

Love is the biggest gamble of all...

MR. BIG

A
Mobsters
of
Vegas
Novella



BELLA DI CORTE

Mr. Big

MOBSTERS OF VEGAS

BOOK ONE

BELLA DI CORTE

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You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you.

SONG OF SOLOMON 4:7

Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.

SENECA

I love her and that's the beginning and end of everything.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

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Foreword

Dear Reader,

I always try to write these letters as soon as the book is done. In doing so, I hope to capture the euphoria the book made me feel while it's warm and preserve it.

Tullio and Leonora brought the euphoria and, even without me writing this letter, I'll always think of them, ready to rush back to their story.

Mr. Big is the beginning of a new series, *Mobsters of Vegas*, that I'm planning for 2024. This book gave me a glimpse into the future. *Mobsters of Vegas* is going to be so different from anything else I've written.

The setting. The players. The mood of it all.

I can't wait to dive into this world even deeper.

And Mr. Big and Leonora?

I can't wait to visit with them again in the future through the rest of this series. They make me excited about what's to come, and I hope you feel the same after you get to know Mr. Big and his Aphrodite!

Also, when this book was included in the *Vows and Vendettas* anthology, it was a short story. I've extended the story and it's now considered a full-length book, even though we all know this book for *me* is a short story!

Much love,

Bella

P.S. The title of the second book in the *Mobsters of Vegas* series can be found in Chapter 15. If you remember Buggy, Corrado's cousin in *Mercenary*, this will be his story! You'll also find out who *she* is in the extension.

CHAPTER 1

Leonora

THERE ARE SO many ways to die. And like everything else in life, each one is subjective.

Take, for instance...drowning. I'd heard once that it's a peaceful way to go, beautiful even, but for me, it would be hellish. I'm a fan of water, but with me watching it while I hold a cold drink in my hand. Not while it floods my lungs.

Or take, for instance, what was going on in the club I worked at in Vegas called Dynamic. A guy wielding a gun in one hand and a machete in the other came in demanding his money back. Money he'd spent the night before watching the show.

Was it strange?

Yeah.

Was it unexpected?

Nah.

But I could probably think of better and more peaceful ways to die. Like Jack had told Rose in *Titanic*...in her warm bed when she had lived her life.

What a way to go, right?

I wasn't sure why water imagery kept coming to me. Maybe because the girls were all arguing about Jack and the wooden raft earlier.

Could Rose have scooted over some?

In my humble opinion, all guys deserved to take the freezing dip, so...

Splash, mofos. Hope you all can swim.

All the peaceful imagery wasn't going to help me, though. I was probably going to end up in two parts, my head rolling away from my body, picking up

MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*—Francine, one of the girls, was studying to be a nurse and gave us all lectures on medical stuff) on these filthy floors for good measure.

The madman pointed the gun at Roxy, who was fairly new and the youngest. I stood in front of her and kept my hands up. “Calm down. Give us a chance to get your money.”

One thing about Dynamic—we tried to take care of each other. We outnumbered Vinny, the owner, and his security guard, Sam, but they were still the powers that be. We had to group together to make a shield in this place, even if Vinny and Sam were halfway decent.

Thinking of Vinny and Sam...where the fuck were they?

The guy moved the gun and machete with me as I moved toward the register. Underneath the counter was a panic button, but it went straight to Vinny’s office instead of the police department. He was frigging cheap and didn’t want to pay the subscription fee. I hoped he was in his office.

I set my finger on the scan thing—the highest-tech thing we had at Dynamic—and waited for it to read my fingerprints so the register would open. At the same time, I hit the panic button underneath the counter. That, however, was old as fuck, with wires sticking out of it. An electrical jolt flashed through my body. It felt like my veins had just gotten fried and my hair was standing on end. There was no doubt that I visibly vibrated.

“What the fuck are you doing?” the madman shouted. “No tricks! Give me my money. Now!” He shoved the gun toward me, but my body refused to move.

“All right!” Roxy screamed. “She’s getting it. It takes a second for the register to open. It reads our fingerprints!” The register opened and Roxy reached in to grab his money. “How much?”

My senses were starting to return, and even though she was young, Roxy was keeping her shit together. I wouldn’t have asked him how much, though. I would have just moved aside and let him take it all.

“Twenty-nine fifty.” He quoted the exact amount for the cover charge. “I had five beers. Oh, and my gas to get to this crappy joint! It was much better back in the day when it was the Hen House. Just make it a hundred and we’ll call it even.”

Roxy went to grab a hundred when Vinny showed up.

“What the fuck? That’s my money!” He went to charge the madman.

The madman threw the gun but swung the machete.

I watched as Vinny's little finger disconnected and rolled along the floor, his pinky ring glinting underneath the lights.

"I didn't want to do it, man!" the madman shouted. The blade of the machete was streaked with Vinny's blood. "I just wanted my money back! I deserved it. You're running a real *shit* show here."

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Roxy making her way toward the gun. I was going to tell her to stop, to stay out of it, or just grab her by the wrist, but I wasn't fast enough.

The madman caught her and set the machete against her neck. "I just wanted my money back! Why is this so hard to understand?"

"I—" She was so flustered that she couldn't get the rest of whatever she was going to say out.

I was trying to judge the distance between the gun and them, but I couldn't make it. And Vinny was no help. He was leaning against the wall, keeping his hand up, visibly ringing wet with sweat. His beady eyes were almost closed, but he was biting his lip in a pissed way. But I wasn't sure if he was mad about the money or his finger. It was hard to tell with him. He could recoup the digit, but not the bill.

The madman slid the machete underneath Roxy's throat, and I tried to firm my resolve—I was going to tackle him. But he was fast about it and only got Vinny's blood on her before he turned to the register and started taking fistfuls of money, stuffing them in his pocket. I guess for all his trouble he decided to add on some bills.

Vinny growled at him, but he wasn't getting close to him again. The madman would probably swing higher this time and slice his wrist straight off, the one with the old-ass Rolex.

"Next time—" the madman started, but then his eyes rolled up.

Sam had entered the scene and flung a sharp stiletto at his head. He hit him in the center of it, like a bullseye, and the madman crumpled to the floor. Sam kicked him a bit, like he was making sure he wasn't going to pull something else, then bent over and started to collect the stolen cash.

Vinny nodded at me and then to the floor. I sighed and forced myself to move. I grabbed a napkin and a glass with half-melted ice from the tray Roxy had left on the counter. I used the napkin to grab Vinny's finger from the floor. I stuck it in the glass of ice to preserve it. Maybe the dregs of whiskey left would help sterilize it.

I handed the glass to Sam, who told one of the girls to escort Vinny to the

emergency room. I guess he was going to stay behind to deal with the madman on the floor. I shook my head, wrapping my arm around Roxy's shoulder.

I was only twenty-eight, but I couldn't help thinking, *I'm getting too old for this shit.*

CHAPTER 2

Leonora

IT WAS ONLY seven in the morning, but the sun was already burning through my windshield. The AC in my car was wimpy, and the air barely felt cool.

My mouth was parched, and my skin felt dry.

On the inside, it felt like I had hundreds of cracks, and they were only growing deeper. I wondered if the lines would make it to the outside one day, and I would start looking like an old painting. All the cracks gave for everyone to see and interpret however they like.

I set my forehead against the steering wheel and wrapped my arms around it. I took a deep breath of hot air and let it flow out.

I really didn't want to go in—my own apartment—but that wouldn't be fair to everyone inside.

Everyone inside consisted of my mom, who was a recovering addict, and my two younger half-brothers, who were awarded to me by the state after my dad ended up in the penitentiary. My dad had been “raising” them, and their mom wasn't in the picture.

It wasn't something I planned on doing at twenty—raising two children who were a product of an affair my dad had—but I couldn't see them in foster care. Life was tough enough without having to wonder if there would ever be anyone out there who loved you and would fight to see you safe.

That was how I felt. Like I'd been fighting all my life.

Fighting for my mom—hoping and praying she'd wake up whenever she closed her eyes.

Fighting for my brothers—it wasn't easy raising two teenage boys. It was

like they made things hard on purpose to see how far they could push me before I gave in and gave them up. They felt they weren't worth loving because their parents didn't care enough to keep them. They were waiting for me to do the same, proving they were right.

Lately, though, it was a bunch of small things. Things like...

...I'd make myself something to eat. A fly or bug would land on it.

...I'd drop the last bag of chips after eating only one or two.

...a piece of my crappy car would have to be replaced when I'd finally saved up a little extra cash to put aside for a rainy day.

On the surface, they were small things, but like nicks in the windshield of life, I could feel them growing deeper, heading straight for my sanity.

Not to mention, I knew how a man's severed finger felt in a napkin. That was something I could go my entire life without knowing.

I shuddered at the thought, and how hot it was getting, and turned off my car. It took a second for the motor to grow quiet. I didn't even want to know why. Sometimes I felt like, if I thought about it too hard, it would break.

Years ago, when I'd reached my limit of stress, I'd stupidly shouted at the universe, *what else can go wrong?*

Big mistake. *Huge* mistake.

The universe took it as a challenge and started throwing stuff at me left and right. And I noticed if I thought on something too long and too hard—like why my car took a minute to shut off—it would go for it.

That was the last thing I needed.

Even though my mom put in for rent and groceries, my brothers got money from the state, and I tried to work as much as humanly possible, we were barely staying afloat.

I released a breath when the car finally quieted.

My mom was sitting on the steps to the apartment when I reached the second floor. She was smoking, her eyes far off in the distance.

Once upon a time, Linda Davies was a striking woman. I could still see glimpses of the mom I used to know, even though she went away when I was seven, mentally and emotionally checking out because of drinking and drugs. For her age, she had deep lines that belonged to a woman much older. She'd lost her teeth and had dentures.

She was a shrunken version of herself, and even more shrunken was her capability to live a normal life. She was even more mentally and emotionally unavailable to me than she was before. She was still on drugs, but her doctors

prescribed them for her. Mostly pills.

I stopped on the step below her and called her name. I had to call her twice more before she focused on me.

“When did you get home?”

No *Hi, Leonora. How was work?* No patting the spot next to her and telling me to sit after I’d been on my feet all night. It was always, *When did you get home?* followed by some need.

I adjusted my bag on my shoulder. “Just now.”

She blew out a cloud of smoke. “I need more cigarettes. More bread and deli meats too.”

It was Sunday. I always went grocery shopping for the week on Sunday. I’d take a nap and then go. Hopefully one of the boys would go with me. Mom barely left the apartment.

I always thought that was the root of her problems. The world was too ugly a place for her. Sometimes when I’d tell her she needed to do things, like go to the store or to the doctor, she’d flinch. Her safe place was in her room, and her limit to the outside world was the steps she was sitting on.

She was abused as a child—she’d told me that much—and it seemed like she’d buried it deep. After she had me, and my dad did all the things he did, it seemed like all her issues came to the surface.

She’d told me more than once that I was the cause of her habit. After she’d had me, and the hospital gave her pain meds, she realized how far away drugs could take her from this cruel life. After my dad bailed on us, it only grew worse.

Her cracks became mine, but I never had much time to dwell on them because I was always trying to seal hers.

It was a tough emotional pill to swallow, though, whenever I thought about her blaming me for becoming hooked on drugs. I knew it was untrue, I was only a baby, but it still stung.

Phoenix, my youngest brother, was lounging on the couch when I walked in. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, his hair was a mess, and he looked half asleep. A bowl of cereal and a gallon of milk were on the table.

“Hey, Phoenix.”

“Hey, Big Sis.” He glanced at the TV. “Good timing. The best cartoons are on now.”

I set my bag next to the couch and sat on the arm of it. “Did you finish your project for school?”

He shrugged, his scrawny shoulders reminding me of a bird's. "I did, but I'm not sure how good it turned out."

"I'll check it out. See if I can help you."

He nodded, laughing at the cartoon on the TV. He was fourteen but still liked watching them.

"Where's Angelo?" Angelo was the oldest at sixteen.

Phoenix nodded toward the room they shared. "In the room, but..."

I didn't like the way that *but* sounded. "But what?"

"See for yourself." He sighed.

I gave the door a loud knock before I let myself inside. Angelo was in the bed, his back facing me, and I could see his tan skin was dripping with sweat.

The apartment was somewhat stuffy, but it felt much better than it did outside. I set my hand on his head, expecting him to be burning up, but his skin was clammy.

He tried to bat my hand away but cried out instead.

"What's going on, Angelo? Tell me. Now."

"Nothing," he barely got out. His voice sounded pained, like it took everything inside of him to get the one word out.

I looked at Phoenix, who was standing inside the doorway.

"His arm is broken."

Phoenix and Angelo were total opposites. Angelo would go down for a secret. Phoenix would tell it because he just didn't care that much to keep it. Angelo was more like our dad, and I could see his traits developing more and more every day in him. It worried me.

Not that I wanted Phoenix to be a snitch, but if it meant keeping Angelo in line and out of trouble, I was glad Phoenix would tell me things.

"How did he break his arm?"

"Fell off my bike," Angelo breathed out. He shot Phoenix a death glare.

"Why didn't you tell Linda?"

"Leonora..." Phoenix gave me a *duh* look.

Duh, because Linda was probably passed out by the time Angelo had snuck out. And she wouldn't have done anything anyway. She was indifferent to them to the point where they almost didn't exist to her. They were only there when they ate the last of whatever was in the cabinets.

"That still doesn't explain why you were out past curfew." I looked down at Angelo.

Two tears slipped down his cheeks, and he let me run my fingers through

his saturated hair.

