing the short silk bathrobe around her little body.

*My body.*

"Is he still saying he hates school?" She rubbed some moisturizer around her gorgeous face; her worried eyes met mine through the mirror.

I tugged her back against me.

The three-karat princess cut diamond shimmered on her left hand as she grabbed my arms and laid her head back against my shoulder, leaning into me, relying on me.

I would never get tired of it.

The way she looked at me as if I wasn't a killer, but someone who did whatever it took to keep her and my son safe.

Protected.

Content.

Happy.

I was still an assassin for the family; I just didn't sleep with women anymore to gain intel.

"Yeah." I kissed the top of her head. "He'll talk about it when he's ready. You know how he gets."

She snorted. "Yeah, he takes after someone else I know in talking to himself and kicking the ground until he's worked through a problem."

I smirked. "Wow, this person must be a great role model."

"Yes, that's exactly what I think when he wipes blood off the blade of his knife or cleans one of his many guns."

I smacked her on the ass, earning a yelp, and then she turned in my arms, and her mouth eagerly found mine.

*Damn, I was ready for her.*

So hard that I forgot our son was in the next room until “Ewwww gross!” sounded from behind us both.

We slowly broke apart. Eden’s cheeks were red; I just winked and said, “And that’s how babies are made.”

Eden smacked me in the stomach.

Naz shook his head. “Babies poop themselves.” He crossed his arms. “Did you know that if you wake up a sleeping bat, it dies?”

See? He loved school. It didn’t make sense.

“Come here, little man.” I picked him up and carried him to our bed while Eden followed.

I placed him between us and cocked my head to the side. “I’m worried. Can you help me out with something?”

His eyes went wide. “I don’t want you to be worried.”

“Okay then, so you can help?”

He gave me a firm nod. His inky black hair was getting long. I threatened to cut it, Eden threatened to cut me off. It was near his shoulders.

My cock was just as obsessed with her as I was.

“You came home kind of upset today, and I can tell something’s on your mind. I think if you talk about it, you might feel better... It’s making me worried that there might be a bully at school I need to go take care of.”

His lips pressed together before he let out a very dramatic sigh. “It was Dad’s Day at school.”

My heart stopped in my chest. “And that made you hate school?”

Tears filled Eden’s eyes as she watched our conversation; I knew it was killing her not to fix it, not to pull him into her arms and cuddle him.

“Well, my dad did bad things, sometimes he hurt Mom, and then he died, and I don’t have a dad, and Jude said that I only had a mama, and then he asked me if I was going to cry.”

I was killing Jude later.

Rage coursed through me.

“Hey!” Naz glanced up at me with the brightest smile I’d ever seen. “I know how to fix it!”

With guns and bloodshed? I was in. Fuck, I wasn’t going to survive if the little man decided to do sports; I would one hundred percent be the parent who got kicked out of the stands.

“How?” I kept my voice calm when I was anything but. How dare anyone threaten my child.

My blood.

I was going to murder the little shit, and I didn’t feel bad about it.

“Well, I mean, if it’s okay with you... Can you maybe be my daddy now? I know I call you Uncle Romeo, but you’re marrying Mama, which means you’re kind of marrying me, right? So maybe—”

I crushed him into my chest with shaking hands while tears streamed down Eden’s cheeks. We’d decided to tell him I was his real dad before the wedding, but the timing just never seemed right.

“You’re my son,” I whispered into his ear. “You’ve always been more than a nephew to me, Naz; I’m just sorry I never told you. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Honey.” Eden rubbed his back. “Before your dad—”

“Before your dad,” I interrupted, “your mommy and I were very much in love, but I was stupid and afraid, and I said some not nice things.”

“He had some growing up to do,” Eden chimed in with a smile.

I laughed. “Yeah, a lot of growing up. And I thought I lost your mama when she married your daddy, but our love was so big and so bright, that we created you, only I didn’t know right away, and when I did find out, you

already had a daddy, it didn't feel right to take that from him."

Naz narrowed his eyes. "I think I understand." He frowned. "So, you're my daddy now?"

He was too young to get it.

But the words had needed to be said.

I pulled him into my lap and kissed his head. "I'll be your daddy forever."

He turned in my lap and threw his skinny arms around my neck, burying his face against me. "I can't wait to tell Jude tomorrow. Hey, can you come to school and drop me off?"

"Of course."

"Yay!" He did a little fist pump. "Oops! Gotta go pee."

And then he was gone.

Eden cleared her throat. "No weapons."

"I wasn't going to—"

"You were literally plotting poor little Jude's death in your head; I saw the tense look on your face. He's six..."

"Still." My jaw clenched. "Little shit for brains isn't even good enough to be my son's friend. I would never hurt a child, but trip one by accident? Tie his shoes together? Teach Naz how to take his enemies down one by one by plucking them from—"

"Mama! Daddy!" Naz came blazing back into the room. "I forgive Jude. It's not his fault he's mean. I'm just gonna tell him that it hurt my feelings."

Damn it. Save me from a son who has more self-control and kindness in his heart than his mom and me combined.

"Good idea, buddy." Eden ruffled his head. "Now, off to bed; I'll be right in to say goodnight."

He skipped off.

And once he was gone, I murmured, "At least let me glare at him..."

“Deal.” She burst out laughing and turned, pressing a kiss to my forehead.  
“Once a made man, always a made man.”

“Hey, this made man keeps you safe. Keeps his family safe.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “He does.”

“Mammmmmmma!” Naz yelled.

“Hurry and kiss him goodnight so I can kiss you everywhere.” I grinned.  
She laughed, sliding her hand down the front of my pants.

I was instantly hard.