“Get up.” I helped him to a sitting position. “You need to go to the ER.”

“They might think you’re unfit.”

“Kids break bones all the time.” I kept my voice even, even though the thought made me a little nervous too. I worked nights, and Linda wasn’t exactly present. It didn’t matter, though. I’d do whatever needed to be done. I’d also get the true story out of Phoenix once we got there. I knew Angelo was lying to me. But I wanted to get him out of pain.

Phoenix rushed to get dressed, telling us he’d meet us in the car. Angelo moved away from me when we started to make it down the steps. He didn’t want me to help him.

I sighed as we moved around my mom. She didn’t even ask me where we were going. It was hard for me to blame her, since they were the living proof of my father’s infidelity, but I still felt bad the situation was what it was.

Our dad was at the root of this, and sometimes I wished I could pummel him.

Angelo took the passenger side. I started the car, turning the air conditioning on, trying to cool it off. He was sweating as bad as Vinny was the night before.

Phoenix jumped into the back seat and I took off.

“What’s that noise?” Phoenix asked after a minute. He sniffed the air. “And what’s that smell?”

Angelo scrunched up his nose at it when Phoenix brought it up.

I’d smelled it too, but I’d been ignoring it. It smelled like a chemical was burning off. Like when water boils out of a pot and the bottom’s about to start melting.

“Damn, Leonora.” Phoenix waved a hand in front of his face. “It’s fuck—hotter than the devil’s balls in here. Do you have the heater on?”

No, I didn’t. The AC must have crapped out.

It was official. I was in hell. And it wasn’t even summer yet.

CHAPTER 3

Leonora

NO SURPRISE, Angelo's arm was broken. And it didn't happen on his bike, though that was the story he fed to the medical staff. He also told them I took him as soon as it happened, which made me feel like a horrible... everything.

Sister, legal guardian, person.

I was trying my best, but my best didn't ever seem good enough.

Especially after Phoenix told me what had happened. Angelo decided to get a job working as an errand boy for a man named Jerry Rispoli. It was no great mystery he was connected to the mob. I had no clue to who, but I was going to find out.

What kind of heartless bastard breaks a kid's arm? And because he was late?

That was my fault too. I'd been late for work, and Angelo didn't want me to know he was going out. He knew I'd lose my shit if I ever found out he was working for the underground scene around here.

He was so much like our dad, even though he hadn't been around him that much. It was scary.

I rubbed my head against his hospital door. I had no clue what to do about all of this. My first instinct was to call my mom, but she was no help.

They were going to admit Angelo because the break needed surgery.

What kind of sister/parent was I to allow this to happen?

Phoenix squeezed my shoulder. "Don't be so hard on yourself. The reason he did it was to help with money. We hate to see you struggling."

Turning my head a fraction, I met his eyes.

“Don’t give up on us, Leonora. You’re all we have.” He squeezed my hand and walked into Angelo’s room.

I sighed, not really knowing where to place his kind words. I rarely heard them, but I stuffed them away for later.

Help was really needed, though. Angelo needed things boys need in the hospital. New pajamas, stuff to read, a toothbrush. I also needed to go to work in a few hours. Not only because of the money, but because I was going to drill Vinny until he gave up who Jerry Rispoli worked for. Vinny wasn’t connected, per se, but he knew everything and everyone. He was a weasel of the underworld.

My cellphone pinged, and I pulled it out.

It was Georgia, or as Vinny called her, George. He always turned our names into male ones. He said it was safer if we didn’t use our real names, and it would help him remember if they were close to the original.

Georgia became George. Leonora became Leo. Roxy became Robby. Francine became Frankie. The new girl, Raquel, became Rocky, though it seemed like that was her nickname anyway. Etc.

Georgia and I started working for Vinny at the same time. I was seventeen and so was she. So...about eleven years ago. We worked our way up to management, even in a dive like Dynamic.

A year ago, Georgia met and married a connected man, Joe Fedele. She told me he paid the bills, gave her extra cash, and left her alone most of the time. It was a good match for her.

“I can hear you breathing heavy on the other side of the line.” Her southern drawl was heavy, and it made her sound sweet. Which she was, unless she was crossed. “Panic or exercising? Since your metabolism is a racehorse, I’m betting on the first.”

The timing of her call was too perfect. I looked around, even though I knew the rat wasn’t going to be wearing a neon sign. Someone must have called Francine, the nurse in making, and told her. I was still wearing my Dynamic T-shirt and cut-off shorts.

“Francine told you?”

“Yeah. Thought you could use a little Georgia love. Why didn’t you call me?”

“I could use a lot of it. And I didn’t want to bother you.”

“What’s going on, Leo?”

I told her.

She ticked her mouth. “That’s the devil. He’s knocking things out of your hands on purpose to get you down to hell. That’s what mamma used to say when life started to get extra hard. He’s coming after you because good things are on the horizon. You’re looking up too much for his liking.”

A laugh exploded out of my mouth. “I don’t know about all that.”

“Uh huh. I do. But while you’re doubting my words of wisdom, I’m going to run to the store. I’ll get everything Angelo needs. I’ll come sit with him for as long as you need me to. What size does he wear?”

“You’re an angel.” I told her his size, then switched gears. “Do you think Joe can find out who Rispoli works for?”

“Let it go, Leo. You don’t want that kind of trouble. You’re lucky it wasn’t worse, understand?”

I did. Angelo could have been broken in half. It made a cold sweat break out over my body. But I had to know who Jerry Rispoli was working for. I also needed to know how deep Angelo had gotten himself in. Phoenix had said it was only his second time working for him. But Phoenix was a better liar than Angelo. I was glad he rarely lied, unlike Angelo, who was a habitual fibber. Because I’d always have to dig for the truth.

The entire situation made me feel uneasy.

“Go sit with Angelo for a while, Leo. Put your feet up. I’ll be there soon.” Georgia hung up, and I did what she’d said. I spent some time with the boys until she got there, carrying multiple bags like she was a fairy godmother.

“Sweet!” Phoenix jumped up, reaching for the bags. “Almost as sweet as you.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her and then kissed her on the cheek.

She laughed, pinching his cheeks. Then she patted Angelo’s leg. “Auntie Georgia to the rescue! Do you mind if I hang out with you and Phoenix for a while?”

“I don’t need anyone.” His voice cracked, and his tan cheeks burned like they were on fire.

“Of course you don’t.” She took a seat. “But Joe is gone, and I don’t want to be alone in that big ol’ house.” She looked at me. “What are you still doing here?”

“I’m going.” I lifted my hands. I looked at Angelo. “I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Is that when...they’re taking me to surgery?”

“I’ll be back before then.”

“Okay,” he whispered.

It broke my heart to leave him, but Vinny wouldn't pay me if I didn't work. And even though Georgia had told me to let the issue with Jerry Rispoli go, I couldn't.

What if he came for Angelo again?

Linda was making herself a microwave dinner when I got home. She didn't say anything to me when I passed her. My stuff was in the room she claimed as hers, and I grabbed a shower, some clean work clothes, and a fifteen-minute nap on the couch before I headed back to Dynamic.

Halfway there, my phone rang. I knew by the ringtone who it was. I answered and put him on speaker. "Yes, Vinny."

"Why do you always sound disappointed when you answer?"

"I'm too tired for lies, so I'm going to keep quiet. By the way, how's the finger?"

"Attached." He said something to Sam in the background, then put his mouth close to the receiver again. "You on your way to the club?"

"Where else?"

He grunted. "Stop and get us both drinks from that coffee place—you know the one. We want that special drink all the girls have been liking."

I almost laughed, because the drink was pink, but held my tongue. Vinny gave me a prepaid card for the times he wanted me to stop and pick things up for him and Sam. It just so happened that I needed one of those drinks he was referring to, a pick me up, so I didn't want to piss him off by laughing at him.

"I'm ordering me one for the trouble."

"You get the points for that reward bullshit. That's my contribution to your caffeine habit." He hung up.

The line seemed like it was around the block, but since Vinny insisted...I used the time to try to relax myself. I closed my eyes and let the warm air envelope me. It wasn't as hot as it was earlier. More tepid. The sun had gone down, and Vegas was just waking up.

A car honked at me from behind. The line had started to move, and I was still idle. I had fallen asleep. I waved out the window, and about ten minutes later, I placed my order.

"Great timing!" the girl behind the microphone chirped at me. "We only have enough milk to make three more drinks!"

Finally. Something going my way. Maybe this was a sign life was going to start turning around for me. It was a little win, but like small losses, they add up to the big stuff. I pulled up to the window with a smile. I'd made the

cut.

The girl frowned at me. “I’m sorry. The car ahead of you forgot to add on a drink, and we can only make two drinks. Is there anything else we can get you in its place?”

Right. Right. *Fucking of course.*

“I’m really sorry.” She gave me an annoying smile to go with the fake apology.

“I don’t want anything else.”

“Okay! \$14.00 then.”

For this, Vinny and Sam were getting taxed. Meaning, I was going to take sips out of theirs to cover the loss of mine.

After I paid, she ran back to grab the drinks. She handed them to me, and I set them on the passenger seat. As I went to pull off, the car in front of me slammed on its brakes. Mine were a little too slow to react, and I almost smashed into the back of the car. The two drinks, carrier and all, flew to the ground and made a pink puddle on my plastic floormat.

What. The. Fuck.

The driver, a young woman who looked like she had thousands of dollars around her wrist, stepped out of her car and made a shooing motion with her hand.

She wanted me to back up.

Fifty cars deep and she wanted me to fucking back up?

I flung the car in park and stepped out, holding on to the door. “Where do you want me to go?”

“They forgot to give me a straw.”

A straw? For a drink that had a cap with a mouth hole in it!

“Here’s the deal,” I snapped. “There are fifty cars behind me. I can’t move them. As you can clearly see, I’m not the She-Hulk.” Or I would have long turned green by fucking then.

“Get me a straw then.” She waved to the window. “You’re closer.”

Who the fuck did she think she was? A princess?

A new crack seemed to develop—inside of my mind. But it wasn’t one of those that made a line. It was a real and true crack. A snap.

I marched to the other side of my car and yanked the two plastic cups from the floor. Dregs of the pink liquid rolled around the sides before they pooled at the bottom of the plastic. I flung them both at her car, making it look like someone had puked Pepto Bismol on her paint job. She was

screaming, pointing her bubble-gum-colored nails at me, and her diamond-encrusted phone was up to her ear.

My car was smoking some, maybe from the wait and the hot weather, and her eyes grew wide as I started to inch closer to her fancy European car. She flung herself on the ground when I got close enough to ram it. I moved that fancy bitch out of the way, and when I could get around her, I hit the gas, sticking the princess the bird on my way out of the parking lot.

Instead of relishing the feeling, tears streaked down my cheeks.

This was my life.

My life.

Flipping out over spilled drinks.

Jerry Rispoli came to mind. So did whoever he worked for. Jerry Rispoli existed because his boss did. It didn't matter if he had a name or not—he would forever be known as the straw that broke my back.

The fucking bane of my existence.

I punched the horn and it got stuck. It wouldn't dislodge. Everyone was staring at me as my horn went off in a continual blast.

Vinny and Sam were standing outside of Dynamic. They narrowed their eyes when my horn announced my arrival. My brakes screeched when I came to a halt, and I emerged from a cloud of smoke from my hood and dust from the lot.

“Where's our drinks, Leo?”

Vinny could very well see my car was shot to shit, fucking *hear* it, and I was in the middle of a breakdown, but he was good at sidestepping personal issues. He said there was enough estrogen in the building to send a rocket into space, and he wasn't fond of Mars. If men were from there, I was sure Vinny was from Uranus. But that was his way of taking the easy street when the girls who worked for him had problems.

And there were plenty enough to go around.

It wasn't like we were all making it in the big league of life. We'd all had big dreams but ended up in this small shack on barren land. The cars that belonged to the staff, besides Vinny and Sam's, were replicas of mine.

Sam walked around to my open window and leaned in. He punched the area where the horn is, and it went wimpy before it stopped completely.

I planted my hands on my hips. “Who does Jerry Rispoli work for?” I didn't miss the hysterical tinge to my voice. Neither did Vinny.

He took a step back. “Who's asking?”

“Is that even a legitimate question? Newsflash. It’s *not*. Since the question came from my mouth, Vinny.”

“It is legitimate when you want to know who Rispoli works for. Maybe it’s not you who wants to know. Maybe it’s someone who has nefarious intentions. I’d be the man telling.”

“Why? Is he terribly dangerous?”

“You can say that.”

“I did. Give me more than that, Vinny, or I’m calling that guy to come back and separate your finger from your hand again.”

“*Whoa. Whoa.*” He held his hands up. His pinky finger was bandaged. “Did someone piss in your drink or something?”

“I didn’t get a fucking drink!”

He looked at Sam, then at me. “Rispoli works for Tullio Bigatti. You might know him as—”

“Mr. Big,” I breathed out.

“You do something to him, Leo?”

Yes.

No.

I didn’t fucking know.

My heart felt like it was about to jump out of my throat.

Mr. Big owned Portofino, an Italian-Riviera-inspired casino along the strip, and he ruled his fair share of Vegas. He was also connected to Giordano Capitani, who ran Paradiso, another Italian-inspired casino a few doors down. Vegas, and probably beyond, had dubbed him Buggy.

They were all fucking buggy—in a ruthless criminal way.

Why, Angelo, why?! I almost cried out.

Vinny opened his mouth to say something, but sirens whooped in the distance.

“What happened, Kallistos?” Sam’s voice was deep and rich, soothing.

It did nothing to make me feel better. Especially when the familiar European car pulled in the parking lot behind the cops. I wasn’t even exaggerating. She was clutching the wheel to her car, her face in a snarl, riding the cop car’s ass. She was on the hunt for me.

“We know where our drinks went. Fuck.” Vinny must have noticed the pink stains on the spoiled princess’s car. He looked at Sam. “Looks like we’ll need bail money.” He looked at me. “I’m deducting it from your pay.”

For the first time in however long, money had no bearing on my feelings.

I knew I was in deeper shit than that.

Mr. Big.

He was a death sentence, but I wouldn't let him get close to my brother.

I'd get to him first.

CHAPTER 4

Mr. Big

THE LIGHTS of Paradiso fell over my black Bugatti Veyron like golden fireworks. My cousin, Giordano Capitani, ran Casino Paradiso, and he better have a good fucking reason for getting me out of my own casino to have a meeting in his.

I wasn't a recluse like everyone assumed, but I mostly kept to myself. Unlike my cousin, who was as flashy as Vegas when it came to who he was and his business. His casino reflected the man and his side of the family.

Paradiso was inspired by the Golden Age of Hollywood, Italian style. The inside was rich, with creams and golds throughout. Staff meandered through it like they'd just stepped off the silver screen during a different era. Modern day music wasn't played, though modern-day artists covered old hits.

His grandfather, who everyone called Old Gio, built the casino from the ground up. It opened its doors in 1946—the same year as the famed Flamingo. He was in his early twenties. So was my grandfather, Tullio. They were two of the youngest men in the game at the time. Casino Paradiso opened its doors the same day as Casino Portofino.

My grandfather wanted Italian, too, but he wanted his casino to reflect his mamma's roots on the Italian Riviera. It was a nod to the medieval village she was from and the Mediterranean Sea that surrounded it. The inside had blue waters flowing throughout, and flowers from her region grew up the walls. Our casino areas were made for gamblers, but our ballroom and guest rooms were a throwback to the old country.

Two entirely different casinos along the strip, but they were connected through one woman.

A famed showgirl, actress, and socialite was the link. Kitty Ducci, real name Canta, was our grandmother. Gio and I were half-cousins. Our fathers were half-brothers. Kitty had been married to Tullio the older, had my father, divorced the older Tullio, and then a year later, married Old Gio and had Gio's father.

She divorced him after that, but she still had penthouses at both casinos.

There was no telling which casino Kitty might be in on any given day or night, since she felt she was entitled to space in both. I wanted to dodge her if I could. I bypassed the valet and parked in the private area Gio reserved for himself and his visitors. I didn't see Kitty's Cadillac, but that didn't mean anything.

Before I could even make it to the door, it was opened by an attendant wearing white gloves and a three-piece suit that looked like it had belonged to Fred Astaire. "Welcome to Paradiso, Mr. Bigatti."

A blast of cool air surged over my skin as I stepped inside. The smooth sounds of Dean Martin serenaded me from above. The floors were made from the finest Italian marble, and tall gold vases stuffed with long-stemmed plumes of white feathers lined the entrance. Pristine white roses in gold vases of all different sizes were placed all over.

Even the scent of the place smelled rich.

My grandfather used to say Old Gio excelled at making guests feel like they had died and gone to heaven—a heaven that cost money to obtain.

Instead of going straight to Gio's private floor, I stopped at the bar to get a drink. The bartender's hair was slicked over with pomade, and a dish towel hung over his shoulder. When he noticed me, he left the other guests to wait on me.

"Mr. Big—atti. What can I get you to drink tonight? Your usual?"

He'd almost called me what everyone used to call my grandfather. Mr. Big. That wasn't me. But it fit the older Tullio like a custom-made suit. He looked like a Mr. Big. He always wore a Fedora, he was built like a bull, and a fat cigar always hung out of his mouth.

"The usual."

"Coming right up."

He poured my water, adding slices of lemon and lime, and I grabbed it from the bar and turned toward the room. I lifted the glass to my mouth and took a slow sip as I scanned the crowd.

All people who were giddy to be allowed entrance to Gio's gateway to a

different era. Down to the hair, they all fit the dress code.

My eyes halted on a woman sitting at the end of the bar, all alone. Long, straight blonde hair framed her square-shaped face and blue eyes. Her smooth, tanned skin was highlighted by the champagne-colored dress she wore.

She looked familiar, but I couldn't place her.

I called the bartender over. "What's her story?"

"The lady arrived shortly before you. I haven't seen her before. Hasn't ordered anything."

Her eyes kept flicking all over the place. She was either waiting for someone, or she had something on her mind. Something she was unsure about.

"Find out."

Not all Gio's bartenders were as skilled as this one. He grabbed a glass, filled it with ice and water, then set a napkin in front of her with the drink.

She looked up, surprised. I noticed she didn't thank him, only nodded. She played with the glass for a minute or two, moving it back and forth between her hands, before she left it at the bar and took a seat on a plush chair closer to the live band.

The bartender carefully handled her glass as he picked it up. He disappeared in the restricted area of the bar, only for employees, and then came back out a few minutes later. He slid a slip of paper toward me like he was sliding a napkin to me.

Leonora Kallistos.

Her address and phone number were listed below her name. She was local, in Vegas, and she worked for Vincent Salemi. He owned Dynamic. Her record was clean, except for an incident at a coffee shop the night before. Seemed she threw a drink on Freddie Money's girlfriend's car then rammed it out of her way.

I'd make a toast to her for that one.

Freddie Money was an ex-boxer who made millions in his prime. Then he made smart investments in Vegas and made more millions. His newest obsession was the one who got this Leonora arrested. All the well-known businesses knew what a pain in the ass she was. She expected everyone to roll out the red carpet for her when she walked in the door. Even at mob-run casinos.

The least I could do was get the incident erased off Leonora Kallistos's

record. She'd done society a fucking favor.

It hit me then where I knew her from. Or rather, a place she reminded me of.

Greece. She reminded me of Greece.

Hot sun, warm beaches, and tepid breezes. I'd never caught the scent of her hair before, but I could've sworn it smelled like sea water.

I'd never had a woman transport me to a place before.

"Leonora Kallistos," I repeated her name, speaking into my glass.

It was like she'd heard me. Her eyes flashed up to mine before she quickly turned toward the band. She stole another glance at me a second later. She was fidgeting in her seat some, making the slit in her dress, which went straight to her thigh, inch higher and higher. It didn't seem like she knew what to do with herself, or maybe some pent-up energy.

I knew what she could fucking do with that energy. Use it on me. I could already taste her on my tongue.

Before I could make a move, she was out of her seat and rushing past me. Through all the rich scents in the air, I could still smell her through it. Night-blooming jasmine, fresh herbs—basil and rosemary—and a hint of olive.

Gio set his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "You're fucking late."

"Something came up."

"Your dick?"

"What's so urgent, Gio?"

He looked around. "Not here."

We walked to the private elevators that took us to his private floor. His space was a replica of Paradiso. Creams, whites, gold, and diamonds, except he had some onyx touches here and there.

The elevator doors opened, and his two black and tan Dobermans ran up with their ears raised. They started wagging their tails when they recognized Gio. The only way I could tell them apart was by their collars. One was white and the other was black.

Even his dogs fit in his space.

They were both female because he said they were more trustworthy. He had men he somewhat trusted, but he said he trusted his dogs more. Couldn't fucking blame him.

Each one of the dogs took a side and walked him into the penthouse.

Before I could enter his office, the back of my heels was slammed into by something hard. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath while Kitty laughed

in her motorized scooter.

“You thought you could get me, Big? Well, I got you!”

I’d had one of my men stick something underneath her scooter that made a slight noise. She’d been wondering what it was for weeks, and for weeks, I had peace from her slamming into my heels and yelling, *Whoops! Someone is too slow!*

Kitty was still active, but she didn’t like traffic, and the only places she ever went was either to Paradiso or Portofino. She’d use her scooter to go back and forth because her breathing wasn’t all that great. And she liked to drink.

She must have been on her way from Portofino to Paradiso when I was driving here. She enjoyed watching the front of the place turn into a version of the Mediterranean Sea. It was something the older Tullio did in the ’90s. He hired a special-effects team to plaster the mountains on the building, while the front filled up with a sea of water.

Kitty said he did that to win her back. Kitty had divorced both of our grandfathers, but the relationship between the three of them, when my grandfather was still alive, was fucking odd. It was almost like they shared her.

It was a miracle I didn’t see her, though. Her entire scooter was encrusted in diamonds, and she even had her own custom license plate with two words on it: *Dmnd Legs*.

She backed up, the machine beeping, and took off for the kitchen. The dogs ran into Gio’s office to get away from her.

Neither of us said anything as we followed behind them. That was our link to each other, and she’d always been a live wire.

I sighed as I took a seat before his desk. I lifted my leg, crossed it over my other, and rubbed my ankle. It was like getting hit with a runaway fucking basket at the grocery store.

“Water?” Gio swiveled in his chair to grab a glass.

“Had one. On the house. Tell me what’s going on.”

Gio poured himself a drink and turned to face me. He pulled out two pens and two pieces of paper, then slid a pen and a piece of paper over to me. We always wrote notes when it came to business. It was too risky to talk.

He scribbled down: *I have reason to believe one of my men is selling flesh right underneath my nose.*

In Paradiso?

“Yeah.” He sighed as the burn of the liquor went down his throat. He wrote down a name. *Lou Rispoli.*

Lou and Jerry Rispoli were brothers. Jerry worked for me, and I’d started to suspect he was getting into shit that I didn’t allow either. Like drugs and using underage kids to deliver them. It was a nice setup, since a kid wasn’t as obvious as an adult.

Like Gio, though, I didn’t mess with drugs—too much heat—and I didn’t sell women, or anyone for that matter. I drew a hard line there. But I didn’t see a problem with strip clubs or escort services because those choices were consensual.

The only reason we allowed the brothers to work for both of us was because Gio and I were allies. We had our own shit going on, and sometimes we could be competitive when it came to our casinos, but we were linked together, even if the connection was a live electrical cord.

Jerry in on it?

He shrugged. *Far as I heard, it’s the drugs for him. Separate pots, but same stove.*

Yeah, I’ve gotten wind of that. I grabbed for the pitcher of water and poured a glass. It’s best to have one on hand while in hell.

Has Jerry been around? He looked up at me after he finished writing.

I set the glass down. *It’s been a day or two. That’s not unusual for him, though.*

He doesn’t think you know anything.

As far I can tell, no. I had a man following him. He told me Jerry broke some kid’s arm for being late.

Late for what?

Good question.

You know me, Big. I don’t do drugs and I don’t sell flesh. What I do here at the casino is plenty.

Yeah, it was the same for mine. Our grandfathers were smart enough to keep what we did inside the casinos. It was a lucrative business to skim. We didn’t need the other shit. And if the men working for us didn’t steal or rat, they had good jobs.

He’s going to eat sand. Gio leveled me with a no-bullshit stare.

Gio was going to kill him.

I nodded. “Good call, but don’t do anything reckless. Make a plan.”

Even though Old Gio was ruthless, he was levelheaded, and he kept his

emotions on a leash. My grandfather was similar. Business came first. Young Gio was the opposite. He was dubbed Bugsy for good reason. He was known to snap before he thought the situation through. He got that from Kitty.

He grinned at me, leaning back in his chair, setting his hands behind his head. "I always do."

Unless the unexpected happened. It wouldn't be beneath Gio to run behind Lou with a bat through his casino.

His casino. It wasn't *his* yet.

"What's going on with Old Gio? He set you up with a bride yet?"

Old Gio was pushing Gio to marry. Thought it would help settle him down a bit.

Gio waved a hand. "He has no control over my relationship status."

I grinned.

Gio shot me the bird. "I got this."

My phone pinged and I held up a finger. Gio made a *go-ahead* motion. I stuck the phone to my ear and answered as I took position behind him and looked out over the city, straight to my casino down the street.

Behind me, Gio burned our correspondence.

"Bigatti."

"We have a situation at the casino, Mr. Bigatti. A woman cheated the table."

"How much?" It didn't matter how big or how little. She'd be paying me interest until she took her last breath, even if she worked at my hotel for free.

Thousands. She cheated me for thousands.

"Keep her there."

"Of course. But...she's asking for you. Demanding to speak with you."

This wouldn't be a one-sided conversation then—fucking good.

I hung up and left.

CHAPTER 5

Mr. Big

I FIXED my suit as I strode into my casino. A few of my employees glanced at me as I walked in. Even though it wasn't their fault, they knew my mood was going to be dark.

No one fucking stole from me.

If *she* would have been *he*... my casino would have been his last sight before he left this world. And he would have left it one-handed. Because I would have chopped it off. Marked him as a thief before he departed.

Gio fell in step with me. He gave me a shit-eating grin. "I would have hitched a ride with Kitty, but I didn't want to miss this."

Just what I fucking needed. An audience. I was going to send Gio back with Kitty whenever she arrived. He sometimes hitched a ride with her. He'd stand on the back of her motorized scooter and let her cart him around—going less than five miles per hour because of his weight.

Umberto Rizzo, who was the head of my security, came to stand next to us. "She's in the holding room."

"Name?"

"Leonora Kallistos."

My head went blank before it took me to Greece to meet the goddess I'd spotted earlier in Gio's casino. I hated to admit it, because it happened in Paradiso, but it was like spotting a goddess in heaven. Aphrodite herself.

Too bad we were about to take the fall.