She gave a throaty laugh. “Neat trick.”

“I have many tricks. Now hurry before I embarrass myself.”

“I love you, Romeo Casanova.”

“Love you too, Red.”

“Forever.”

“Forever,” I repeated.

My everything was in this house.

My world.

My future.

My son.

And soon-to-be... my wife.



# EPILOGUE

“The West? Oh honey, I’m the wicked witch of everything.” —*The Wicked Witch of Oz*

*Romeo*

Now: Eight months later

“Oh God, right there...” Eden nearly came off the bed as I thrust into her, she scratched up my back, and I moved her to a sitting position to let her ride.

I preferred being the one in control, but I could allow it this time.

It was our honeymoon.

Plus, watching her tits bounce in front of my face was a great way to start my day.

“So good,” I rasped, her breasts slapped against my skin, her core so full of me that it was nearly painful. “Harder.”

“I’m so close!” she panted.

Bouncing up and down.

Rotating her hips back and forth.

I dug my fingers into her ass, making her ride me hard and faster.

More demanding.

See, I still had to be in control.

“Take me, take everything.” I gripped her hips and set her at a wilder pace; her jaw went slack, clamping down around me.

It had been like this before.

And after.

And now that we were married, it seemed like all she wanted was sex.

I never used a condom, and she still wasn't pregnant. All the more reason to practice.

I came deep inside of her, and she fell onto my chest.

“You've been really horny lately,” I commented when she relaxed against me.

“About that...” Her eyes met mine. “I may be a little bit pregnant.”

“Red, you're either all the way pregnant or not pregnant at all. That's like saying, it's not sex when only the tip goes in.”

“Worst example ever,” she grumbled, leaning her forehead on mine. “And I am pregnant.”

“You're lying.”

“Why would I lie?”

“To make me happy.”

“I make you happy without lying to you, Romeo Sinacore.”

“Well then, you're fucking with me, Eden Sinacore.”

“I would never.”

“Prove it.”

She smirked.

I flipped her over, hovering above. Kissing her belly, I put my ear to her stomach. “I don't hear her.”

“Her?”

“Yes. I don’t hear our baby girl.”

“How do you know it’s a girl?”

“Because I know these things. I kill people for a living.”

“Bad people. You kill bad people for a living.”

“Same difference.”

“Actually, it’s really different.”

“Hello,” I crooned to her stomach. “Little Red, are you in there?”

My eyes locked with hers. Eden’s filled with fresh tears. “You’re going to make me cry.”

“Fuck, maybe you are pregnant.”

“There is no maybe. I am.”

I narrowed my eyes at her.

She reached into the nightstand, pulling out what appeared to be a positive pregnancy test.

“Here is your proof.”

Joy burst in my chest, an emotion I was unfamiliar with up until the last year when Eden and Naz became mine. “Am I the lucky bastard that gets a horny pregnant woman for the next nine months?”

She smiled.

Big.

Bright.

Beaming.

“I’m going to use your dick like my own personal vibrator for the next few months.”

“Wow,” I laughed. “I feel oddly used.”

“You’ll make it.” She patted me on the shoulder just as a knock sounded at our door. “That’s probably Juliet with Naz.”

We hadn't been able to bear leaving Naz home for our honeymoon, and I didn't trust anyone else to protect him. I decided to take him with us, bringing my sister along to help us have some privacy. It was a free vacation for her, and Naz loved his aunt Juliet.

They had a special relationship, those two.

Deliberately, we separated ourselves from one another. Eden quickly put on one of the plush white robes and threw on a pair of gym shorts before I walked to the door, opening it wide for Juliet and Naz to come in.

My sister had that look on her face that said she was trying not to be embarrassed that I'd been balls deep in my wife and loud enough for the entire penthouse suite to hear about it.

"How was the beach?" I asked in a calm voice while she stepped in.

"It was fine. He missed you guys, though."

I picked him up and swung him around. "How about you take a quick bath, and we go to dinner?"

"Yay!"

I shot my sister a wink and took care of my son.

Later, we all went to dinner. Juliet took Naz down to the beach to give Eden and me a little more privacy.

"I don't want to go home." Eden pouted from across the table. "I love it here in Tahiti."

"I'll bring you back. Next time with our baby girl and son."

"You're just dead set that I'm carrying a girl, huh?"

"I know these things. It's what makes me good at what I do."

"And what's that?"

"Fucking you senseless."

She rolled her eyes.

"Eden..." I warned. Her sass didn't always have the best timing. I wanted

to bury dick inside of her like I wanted to slap her ass for being a bad girl.

She giggled, and it was still the sweetest sound I ever heard. "I love you."

"I know. I'm a lovable kind of man."

"How modest of you."

"I only speak truths." Hooking one hand around the back of her neck, I tugged her toward me. "And I love you more."

She grinned against my mouth, and hers parted as my tongue slid past her lips.

Our moment was cut short when we heard Naz yelling, "DADDY!"

I instantly turned in his direction, my hand already on my Glock. Panic took over every last bone in my body. I tensed up, watching him haul ass into my arms.

"Naz," I breathed out once he was wrapped around me so tightly.

"Daddy!" he cried with uncontrollable tears sliding down his fear-stricken face.

"What happened?"

I peered up, searching for my sister. All the blood drained from my face when I didn't see her running after him. She never let him out of her sight. It was the reason I trusted her more than I did a nanny.

It was in our Sinacore blood.

I didn't have to hear him answer; I knew.

I already fucking knew.

"Daddy, I'm sorry. Aunt Juliet told me to run."

I would forever remember his next words...

"They took her, Daddy! The bad men took her!"

*The End*

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