Umberto gave me a deep dive into who she was—all the things Gio's bartender had found out by lifting her fingerprints, but even more.

From the main facts of her life, I was starting to piece together who she

was. I could see how her situation had made her desperate.

Not desperate enough to steal from me, though.

“A woman stole from you?” Gio whistled, setting his hands on his hips. “Besides ordering her to a life of servitude for stealing, what else are you going to do? This takes creativity, Big. It’s like deflowering a virgin. The rest of her experiences are going to be measured by this one. To steal or not to steal...”

Instead of chopping her hand off, maybe I’d shackle it with an engagement ring, depending on how disagreeable she was towards becoming my wife. If she loathed the idea, she might be spending her forever with me as her husband. Maybe she’d see it as the death sentence I couldn’t dole out.

I kept the thought to myself as I headed toward the holding room.

A guard stood outside of it, a hand to his cheek. Blood trickled down.

“What happened?” Umberto asked him.

“That bitch clawed me!”

He was a lower-ranking guy who did as he was told but had some anger issues. A little of that went a long way. I wasn’t paying a bunch of Buggy wannabes to fuck everything up for me.

There was a reason I kept a low profile. To keep what I fucking had.

I nodded to Umberto, who gave me a subtle nod back. It was simple—*keep an eye on him until I say otherwise*.

Ms. Kallistos was sitting in a chair, her arms wrapped around herself, when I looked through the one-way mirror. She was shivering. Probably because Umberto kept it as cold as the arctic as a torture technique.

“Turn the AC down in her room,” I ordered. “And bring a blanket in.”

I would have kept it on, let her suffer some, but she reminded me of such a warm place... I couldn’t see snow on a beach in Greece. When I thought of her, I thought of night-blooming jasmine, or lady of the night, wilting from the cold.

I hated that I harbored any warm feelings for this thief, just as much as I hated that she chose to steal from me.

She startled when I opened the door and walked in. She jumped from her seat, her entire body tense, goosebumps puckering her skin.

“Where’s Mr. Big?” she demanded. Then her eyes lit up with recognition for a split second before she took a deep breath and released it.

Fuck. She was even more stunning in bright light. Everything I’d noticed about her before was made more exceptional by it. Her flowing hair was the

color of honey mixed with caramel. The color of her eyes, crystal blue, came from the Mediterranean. And her olive-hued skin looked like it had just been warmed by the sun—except she was wilting before my eyes.

I could still smell her in the air—night jasmine and herbs.

A few things I hadn't noticed earlier, though. The angry red mark on her cheek that would no doubt turn into a bruise. Red welts splotched her arms. Hand marks.

"Where is he?" she pressed. "I was told Mr. Big was coming. He personally handles these types of situations."

I took a step toward her, and she took a step back, her eyes darting to the door and then to me.

"You're looking at him."

"Bullshit!" She balled her hands into fists. "I know what Mr. Big looks like. He looks like a mixture of one of those head guys in New York, the one who always had a cigar hanging from his mouth, and the guy from the drink in New Orleans—Big Shot. You're not him." She looked me up and down, her eyes lingering on my crotch. She blinked and then met my eyes, not ashamed in the slightest. "You're not a bull, more like a lean jaguar."

That was a fucking good way to describe me. "You're looking for the old Mr. Big. My grandfather. And unless you're able to reach out to the other side, you're not getting in touch with him. Right now, he's sitting on my grandmother's mantle—turned into the thing that fell from his cigars. Ashes. And Mr. Big was his name. You can call me Mr. Bigatti."

She looked flabbergasted. Absolutely stunned.

"What happened to your face, Ms. Kallistos? Your arms?"

She unconsciously touched the spot on her arm and opened her mouth, but I gave her this warning before she spoke.

"Don't lie to me. Unless you don't care if a man's life is taken for it."

"I'm not even going to comment on it. Because the truth speaks for itself. All you have to do is look at my face and arms."

"You could've done that to yourself."

"You have cameras all over this place. Pull the video footage of the last hour or so."

She was right. I did. I used them to my advantage or shut them off at will. But I also believed her.

"Contrary to what you probably believe, people are not born to deceive or to hurt, Mr. *Big*." She gave me the meanest look, like I was the one who stole

from her fucking pocket. “It’s a choice.”

“Maybe they’re just born to steal then?” I took her left hand and she tensed. So did I. It felt like a lightning bolt streaked through my pulse and shocked my veins. “Just as I thought. Sticky fingers.” My voice was almost hoarse from the shock.

“It’s not stealing when it’s owed.” I couldn’t tell if she was shivering from the cold, the pent-up aggression...or from the same shock. “And if anyone has ever told you that Big doesn’t fit this—” she waved her free hand around me “—they lied to you. Because you’re a *big* fucking bully. Adults are a different story. But kids? I draw the line. I’m a *big* advocate for them.”

I was missing something big here. Maybe something huge. Or she was taking me for a ride with her anger disguised as righteousness. Maybe she was pissed that she’d been caught and was picking at straws to weasel her way out of this.

She wasn’t fucking ducking anything, though. She didn’t go on a rant about how she was innocent. She’d admitted she stole from me because I owed her.

The truth hit me in the gut then. “You wanted to get caught.”

“*Again*, I wanted what was owed to me and my family, *and* to talk to Mr. Big. How else was I supposed to get an audience with him?”

“The floor is yours, Aphrodite.”

Her face pinched, like I’d insulted her. It seemed like everything I did rubbed her the wrong way. I’d never met this woman in my entire fucking life. She didn’t know me. I didn’t know her. And up until I’d found out she’d stolen from me, I had nothing but glowing memories of her in Paradiso. Like I said, though, we were falling fast.

The wings were still attached to her, though. It pissed me off.

She’s just a woman, Tullio. You’re thinking with your dick. Set the head on your shoulders straight. Get rid of her.

That thought pissed me off too.

We were engaged in an intense stare down. I didn’t know whether to pull her forward, stick my tongue in her mouth, and fuck how she felt about me out of her. Or punish her by shackling her left hand to mine—for eternity.

Leonora Bigatti.

Mrs. Big.

The grin on my face made her take a step back, but our hands were still connected, and she couldn’t go far.

Get used to it, Aphrodite.

Fuck. I was screwed in every way possible.

She refused to look away from me first. She wasn't even blinking.

I barely had time to push her out of the way before Kitty came barreling into the room and rammed my ankles again.

"Damn slow breaks, but damn good sneaky wheels." Kitty smiled at me. She turned her attention to Leonora, who had a slight grin on her face because Kitty had hit me with the scooter, but it faded fast when her eyes widened.

I turned and found Gio standing behind me with the blanket.

"You wanted this, Big?"

Leonora was inching away from him, as far back as she could.

He looked at her and then at me. "My reputation precedes me, I see."

"You have some nice gams." Kitty was checking out Leonora's legs through the slit. "Are you a dancer?"

"Tried to be once upon a time."

Kitty studied her for a second. "In my time, I was known as Diamond Legs. They were worth millions. Betty Grable had nothing on me."

"I know who you are."

Kitty brightened at that. She said not enough people recognized her. She looked at me. "Have a baby with this one and somewhere down the line, one of the girls will get the Diamond Leg gene."

Leonora looked totally disgusted at the idea of procreating with me, but it didn't last long. Her face morphed into wariness when Gio went to hand her the blanket.

"I don't have fleas." He scratched his head, being a smart ass.

She reached out slowly and took it from him, like he might bite. Gio was a buggy son of a bitch, but he only messed with women when he wanted to seduce them. Other than that, they were pretty things that happened to talk and walk.

The real bite she had to fear was mine—on her ass.

"I'm going to take granny and go." Gio winked at me. "Seeing as you're about to hand down some justice." He placed two feet on the back of the scooter and pointed onwards, like he was the captain, and I heard the door shut behind them.

Leonora set the blanket on the chair. She smoothed out her dress. "This is not how I expected this night to go." She blew out a heavy breath and rubbed

her arms.

It was about to take another turn. I left her in the room and told Umberto to get the guard who'd put his hands on her. Another one of my men walked him back to the holding area.

I took off my suit jacket, handed it to Umberto, rolled up my sleeves to the elbow, and gave him a punch to his face that sent him stumbling into the wall. Before he could slide down it, I grabbed him by the arms and squeezed until he started to whimper.

"You don't ever touch what's mine without permission, understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Bigatti," he barely got out.

I flung him against the wall, pulled out my gun, and shot him in the head.

"Of all the places." Umberto sighed.

"At least it's not carpet."

He shook his head at me.

I walked back into the room with Leonora. She jumped from her seat again, her eyes taking on that same trapped angel look—the same one she had for Gio.

"You're covered in blood," she whispered, taking a step back when I took a step toward her.

"The blood of your enemy."

"My...who?"

He was done. *Finito*. It was time to get back to the beginning of this conversation. Why we were here in the first place.

"Why did you steal from me, Ms. Kallistos?"

Her back hit the wall, and I towered over her. She was so fucking soft, and she smelled like fresh, ripe things under the Mediterranean sun.

She glanced at my lips before she shook her head and met my eyes. She lifted her chin some but didn't say anything. Her chest heaved with the insane pounding of her heart.

She felt it too. The fucking chaos between our bodies that kept inching us closer to the relief of it.

I set my hand against the wall, leaning in slow, and pressed my lips against hers. It felt like that lightning bolt started with her and went straight through me. After this was done, she was going to be imprinted on my body.

Her hands came to my shoulders, digging in, and her tongue danced with mine. She moaned into my mouth, and the vibration of it went straight to my cock.

I rocked against her, and she almost convulsed. She was fucking breathing me in. Until she bit my lip so hard, she drew blood. She pushed against my chest, and after I gave her some space, she crossed her arms. She had a blood spot on her face, but I wasn't sure if it was mine or from the guy who was going to be buried in an orchard somewhere.

She slapped my hand when I reached out to clean it, but then she let me—maybe because of the look on my face. I wasn't fucking around.

“What are you going to do with me, Mr. Big?”

“Besides fuck you until you're crying out, I haven't decided yet.”

“You'll have to force me.”

“We'll see.” I rubbed my jaw. “I'm not going to ask again. What the fuck possessed you to steal from me?”

“I'm sure you don't even remember this, but you sent a man to break my little brother's arm. And when I say little, I mean a sixteen-year-old. He's not a boy, but he's definitely not a man yet. What kind of cruel bastards do that?”

Jerry Rispoli.

“You must hire real winners to do your dirty work for you. I'm not sure how deep my brother is in, but I want him out.”

The boy whose arm Rispoli fractured came to life in my head—he was someone's brother. And it was giving me an entirely different picture of Leonora Kallistos.

Her brother wasn't in, and Rispoli wasn't going to be breathing for much longer, but I had to fucking confirm my gut feeling.

“At what cost?”

She visibly steeled herself. “Whatever I have to do. Even his life for mine.”

“Angelo, that his name?”

She barely nodded.

“You felt you were owed because he needed medical attention.”

“Yeah.” She wiped her eyes, smudging her makeup. “And you know what happened, Mr. Big? My brother had a reaction to the anesthesia. Because your man fractured his arm and he had to have surgery on it. My brother almost didn't wake up.”

“It cost—”

“Fuck the money. I. Almost. Lost. My. Sixteen. Year. Old. Brother.”

She was keeping her emotions in check, but I could hear the tremble behind her words. It was a mixture of pure anger and overwhelming sadness.

“You think I did this to you?”

“Men always do this kind of thing. Fracture.”

“Are you fractured, Ms. Kallistos?”

She grinned, but it wasn't pleasant. “If you could only see me on the inside. I look like an ancient statue... of Aphrodite, you called me? And just like the carved versions... My heart is fireproof, and all the love has been drained out of me.”

Fuck.

I took a step toward her, but this time she didn't move.

“Your brother is free. You have my word.”

Her eyes widened, her shoulders visibly relaxed, but then she tensed.

“What about me?”

“You stole from me. That means you owe me. *Big.*”

CHAPTER 6

Leonora

OWE HIM BIG.

What did that mean...exactly? I wasn't sure what he was going to take from me as payment. Would I owe him sexual favors? Or work at his gorgeous hotel cleaning toilets for the rest of my life?

He left me alone again in the ice room before I could ask him to elaborate. The man who'd yanked me from the casino and brought me back here had called it a holding cell, but I was sure if water dripped from the ceiling, snowflakes would form. In Las Vegas.

The waiting was working on my nerves because each time Big left and then came back, my bones would jump and knock against my skin.

His entrances weren't big, but huge.

He had that in common with his grandfather. I'd never met him, but judging by his photos, his presence was larger than life. The younger Bigatti inherited the same.

What I hadn't expected, though, was him. Tullio Bigatti the younger.

That was why I was so confused at first. Mr. Big was burly and looked like he wore the smell of cigars as his cologne. Tullio Bigatti the younger was fine as hell. I'd noticed him watching me in Paradiso, and it was hard to keep my eyes off him.

He was debonair, with dark hair that was styled in a suave comb-over with a hard part. His eyes were a mixture of blue and green, though it depended on the light which way the color wheel tilted.

His face seemed chiseled out of stone, his jaw and over his mouth stubbled with the perfect amount of hair. His body was a replica of his face.

He seemed to have an athletic build, slender but muscular, like he ran many miles a day and lifted heavy weights, but it was only for the health benefits. He seemed naturally built that way.

Unshakable confidence existed underneath his exterior. It oozed out like a masculine scent. Maybe it was in the way he carried himself, even the way he talked, but it was smooth and undeniable.

Altogether, he was stunning. A real fantasy in the flesh.

That was where the attraction ended, though. I'd sworn off men after the last guy I trusted stole all my groceries and ran off with my family-sized pack of toilet paper.

On a fucking motorcycle, no less.

What kind of man rides around Vegas with a huge pack of crap paper on the back of his bike?

A shit was what Georgia had called him.

I'd be prepared for Big this time, though. I stood, facing the door. A minute or two later he strode in, stealing my breath again.

It's just his looks...just his looks... was my new mantra because it felt like he was trying to put some kind of Italian charm on me.

I felt shameful. The man had ordered my brother to be hurt, and I'd melted in his arms like candle wax when he'd kissed me. And when he called me Aphrodite too. I'd never been a sucker for cutesy nicknames, but that one got me. Or maybe it was just the way he said it. Like he truly saw that in me.

He took my hand and pulled me toward a table. He set my left hand down on it and made me splay my fingers.

Oh shit. Was he going to chop my hand off for stealing like they did in the olden days? I could see him doing that. He'd probably think it was poetic justice.

His man, Mr. Umberto Rizzo, came in with a huge ass knife and a ring box.

Since I knew my brother would be okay, it was the first time I felt real fear in Big's presence. Gio got the nickname of being buggy because he snapped and was impulsive. Big didn't seem to be impulsive, but they shared the legendary buggy twitch when they were about to snap. I'd seen it on Big's face when he'd asked me about the man who'd manhandled me, and he'd come back covered in blood splatters after we talked about it.

I didn't quite see it on Big's face in that moment, but there was something still crazed about his eyes. Or maybe his demeanor.

“This or that, Aphrodite.” He nodded to the two choices. “Take your pick.”

“A knife or a ring box? This feels like a trick question.” I looked away from Big and toward where Mr. Rizzo was, but he must have quietly exited the room.

“Plain and simple. You pick the knife—you lose your left hand.”

“If I pick the ring box?”

He opened it, and the biggest diamond I’d ever seen reflected the bright light and almost blinded me. The center was a huge, round-cut diamond with a halo of diamonds around it.

“You wear my ring on your finger—forever.”

Oh no. I could get the hand chopped off and be done with it. But being shackled to him forever? I’d seen the movie *Casino*. I knew how this was going to work. I’d end up losing my mind, then I’d probably kill Bigatti—either way, a death sentence for me.

He was grinning at me when I met his eyes. It was like he could hear every thought going through my head.

He was a devil disguised as an angel.

I had the sudden urge to flex my fingers against the table but tamed it. “I owe you money, Mr. Bigatti. Not my life.”

“Equals the same to me.”

“I’ll clean the toilets in your hotel for the rest of my life.”

“I don’t have all night. This or that, or I choose for you.”

I closed my eyes. “Cut it off.”

It seemed like he made me wait a helluva long time, and when I heard the knife move, my knees felt weak.

A second later, cool metal slipped over my third finger, left hand, and I knew he’d beaten me at my own game. When my eyes opened to his, the satisfaction in his told me he’d always known he would.

“If you’d rather lose a hand than marry me—” he touched my chin, and I moved my head away “—I know where I’ll get the most interest from.” He pulled my body against his in a rush, and I breathed out. He set his mouth next to mine and slid his swollen lip against my cheek. “I’ll be in touch soon, Aphrodite. Umberto will take you home. Try to leave this city—you won’t be able to afford the interest, understand?”

He turned me around and set me on a path toward the door. I walked out in a haze, not fully comprehending what had happened over the last couple of

hours.

Out of all the scenarios I thought I'd be facing, marriage wasn't fucking one of them.

CHAPTER 7

Leonora

AFTER A STANDOFF OUTSIDE OF PORTOFINO,

because I wanted my ride, Big drove me himself in my car. He didn't say anything about the state of my wheels, but I could tell he thought it was a danger to society when it started smoking. He must have sighed ten times.

He was heading in the direction of my apartment. He knew where I lived. *Of course he fucking did.*

"Not my apartment." I gave him the name of the hospital.

He found a spot and parked. We both got out.

"My keys." I held my hand out.

He leaned his back against the door and waved some smoke away from his face. "Not a chance in hell."

"Given that's where we are...I even have a visual of it." I lifted a hand toward his smoke-covered face.

He didn't seem to find my humor funny. "Umberto will be by in an hour or two with a new one."

I went to open my mouth, but he lifted a hand. "You can't move me. Not on this."

"I don't know what the end game is here, besides getting what you're owed in the form of someone's misery, but if you think you're going to turn me into a docile woman, you're sadly mistaken."

"Nah. I'm oddly impressed that you don't fold so easily."

Umberto pulled into the spot next to mine, and Big nodded toward the hospital. The only reason I walked when he motioned me forward was

because I needed space from him.

On a side note, I noticed two men step out of Umberto's car, fully suited with dark glasses, and follow behind me. They were keeping their distance, but I knew Big must have ordered them to.

I tried to ignore them as I went into the hospital and to Angelo's floor.

Phoenix's eyes widened when I walked in. He whistled. "Fancy pants. Where'd you go dressed like that?" He took my left hand when I was close enough and whistled even longer. "Nice ring."

"Goes with the dress." I rustled his hair and he smiled.

"Even if it's fake, it looks real, so you better not wear it again. You might lose a digit."

"Noted." I turned toward Angelo. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." He went back to the comic he was reading.

I sighed, the pressure in my heart immense. I kept trying to remind myself that he was a teenager, and teenagers are moody, but I kept feeling like I'd failed him somehow and would never be able to have a close relationship with him.

After what had happened during his surgery, I felt such a relief at seeing him. Maybe I took for granted how much I needed them too, because I was always so busy trying to make it—for the four of us. I just wanted to change my clothes and relish the fact that Jerry had no hold on him, and he was going home.

I could forget the last twenty-four hours for a while.

Angelo knew what had happened during surgery, though. The doctor told him that he would always have to let medical professionals know about his reaction to anesthesia. It seemed like Angelo blamed me for it. He'd always been a little further away from me than Phoenix, and I could feel the gap between us widening.

I had no clue what to fucking do. It seemed like he was never happy.

"I'm going to change out of these fancy clothes, and after, how about the three of us play a board game or something?" Georgia had bought some.

Phoenix was all for it.

I looked at Angelo. "You?"

"What happened to your face?"

I automatically touched it and winced. That asshole had backhanded me and probably left a bruise. I hadn't seen my face since I'd done my makeup before I left for Portofino. I was too tired to even come up with a lie. I just

shrugged, and he turned away from me.

After I took a quick shower and melted into a comfortable top and shorts, I tried to spend some real quality time with the boys. Phoenix had coaxed Angelo into the game, and after a little while, he softened up some. Phoenix even got him to laugh when he started flinging fake money from the game all over, waxing poetic about losing.

By the third game, I fell asleep with the cards on my chest. It felt like Phoenix woke me up seconds later when he told me I had to get dressed for work.

Work.

I owed Vinny for bailing me out, and I didn't want to deal with his bitching ass if he thought I wasn't going to pay him back. He'd weasel his way into every facet of my life if I didn't.

Besides, I wasn't that person. The one who skipped out on my responsibilities. Vinny was a weasel, but he did help sometimes. I didn't want to burn him.

It took me longer than usual to get ready. The bruise was angry looking, and I had to layer my makeup to cover it. I said goodbye to the boys, grabbed my bag, and then stopped short when I was out in the parking lot.

Did I even have a car?

It was like the universe was always so eager to answer me. An all-black Maserati sport utility with tinted windows stopped in front of me. Umberto got out and handed me the keys.

My eyes narrowed on the diamond-encrusted license plate. *Mrs. Big.*

I squeezed the keys and tried to ignore Umberto's grin as I climbed inside. It had a new-car smell, and everything was lit up like the cockpit of a jet.

That new-car smell. No smoke from the hood. Enough room for the boys *and* air conditioning.

I almost started to cry, but then I remembered who it came from.

This car came with emotional interest, and this was only the beginning. Every time I looked at my left hand, I was reminded of the shackle. Of what I owed him.

Basically, my life.

The ring glittered really pretty, though, against the black leather upholstery.

Dynamic's parking lot was filled with employees' cars, since the rush

wouldn't happen for another hour or two. It wouldn't take long until it was overflowing. It was Dynamic night, and that meant we'd have shows that spanned decades. Hits from the 1960s onwards.

Georgia's car stopped me before I went inside. It was as fancy as mine. Her license plate read PEACH. I twirled the ring around my finger for a second, then took it off and dropped it in the pocket of my Dynamic work shirt. I wasn't ready for the questions or comments. I didn't want to tell the truth, and I didn't want to lie either. I had to figure all of this out before I kept it on *that* finger.

Vinny and Sam were sitting at a table eating when I walked in. The slight bit of sun left lit their faces as the door closed. Vinny kept it on the dark side for ambience, he'd said. I thought he just didn't want an outrageous light bill.

"There's the little jail bird." He lifted his beer to me. "How's it feel to be free and back inside of this palace?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Vinny. I was looking forward to three hots and a cot. The food, I'm sure, is so much better." On that, I was just messing with him. The food at Dynamic was amazing.

Sam grinned and shook his head. Vinny told me to earn my keep, then shoveled more pasta in his mouth.

"Hey, Vinny?"

He looked up.

"Thanks for bailing me out."

"Yeah. Yeah."

I grinned as I opened the door to the back of the place. Girls were moving all over, preparing for the shows. Some of them sang. Some danced. And even though none of us were living the big time we had hoped for, we had damn good shows.

"Hi, Leo!" Penelope (aka Peter) looked up from painting her nails. She narrowed her eyes. "What happened to your face?"

"What about it?" I looked in the nearest mirror and made a show of searching it. I didn't want to have to retell the story. "Oh. I must have had a heavy hand with the bronzer. Good thing it's dark."

"You want me to fix it?"

"Nah. It's good enough."

She smiled and went back to painting. She looked up as the new girl, Raquel Barcelona, who we all called Rocky, took a seat next to her. She was fixing her hair.

“So...” Penelope nudged her. “What do you say? Are you in?”

“I don’t—”

“It’ll be fun. Domenico Casino is going to be singing and everything!”

“Domenico Casino...? Oh, he’s in that group...the one where they have an older vibe but to a newer beat, right? Sort of like a new-age Rat Pack?”

“Yeah! They’re all so fine.” Penelope rubbed her arms and shivered. “I swear, you’ve never seen anything like it. Tell her, Leo.”

“Tell her what?”

Penelope smiled. “About Paradiso. How beautiful the entire casino is, and how fun it is.”

I couldn’t lie about it. It was one of the most stunning places along the strip, next to Portofino. The bar was so exclusive, you had to have a special ticket. If it was golden, it was lifelong and had to be transferred at the time of death or it wouldn’t be valid. A regular at Dynamic, who loved Vinny, left it to him when he died.

Vinny said the entire place was too rich for him and let us use the card whenever we wanted to. I’d taken it, planning to stop at the bar to see Georgia’s husband, Joe. I thought maybe he could talk me out of what I was going to do, or at least prepare me. He lived the life of a mobster.

I’d seen him with another woman, though, and that was when I left. It felt like a best friend’s code to confront him, and a silent woman’s vow to tell Georgia, but she knew. She was totally blasé about it. I left it alone, but it still pissed me off. I was going to live the same life, and I hated it.

“Leo? You have the ticket?”

Snapping out of my brain fog, I dug in my bag and handed the card to Rocky. “Full moon tomorrow night...be extra careful out there.”

I wished I had something like a full moon to blame my wild night on.

“Leo.”

I turned at the sound of Georgia’s voice. She was sitting on a barstool prop, sewing what looked like a ripped skirt, and she looked ghostly. I hadn’t noticed it before, but the light made it more apparent. She was losing weight. Her bones pressed against the underside of her skin. Georgia was beautifully full figured, and I had no idea why she would want to lose any of herself.

She set the skirt over her leg. “Where did you go last night?”

I leaned my weight against the wall and sighed. “I had to know, Georgie.”

“I told you to leave it alone.” In all the time I knew her, I’d never heard a growl in her voice aimed at me. “And now what?”

“Now I owe Mr. Big.”

“Joe told me. Fuck, Leo!”

“I know! I know!” I wanted her to tell me how wrong I was, but then again, I didn’t want to hear it. I was fine being in denial for a couple more hours. “I’m in my own version of hell anyway, so I won’t even recognize a difference. Except for the car with an air conditioner that he bought for me. It probably has about a million dollars’ worth of emotional interest tacked on it, but...at least I’m staying cool, right?”

“I don’t know all the specifics.” Her voice was so low, it raised goosebumps on my arms. “But I know if you had listened to me, you could have avoided all of this.”

“What are you talking about?”

She sighed, picking up the needle and thread and looping it through the rented fabric. “Tullio Bigatti doesn’t allow his men to sell drugs. He might have known that Jerry broke Angelo’s arm, but he had no idea who Angelo was or why Jerry had done it. He started to become suspicious of Jerry only recently. Nothing done in the dark ever stays hidden. Your visit probably confirmed Bigatti’s suspicions. If he hadn’t found out not long before. These are all recent developments. Like...if this news was a body, it would still be warm.”

“Angelo was delivering...”

“Yeah, he was.”

I knew Angelo wanted to help me, like Phoenix had said, but it seemed eerily like how my dad got into the game. Then he started using.

Wait. Wait. Wait. Back up a few words.

Big didn’t give me all those specifics. He alluded that he knew, but the asshole really didn’t. He let me believe he knew what my brother was doing.

I was starting to become very confused very fast about his intentions. Okay, I stole from him, and he felt he was owed, even though I didn’t see a penny of it, but why all the fucking drama?

“Am I paying you to sit around and chat with Georgie?” Vinny appeared out of nowhere.

“You’re not paying me to fix your costumes, but here we are.” Georgia looked up from what she was doing. “Consider it swapping my talents for a little of Leo’s time.”

Vinny mocked her, grumbling her words out. “She stays until you’re finished! That’s *it*. She already owes me for bailing her out.” He left,

mumbling to himself.

Georgia lifted her eyebrows.

“Oh, you didn’t hear about that, social butterfly of the mob world?” I said. “But you heard about my unfortunate meeting with Big?”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“No. I’m enjoying the river of denial I’m floating on right now.”

“Beware of those crocodiles on that river. Those are very real.”

“Warning heeded.”

She sighed. “Gotta get this skirt to Danny.” She lifted the pink silk poodle skirt from her legs. “She’s opening tonight.” She hopped from the barstool and set her arm around my neck, pulling our heads together. “We’ll be all right.”

It was something we started saying to each other after we first met. It was four words of light, even when things looked the darkest for us.

“We’ll be all right,” I repeated.

The night grew busier, and Georgia and I divided and conquered. She mostly helped with last-minute costume issues. I kept everyone on time.

I was watching the end of the ’60s routine when someone tapped me on my shoulder.

One of the girls. “Paul is in the bathroom and says she can’t come out.”

“Something wrong?”

“Cramps.”

Cramps covered a lot of ground in a female-dominated crew. Paul—Paulina—had been calling in sick, and when she showed up, she hid in the bathroom. I wasn’t sure what was going on with her, but I made a mental note to talk to her about it. Vinny was decent, but he wasn’t a saint. He’d cut her loose if he felt she wasn’t earning. Like the rest of us, she had responsibilities to take care of at home.

I had to fill her spot, though. She was in the 2000s crew. I looked around the room and got either a shake of the head—*no*—or eye avoidance.

“Okay. I’ll do it.” I knew all the routines, like an understudy.

The ’60s crew rushed off the stage while the ’70s crew discussed last-minute things before they went on. There was usually about a ten-minute intermission between sets.

Vinny barged into the back and stopped, hands on his hips, his eyes searching. They landed on me, and he bulldozed his way over.

“What did you do?” he hissed at me.

“We both know I’ve done a lot. Be more specific.”

“I’m in no mood for your sharp tongue, Leo. You asked about Tullio Bigatti, and guess who shows up in my lowly club? The devil himself.”

I rushed to the door and peeked out. My eyes landed on Gio moving through the crowd with a cold beer in his hand. He was wearing a tight gray T-shirt and dark jeans. Which was not the norm. Those men mostly wore custom-made suits. He was trying to blend.

His hair was light, and so were his eyes, but his skin was tan. He had sharp features. He did have those unsteady eyes, no doubt, but he was seriously good looking. Just like Big.

It would be such a disappointment if his name didn’t live up to what he was packing in his pants. If the steel pipe pressing against me the night before was anything to go by, though, the name was not wasted on him.

Maybe it would be the only pleasure in this arrangement with him.

Since I found out he hadn’t ordered my brother to be hurt, that shackle was off. I could lust after him without feeling guilty.

Rocky ran into Gio on his way back to the table, but he barely looked at her, even though she held her hand out and apologized. It was like she was something he had to keep from falling off a shelf, and then he just moved on.

I was shocked he didn’t notice her. She mostly worked the bar, because she said she couldn’t dance or sing, and she was stunning. It was hard not to notice her.

My eyes followed Gio back to his table, and my heart started to skip beats. Big sat there, nursing what looked like a water, his eyes constantly taking in the room. He was dressed similarly to Gio. Black T-shirt, dark jeans, and boots. He wore a ball cap on his head turned backward.

If I had to guess his age...late thirties or early forties. So fucking young to run such a bloody empire.

“There he is.” Vinny pointed over my shoulder, his gold-link bracelet catching the light and jingling in my ear. “What’s he doing here, Leo? Cause I don’t like his type of visitor in my place. It usually means trouble.”

“My guess...he heard you had hidden talent and he’s scouting.”

Georgia tapped him on the shoulder. “You know what that means, Vin? You better start upping the pay around here.”

“No shit?” Instead of wilting, Vinny stood a little taller.

“No shit.”

“This is the best crew I’ve had since you ladies started, but I’m not

fighting over anybody with Tullio Bigatti. As far as I'm concerned, he can take what he wants and be done with me." He made a show of dusting off his hands, then walked away, probably looking for his steel wall, Sam.

"Hey." Georgia nudged me. "You know what the next song is?"

A sly grin spread across my face.

She slapped my behind. "Sick the ladies on him, Leo the lioness." She growled at me.

Before the next set went out, I told them to make our VIP guests feel *extra* special. They agreed, and as soon as the song started, they crowded around his table and serenaded him with "Mr. Big Stuff."

Gio was laughing his ass off, and it seemed like the two guys at the table wanted to, but Big's eyes were searching past the crowd and landed on me.

I gave him a little wave before I turned around and exploded with laughter. *Ah*, I sighed. He wanted me in hell with him? Might as well have a little fun while I was there.

CHAPTER 8

Leonora

SOME OF THE wind left my sails when I had to prepare to take Paulina's place in the dance routine.

Throughout the entire '90s show, Big stared in my direction, and it made my breath come harder and faster. Even when I had to move to get dressed, it was like his eyes never left me.

I'd never felt nervous before I danced. It was just people watching me have some fun. Shaking my ass to a hit from the 2000s while Big was in the crowd was sending me into a panic, though.

Georgia gave me a pep talk, turned me toward the crowd, and slapped my ass to get me going.

When my eyes met Big's, I couldn't even remember the steps.

I was so screwed.

Catching Vinny's stare doused me some, and I shook my head, making myself move.

I kept making mistakes when I'd meet Big's intense eyes, but when the song started to get sexier, I was starting to find my groove, imagining it was just him and I in the room.

His face transformed. It went from relaxed to tight. Kind of scary, like when he'd found out that guy had hurt me. His eyes caught that twitch, though his entire body went rigid until he jumped out of his seat and attacked a guy sitting a few seats down. Knocked him out with one punch.

The girls were glancing at each other, but none of us stopped moving, because Vinny was making a "keep going" motion.

A second later, Big hauled me off my feet, flung me over his shoulder,

and brought me into the back room.

“Somewhere private,” he almost growled out.

Someone must have directed him, because he took off in a different direction, and we ended up in a storage closet.

He set me down on my feet and took a few steps back. He was breathing heavy, his nostrils flaring.

“How are you doing, Mr. Big Stuff?”

“Where’s your ring?”

“In my bag.” *Tucked into the pocket of my work shirt*, but I didn’t mention that.

“A two-fucking-million-dollar ring and you have it in your bag? Where?”

I pointed and gave him slow directions because I was stunned. *Two million dollars?*

He stormed out of the closet, leaving me reeling, until he came back, took my finger, and slid it back on. “You know what that ring means, Aphrodite?”

“I can guess what it means to you. You *think* it means I do what you say.”

“It means you’re fucking mine. I share you with no one. Not a room full of drooling men. Not one man fantasizing about you. Not. Fucking. One. It’s also a symbol of who you are to me, and who I am to you. You’ll be buried with it. It doesn’t leave your finger.”

“If it does?” I slid the ring up and down my finger, each time getting closer to taking it off. I was poking the jaguar a little, but it was payback for him poking me the night before.

His grin came slow. I took a step back, running into the wall, my hands shooting out to keep purchase. He was advancing on me, and I’d cornered myself. Basically, a repeat of the night before.

“You afraid of needles?”

“Not really.”

“Good. Because you make wearing my ring an issue, my initials will be tattooed on your ring finger.”

I set my hand against his chest, felt his heart pound against my palm, then pushed him back. He didn’t budge. I went to push again when he put his hand over mine and stopped me. He slid his hand underneath my hair and his mouth came over mine.

His tongue reached out, and so did mine.

I’d stopped the electricity between us the night before because of the disgust I felt for what I thought he’d done to my brother.

I couldn't fight it this time.

My mind agreed with my body, and I freed myself from all constraints.

His body was so hard and so hot. If I was his Aphrodite, he was my Adonis. My hands were addicted to the perfection of what they were exploring. And his tongue? It was no wonder all that Italian charm flowed so freely from it.

It was magical, and I hoped it could transport me out of my head and fully into my body.

Two industrial-sized shelves were on either side of us, filled with all sorts of cleaning supplies and things, and we'd moved between them, just enough space for us to maneuver.

Big took me by the chin and forced my eyes on his. It was the most intense few seconds of my life. It was like we were breathing each other in, and we couldn't stop.

His face came in closer to mine, and I forced myself to speak.

"You have your work cut out for you, Big." My voice was breathy and whispered. "My heart has turned the rest of me off from intimacy. That part of me—" I looked down to my crotch and right back up "—is broken."

His eyes slowly roamed to where I'd looked and then back up. And I almost called myself a liar. It felt like wherever his eyes landed, the blood rushed, and all signs pointed to release.

"Broken?"

"Yeah." My eyes landed on his lips, and I licked mine. They tasted so good. "Broken."

"Not broken." He moved in closer, his mouth coming close to my ear. He nibbled on my lobe. "Waiting for me." He kissed down my neck, sucking and biting, and I closed my eyes, goosebumps appearing on my skin even though the closet was hot.

His fingers caressed my sides as he made love to my skin with his mouth, and I sank into the feel of him. He lifted my work shirt slowly and set it on the shelf as his eyes took in my breasts in the knock-off lacy bra. His fingers barely brushed over my nipples. I shivered and whimpered.

His eyes rose to meet mine. "A key is specially made for a certain car. You can't just use any key to start a Bugatti. And you are a masterpiece, Aphrodite. A masterpiece only I have a key for." His fingertips dipped inside of my shorts and caressed around the band, until he undid them and had me step out of them.

He made a ferocious sound in his throat when he took me in, and I could feel the heat from his body as he took a step closer to me. Sweat dripped down my skin.

My nipples were tightening, and the pulse between my legs was begging to be touched. To be silenced.

He was so fucking right.

He was my key—and suddenly, I needed this. Had been anticipating it.

“Fuck me, Big.” I reached out and pulled him toward me.

He kissed me until I was whimpering into his mouth and had to pull away to catch my breath.

“Right now?” His fingers ran over my thighs, and he made a content noise at what he found.

I was soaked.

“Now! My engine is...growling.” I lifted his shirt, flinging it over mine, and then went for the button of his jeans.

Boom. That was all I could think. When his cock sprang free...*boom.* It was so perfect, it needed a sound effect when it was unleashed.

Mr. Big wasn't just a nickname.

He'd fucking earned it.

It was thick and long, and I had a feeling he knew how to use it. It wasn't just a toy for a boy.

I was ready to prove that true.

He ripped the flimsy underwear away from me and set it on the shelf. He took a condom out of his pocket and rolled it on. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. He lifted me up, and as soon as my entrance met his dick, he slid right in.

We both made inhuman noises.

Then he started to move.

And.

Oh.

My...

The pressure was exquisite.

My walls were tight around him at first, like I was a virgin, and he was going beyond the pale for the first time, but as he pushed into me, I started to relax, and I could feel every slide and thrust.

I could honestly vouch to knowing how a matchstick felt as it was being struck. Each time he would pull out and come back, I could feel myself being

worked higher and higher, until the point I knew my body wouldn't be able to hold back. He tilted me back some, and I held onto to each shelf as his position went even deeper.

“Fucking gorgeous,” he rasped out. “My Aphrodite in the flesh.”

At his words, a moan seemed to echo in the small space from somewhere deep inside of my chest. His fingers were digging into my flesh, and when he leaned forward and kissed me, it was the kind of connection that felt life changing.

He was making me feel him, so deep, and he knew it.

I couldn't hold on any longer. It had been too long, and never this way. And maybe he was a selfless lover because he seemed to know how much I needed this without me saying it. He had no mercy on me, and I was so thankful for it.

“BIG!” I shouted as he seemed to read my body and pound into me even harder. I couldn't control what was happening to me on the inside, and I let go, rocketing to Venus.

Sweat ran down his face, and I could feel his body tighten before he let go and exploded with a growl.

He was so fucking right—again.

It seemed like my body had been waiting for him.

My heart sank deeper into its protective shell at the thought, but my body rejoiced.

CHAPTER 9

Leonora

MY LEGS WERE TREMBLING. I'd never had an orgasm strip me of all my energy before. I felt gutted and bare to the bone.

It left me speechless. A rare occurrence.

After Big helped me dress, then righted himself, he took my hand and led me out of the closet. The air felt cooler and fresher, even with the crowded room filled with bodies. The heat between Big's body and mine could create a sauna.

"Grab your things." He nodded toward the row of lockers where he'd gotten my ring out of my bag.

He waited for me while I moved in a post-glow haze. It had been...a long time since the last time I had sex, and even then, it had never been that powerful. I wasn't sure what to do with the feelings because they were something other than...*that sucked*.

Not that the guys I'd been with were terrible in bed, but none of them had ever felt that way. And that was closet sex!

Georgia leaned against the locker as I set the strap of my bag over my arm and shut the door.

"Are you okay, my ferocious Leo?"

What could I say? I'd just taken off like a rocket and landed on Venus for a while? "I'm okay."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Take one breath at a time." I smiled at her.

She squeezed my arm. "I know the entire city of Vegas is going to sound like it's cracking in two tonight when all those pining women find out Mr.

Big is in love.”

“In love?” I scoffed. “He’s not in love with me, George.”

“If he’s not, he will be. There’s no way he can’t fall in love with you.”

“I love when you get all uplifting on me.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Call you soon.”

Big placed his hand on my lower back as we entered the front of the house. The music was still going, and the place was buzzing with energy. This was a good night for Vinny, and I felt bad about leaving.

Vinny stood and held out his hand when Big stopped at his table.

Big shook it. “Salemi. Here’s what’s going to happen. Leonora is going to be my wife soon. That means she’ll have eyes on her that weren’t before because of her last name. I understand you have an arrangement with Joe Fedele. It’ll be the same for my wife. She can still manage for you, but she doesn’t do anything but manage, and she stays behind the scenes with Georgia.”

Vinny nodded.

“I hear my wife dances like she did tonight, or our arrangement is broken in any way...” Big let the sentence linger, and the threat was there even without the words.

“Understood, Mr. Bigatti.”

Big nodded to his guy at the table, who came over and handed Vinny an envelope out his suit jacket.

“Open it.”

It seemed like Vinny didn’t want to, but he did.

“That covers the money you fronted for bail and interest. There’s also some extra for your trouble.”

“Leo’s no trouble.” Vinny looked at me. “You want this?”

I could feel Big harden at Vinny’s blunt question. I wasn’t sure what he was going to do if I didn’t, but I had a new respect for Vinny. He had balls. I could see it in Big’s eyes too. He wasn’t expecting Vinny to ask me.

“Yeah. I’m good.”

If I said anything other than that, and Vinny stood against Big, he would lose everything he loved. Including his life. And I’d done this to myself. I’d acted impulsively, just like I did when I flung the drink on that chick’s car.

Well, at least no one could fault me when it came to trying to keep my brothers safe, or ever accuse me of not loving them enough.

“You want this?” Big looked at me and chucked his chin at the club.

Point for you, Big. He was giving it back to Vinny in the same way. He was asking me if I still wanted to work there.

“Yeah. I’m good.” It would be nice not to have the pressure to work, but I liked the girls and felt they needed me. Georgia stuck around for the same reason.

We left after the air was clear. Gio and the other men, who were probably just muscle, followed us out. Gio and Big shook hands, and we all separated.

Umberto was standing against a convertible Ferrari smoking a cigarette. His long black hair was slicked back, and his tan skin glimmered under the lights of Dynamic. I had a feeling he’d been watching the car for Big because the top was down.

Umberto handed him the keys and nodded at both of us. He headed toward another expensive car.

Big opened the door for me, and I slid in. This was a fucking rockstar of a car. The engine roared to life, and it purred underneath my legs like a powerful cat. I was still sensitive from what we’d done—and I was getting turned on again.

Once he’d opened the floodgates, it was like I’d been swept up inside them. If he decided to punish me by withholding sex, I really might hurt him.

I tried to focus on something else. “What kind of Ferrari is this?” I dug in my bag and found a hair tie so I could pull my hair up in a messy bun. It was going to be a windy ride.

Big looked both ways and then tore out of the parking lot, the beast of a motor coming to life and using Vegas as its hunting ground.

“Portofino M.”

“This is one of the sexiest cars I’ve ever seen.” I tapped the dash.

“This one was a gift from the Fausti family.”

“*The Fausti family?*”

“Specifically, Rocco Fausti. Once upon a time, I was a racer in Italy for them. His father, Luca, is one of the greatest racers to ever live.”

I pulled my phone out and Googled: *Tullio Bigatti Italian Race Car Driver*. His face was plastered across the results, along with one of those little boxes that gave official information on him.

My eyes flew up. “Why did you quit? This says you’re one of the best.”

“Keep reading.”

Oh... My next breath went down like a lump of coal. His mom had died—complications of cirrhosis—and at first, they had accused his dad of killing

her. Apparently, his parent's relationship was violent, and they were both heavy drinkers. There was a fight between the two the night before she was found. His dad died two years after his mom and two years before his grandfather.

I glanced up at Big. His eyes were hard on the road. I knew what addiction could do to a family, and I knew my apology would only seem like I was feeling sorry for him. I did, but I felt the same for all families who had to go through it.

Scrolling further, I found something that made me burn a little. I'd never been jealous in my life, even when I had the energy to care. Maybe that wasn't what this was, but...I was having a hard time putting a name to the feeling.

I lifted the phone. The screen showed a picture of him and a slightly built Italian beauty. Abree Caffi. She reminded me of a bird. "I'm her replacement?" Seemed like Big was engaged to her while he was in Italy doing his racing thing. She and her family were considered opera royalty.

"Do you care?"

"Why would I?"

"Just making sure." He grinned.

Hot air blew through my nostrils. "Just because you gave me good sex doesn't mean anything. I'm immune to feelings, and my heart is fireproof. I can't be burned. Not anymore."

"At least you can admit it's—" he paused, like he was searching for the right word—"good between us."

"Good" was a lame term for it, and he knew it. He just didn't want to admit it. Like I didn't. Probably because it took some of his control too. It was the kind of thing people would become shackled for.

"If it's the one pleasure I can take from this—" I motioned between us—"that works for me."

"It's that moment in Paradiso."

"Which moment?"

"When our eyes met."

Whatever I was expecting, it wasn't that. Was he trying to say we met in heaven? That was...heavy, and so romantic. He was laying the Italian charm on thick again. I needed to invest in an evil-eye amulet to keep him from consuming me. My heart knew *not* falling for him was going to be a challenge.

He wasn't the kind of man a woman met every day. He was absurdly rich, powerful, good-looking, and had a successful run as one of the most famous racers in the world. Not to mention the Fausti family sent him gifts—a family that was considered ruthless royalty in Italy.

He wasn't in a league—he *was* the league.

The tepid heat coming from him was making my guard feel relaxed, and I had to turn the conversation before I truly let it down. “You're just talking sweet to me because you're dodging the question.”

“Nothing sweet about me, Aphrodite. I speak the truth, whether it cuts or not.”

“Good. I'd rather a sharp knife of truth than a dull one of lies. Cuts to the quick faster. All that unnecessary pain—what's the point?”

“Is that what happened to you?” He glanced at me before he turned his eyes back to the road. “A lot of unnecessary pain?”

“And suffering.” I twirled the strap of my bag around my fingers, tightening it some. “We're not talking about me, though. We're supposed to be talking about you.”

“You're being driven by a world-famous racer.” He chuckled at that. It was kind of self-deprecating, but in a Big way. “Enjoy the ride, Aphrodite.”

Outside of the city limits, he hit the gas, and the wind whipped so hard I thought it was going to rip my bun out. But the weather felt like him—warm—and it felt good to be traveling away from the city and along Route 613.

About ten minutes in, Big slowed up some. I raised my brows at him.

“Animals cross.”

I grinned as I looked away from him and at the canyons in the distance. It was dark—almost pitch black—but it was almost like I could make out their forms from some sort of night magic. Or maybe it was just my memory filling in the blanks.

Around twenty minutes away from Vegas, Big pulled off the interstate and parked in a viewing area.

“Wow.” The word just slipped from my lips. “This makes you feel like you're on another planet instead of being in Vegas.” I lifted my hand and twirled it around, like I could stir the pot of stars above me. There were so many of them, and they seemed almost liquid, like they were sparking from the bottom of a huge pot above. Floating in a sea of soup somewhere. The gigantic ring on my left finger seemed to fit with them, in terms of how bright. “I forget sometimes that Red Rock Canyon exists right outside of all

the fake lights.”

“My mom used to say this was the real Paradiso.”

My eyes slowly left the stars and fell on him. He was looking at me.

“Why?” I whispered. “Because you don’t need to buy a ticket to get in?”

He studied me for a second, like he didn’t expect me to say that, and nodded. “The arrangement with Abree was just that. An arrangement. Rocco is married to her sister, Rosaria, and he thought we’d be a good match. His brother, Dario, had something with her for a while, and when that fell through, he introduced us.” He looked forward.

“You can’t just leave me hanging like that, Big.”

“*Mr. Big.*”

I grinned at his profile. “*Mr. Big.*”

“Better.” He squeezed the steering wheel, the tendons in his arms straining, making his veins seem more pronounced. Even his forearms were beautiful. “Eleni Bigatti’s death put life into perspective.”

His mom.

“That’s why you didn’t go forward with the arrangement?”

He nodded, turned his head up, his eyes reflecting the stars.

I took a deep breath and sighed it out. That was a vague answer to what seemed like a more complicated issue, but it wasn’t my place to pry. I was already starting to relax around him. I didn’t need to start feeling sorry for him and start telling him *my* sappy life story. I only needed to know what I was up against when it came to the Italian beauty—a memory that had trapped him? Or a memory that breezed in and out whenever something triggered it?

It wasn’t because I cared if it trapped him, either. Okay. Maybe I cared a little. But I wanted to stay out of that particular trap myself, refusing to get pulled into some kind of relationship issue with another woman.

A sense of peace washed over me with a warm wind when I accepted the answer he’d given me, though.

The quiet between us seemed loud suddenly. I reached forward and turned the radio on. It was just a whisper in the night. The song playing was older, from the ’70s, and I went to change the station when Big stopped me by putting his hand over mine.

It was the eeriest thing that had ever happened to me, but I knew the song meant something to him. Maybe his mom had liked it. In one of those articles, it said she was a darling of Vegas and used to be a singer.

I wondered if he would take it as a sign. A sign of what, though? I had no clue.

Our eyes met for a second before I relaxed in my seat, leaning my head back. He still had my hand, and the warmth of it was...nice, especially with the song.

Before I realized it, I dozed off. My eyes fluttered open when the bright lights of Portofino hit them.

Umberto was taking Big's place in the driver seat, and Big was already at my side. He opened my door and gave me his hand. I took it, and he led me into the Mecca that was his casino.

CHAPTER 10

Leonora

I WAS AWAKE, but still sort of drowsy. Before I forgot, I set an alarm on my phone. I wanted to get up early enough to go to the hospital. That was one thing I tried not to do—be late.

Phoenix was more sensitive to it, the fear of being left behind a real thing, but I could tell it bothered Angelo as well. He just hid it better. I was excited about telling them about the new car, too, but I was also freaking out about this situation.

If Big did his own thing, fine, he could just leave us alone most of the time and get me in the bedroom, or wherever, whenever he wanted. But I refused to let him get close to my brothers and do more damage to their lives. Even if I had to steal from him again to do it.

He was so rich, he probably wouldn't even notice.

I glanced at his profile as the numbers in his private elevator climbed higher and higher.

He'd fucking notice. He just seemed the type.

I sighed and he looked at me. I looked away.

We'd have to have that conversation soon.

Big's penthouse was huge and fit for a medieval king. It had modern touches, like in the kitchen and bathrooms, but it looked like someone had lifted a villa from Italy and set it in the center of the strip.

The walls and floors were made of what looked like old stone, but fine Italian marble graced countertops and all the bathrooms. Light colored walls highlighted dark-stained wooden beams along the ceiling. Iron fixtures brought it all together. Exotic sprays of flowers had been placed in the most

optimum spots.

It was just a continuation of the casino, but private.

While Big excused himself to make a phone call, I found my way to his bathroom. Since he was on the phone, I decided to take a shower. It felt like an entire days' worth of sweat coated my body, and so did the dust from the ride out of town.

I'd jumped the gun a little after I undressed and couldn't figure out how to turn it on. It was one of the ones that shoot out from both sides and trickles from above—like showering in a rainforest, sans bugs. Eucalyptus and spearmint hung heavy in the air.

“Shit.” I couldn't figure it out. Did they expect only rocket scientists to take showers in these things?

“Like this.” Big's voice was rough, and his body came behind mine, almost engulfing me. His hand slid down my arm, his fingers closing over mine, directing me.

A fine mist floated in the air once it turned on. The soft sprays touched my hair, face, and skin. It chilled me at first, until the warm water started to create humidity. It clung to me as much as Big was. I closed my eyes when his lips started to kiss a path down my body, his hands tracing the shapes of my curves.

“I love that you don't ask. You just fucking take. You know what's mine is yours already.”

All I could do was absorb his words like I was absorbing his touch. It was seeping into my skin like the scented water. He turned us to face the fogged mirror. Through the droplets running, our reflections were somewhat distorted. But the look of two people completely lost in each other stared back at me.

Maybe because together like this, we were not separate people who existed outside of these moments.

I sucked in a lungful of soggy air when he continued the path down, turning me toward him. Getting to his haunches, he parted me.

“I don't think—” I trembled when his finger skimmed past my butt crack. “I should shower first—”

“Why?” His warm breath fanned over me, and my eyes snapped shut when his finger came to my entrance.

“I've been sweating—”

“I don't give a fuck. This is you, and you're mine. All of you. I want to

taste you just like you are. I want your perfume all over my skin.” He stuck his tongue inside of me, and his fingers started to circle me.

“Oh my—” I held onto the counter, my thighs already trembling from the rush of pleasure.

“So fucking good,” he mumbled against me, his tongue going back for more and more. He was making *mmm* noises, the tremble of his voice hitting me as hard as his tongue and fingers between the legs. “Are you wet for me, Leonora? Or is that the shower?”

“You,” I barely got out. “*Ahh!*” He bit me, but only enough to send more blood rushing to the sensitive bundle of nerves.

“You like when I bite you like that?”

“YES! Do it again!”

“Like this?” He started to nibble and suck, and I started to moan, rocking into his face and touch. The pace was much slower, more torturous, like he was molding me as he made me pliable. A shape that would only fit his hands. And I lost all control. My hips bucked as I tried to prolong my orgasm.

I could barely open my eyes. He slipped his hand underneath my dripping hair and pulled my mouth to his. He tasted like salt and me.

He kept our faces close enough that I could stick my tongue out and lick the beads of water over his lip. “You like the way my mouth tastes with the scent of you on my tongue?”

I tried to bridge the gap, to show him how much I liked how I tasted on his lips, but he held me in place with my hair.

“You want more?” He stuck his tongue out just a little, and when I surged forward, he let me.

Our tongues touched before our mouths crashed.

We kissed as we moved toward the shower, my hands undressing him before we stepped fully under the warm sprays.

The kiss was totally consuming. It swallowed every inhabitation whole.

I had to break it to breathe, but he never truly let me catch my breath. I was constantly a heartbeat ahead, or maybe behind, when he touched me, kissed me, was in the same room as me.

Again, he was right.

This was the moment in Paradiso—the first moment our eyes met from across the room.

He sucked down my neck, making the blood rush to the surface of each

spot. My hands reached out for steady ground, but even the tiles were slick. I reached out for him instead, and when my fingertips made contact, he groaned deep inside of his throat. The sound made my uterus contract and my nipples ache.

His mouth moved even lower, and when he closed it around my nipple and started to suck, the moan from my throat met the deep one from his. I was still so sensitive between my legs, and I almost felt like I could orgasm again just from what he was doing to me.

My hand slid down his shoulder, and my palm rested against the frantic beat of his heart. I needed to feel it, to make sure I wasn't the only one feeling this...immense intensity between us. I kept my hand steady, but it was like I'd pushed him across the shower a second later.

His chest heaved and his nostrils flared like he'd just run a marathon. "Mr. Big" was a pathetic way to describe what was between his legs. It was more like Mr. Monstrous. And it was bobbing with the almost violent motion of pulling away from me.

"Even with all this water, I'm still fucking burning for you." His voice was as low as his hooded eyes, and it was as warm as the water as it fell over my skin. Droplets had collected on his long, inky lashes, and they ran down his face. Steam rose around him, and his skin was flushed from the heat.

I'd been unsteady on my feet from his intensity a few times. It made me feel caged in with emotions I never wanted to be close to. It reminded me that there was a power inside all of us that wasn't ours to control or to give. If it decided to go, it just went, whether we wanted it to or not.

That was why falling in love was such a risky gamble. If it wasn't reciprocated or it was used as a weapon...

I hated that it felt like mine was going to him. But if this wasn't one-sided...he should feel it too, and like me, not be able to run from it.

He'd shackled me, but he also shackled himself *to* me.

My feet took the couple of steps that bridged the gap between us. He had no place to move. He was cornered. I set my hands on his shoulders, getting close enough that my nipples pressed against his slick chest, and whispered in his ear, "It's that moment, right?"

The noise from his throat was a mixture between a growl and a plea. In a rush, he turned me toward the seat in the shower and ordered me to put my hands against it.

He spread my legs with his knee and ran a hand between my folds. From

the side of my eye, I watched as he closed his eyes and sucked his finger clean. He took a firm grip of my hips before he slid inside of me.

We both groaned.

He stilled, giving me a chance to adjust to his size, and then he started fucking me like a crazed man. A man who, suddenly, was trying to outrun whatever feelings were chasing him.

Maybe they were making him angry, as angry as he made me, because he wasn't used to running. Each stroke was deliberate, and I felt it almost too deep, like he was wedged too far inside, and I'd never be able to dislodge him.

He was the source of my greatest pleasure *and* my pain.

The shower was hot and full of steam, but sweat stung my eyes. The taste of salt invaded my mouth from the sheer power of what he was doing to my body.

My moans met his grunts as his body slapped against mine. I could feel his balls hit with the momentum. I pushed against him, meeting his thrusts, and he pulled my hair.

"You want to give as good as you take?" He spread my legs even wider and thrust so hard, I lost my breath. "You fucking do. Because your body was made for mine. *Mine*," he growled in my ear while he claimed me. "So fucking gorgeous. *Mine*."

I couldn't tell if he was causing more internal fractures or healing them.

"Harder!" I'd never had orgasms inside before, and it felt like my walls were pulsating, tightening around him to a tipping point, and I was almost there. "Harder!"

"Fuck!"

He was losing the fight against control, and so was I.

I came around him with a cry that could shatter glass. He pulled out at the last second and jerked himself on my ass, cursing and grunting. The sound came from deep inside of his chest.

If I wasn't still spiraling from what he'd done to me, the noise alone would have sent me over. My skin felt so sensitive, like a touch would bring me to my knees, and my chest burned.

Little by little, breath by breath, the real world was coming back to me.

The sound of the shower. The scents of it. The feel of the tiles against my palms.

I went to stand but was unsteady on my feet. Big lifted me up and kept

me pressed against his chest. He rocked me in the shower for a few seconds, like he was hearing music, before placing a kiss against the slowing pulse in my neck. I turned my face some and placed a kiss on his lips. His eyes narrowed for a second before they became hooded again.

He grabbed for the soap and started washing me clean.

I all but melted in his arms.

CHAPTER 11

Leonora

WE WERE quiet as we dressed after the shower. It wasn't awkward, but there was something different between us. Something that felt new and, quite honestly, frightening.

I knew he felt it too. He'd never been this quiet before.

Maybe he was rethinking the entire arrangement.

Good. Because if my knees hadn't been so weak from what we'd done, I might have tried to run.

He gave me a look through the mirror, like he'd heard my thoughts, and shook his head subtly.

That was freaky too. How easily he could read me. I'd never been a closed book, but I only opened to people I trusted, and those were few and far between.

I sighed and tried not to stare at his sculpted chest as he pulled on a pair of grey sweatpants. "Do you happen to have a blow dryer?"

He touched a bunch of drawers and they opened at his command. A variety of female products—and a blow dryer—were housed inside, still in boxes.

He shrugged at the look I gave him. "Lidia—who sees to my penthouse—thought you might need all those things. She left most of it in boxes in case it's not your taste. Said she'd donate the rejects and then buy whatever you want."

"Did Lidia know about the shampoo, conditioner, and body wash I use at home too?" He had all of them in his shower.

He ran a comb through his hair. "I like the smell of it."

“You do?”

“Reminds me of Greece.”

“Ah.” I found a nice hairbrush Lidia had bought for me and used it to comb through the tangles in my hair. “Aphrodite. It’s all starting to make sense.”

He didn’t comment on that, just told me he’d meet me in the kitchen. Yeah. He was totally rethinking this thing between us.

“Aphrodite?”

I turned with the blow dryer box in my hands. “Yeah?”

“That ring on your finger—it’s not there just for decoration. It means something to me. And when something means something to me, I take it fucking seriously. There is no slipping through the cracks with me. I’ll catch you every time.”

The ending part of his statement caught me off guard. He either meant he’d catch me if I tried to run—every time—or he’d catch me before I fell—every time. Or maybe he meant it either way, depending on my thoughts.

“Mmhmm.” I turned from him and finished getting ready for bed on autopilot. I tried not to make it a habit of overthinking my life, and I had to focus hard on not thinking about Big and where we were headed.

I’d met my quota of placing this entire situation underneath a microscope, and maybe after a snack, sleep was what I needed. Because even though he’d said I was in this situation because I owed him, it didn’t feel that way.

It felt like I’d done something for him. What? I had no fucking clue.

Lidia didn’t seem to buy me any pajamas, so I slipped on the T-shirt Big had left on the bathroom counter. It fell to my thighs and was as soft as skin. It even smelled like him. I couldn’t place the exact scent, but I loved it. It wasn’t overdone, but it was there.

I padded barefoot to the kitchen where Big was plating up food. I stood behind him and sniffed over his shoulder. It was some kind of pasta dish with oozing cheese in the middle. “That smells like heaven. I can’t remember when I last ate.”

“Lidia takes care of everything for me. I personally brought her and her husband here from Italy. He’s the head chef in our restaurant. Not many people can cook like they can—authentically—and I trust them. Especially her. That’s why she’s allowed in my personal space. She keeps the place stocked, and she’ll be waiting to hear from you—everything you want and need. If you need her, just dial 11 on any of the phones. She’ll give you her

personal cell to use when you're outside of the grounds. She's available from 5 am to 5 pm, but she's so good, I rarely need to call her."

Big set the plates on the table, along with everything we needed. He held out my seat for me and I took it, digging right in. The food was so good, and I said so.

"What is this called?"

"Orecchiette with burrata."

"I taste lemon."

"It's in there."

"Lidia would give Vinny a run for his money. All his recipes were passed down. He sometimes gets in the kitchen himself and does a special for the club, but mostly he serves hamburgers and fries, things like that."

Big only nodded in acknowledgment, taking a sip of his water. He'd poured me a glass of wine. It went perfectly with the light sauce of the dish.

We were quiet as we ate, until Big pushed his empty plate and glass to the side.

"Contained feelings bottle up violence, Leonora. Speak what's on your mind—always."

"I don't have a problem with that. Usually." I grinned, but this topic was serious, and it made me anxious. His response to what I was about to say could change the entire course of things—for better or for worse. "But here goes. I have two brothers who depend on me. I'm not their mother or their father, but I'm the only parental figure in their lives. What I did—steal from you—I'd do again, even if it meant losing my hand, because I care about them that much. I refuse to be separated from them, and I also refuse to allow the wrong people in their lives. I'm not the best at this—raising them." I thought carefully about my next words before I shared them.

"Angelo, he's angrier at his mom and our dad than Phoenix is, though he says he's not. I'm not sure if I'm reaching him, or failing him, but the way I see it...I'm there. I'll always be there for them. And I hope that's enough. But...this, between us, came unexpectedly, like the issue with Jerry Rispoli. I had no idea Angelo knew what he was delivering. Jerry Rispoli might not have told him, but he knew. My brothers are smart kids.

"Anyway. My point is...I have people who rely on me. Even if you make me suffer, I refuse to allow what I've done to touch them. I just want what's best for them. They've had a hard life already." I picked up the glass and drained the rest of the wine.

I hated that I was so vulnerable, especially since it had to do with two young lives, not just mine. I remembered what the article said, too, about his parents' relationship being violent. It was the same for my brothers' mom and our dad.

My mom was too far gone on drugs to really fight with him, but our dad was arrested more than once for domestic abuse. Judging by what Big had said—contained feelings bottle up violence—I hoped that was a cycle he refused to repeat.

“What I said earlier, about wanting all of you, still stands, Aphrodite.”

Not knowing what to say, I finished my food and then took our dirty dishes to the kitchen. I went to start washing, but Big stopped me.

“Lidia will take care of those.”

“But—”

He shook his head. “She’ll feel like she’s not doing what I hired her to do. We’ve had this conversation before. She’s proud and will get insulted if I step over the line of what she feels is part of her job.”

“You must pay her a lot,” I mumbled as he led me toward his bedroom.

I had no qualms in climbing in his bed and burying myself under his probably thousand-dollar comforter. The penthouse was cool, and the blanket felt like it was adjusting to my body temperature or something. It was the definition of perfect. It had been years since I’d had a bed, and none like this when I did, and it almost made me want to cry. It was so fucking comfortable.

My eyes drifted to Big, who was propped up against the headboard, reading something on his phone. He wore black reading glasses, and in sweatpants with no shirt, he looked sexy enough to climb on top of, move until the friction...

My eyes closed.

I had the sweetest dreams.

Of him.

CHAPTER 12

Mr. Big

AN ALARM KEPT GOING OFF. It wasn't mine. I had a tight schedule. Wake up at 4, exercise till 5 in my gym, shower and eat by 6, then the rest of the day depended on the needs of the casino.

I didn't mention it to Leonora, but Lidia's schedule was tailored to fit mine. It worked for me, but I wasn't sure how it was going to work for her and her brothers. I might need to bring someone on just for them. Or see if Lidia could accommodate. I wasn't fucking exaggerating when I said she was the best. And her husband ran one of the most famous kitchens in the world like a tight ship.

Portofino's kitchen—Nervina.

Like most unforgettable Italian restaurants that were built on the backs of the Italians who were proud of their recipes, Nervina's dishes were from my family. Lidia's husband took those recipes and brought them into modern day, but he was somehow capable of keeping the roots intact.

That was important to me when I took over.

The alarm went off again, and I knew I wasn't fucking dreaming it. I also wasn't imagining the Aphrodite in my bed. Her hair was plastered to the pillow, and she was clinging to me. Her arm was over my chest and her leg over mine.

It was like she hadn't slept in years.

And...Aphrodite. I'd never given a woman a nickname before. I even gave Gio shit for months when I heard him call a woman he wanted to fuck a little minx. But the name suited Leonora. She embodied the idea of Aphrodite.

She was full of love and beauty, and maybe this was an off trait, but she was loyal. She took care of her brothers, even though she didn't have to. She could have said let the state deal with them and lived her life.

Most of the world seemed to lose sight of those qualities, but when you went without, the value of those things goes up.

She was priceless to me.

The irritant went off again. It was her phone. I carefully detached her, and she just rolled over, sighing as she pulled the covers up to her neck.

Before it could go off again, and this time wake her up because she was turned toward it, I lifted it from the side table and took it with me into the bathroom.

She'd set an alarm so she wouldn't be late to go to the hospital to see her brothers. Apparently, the younger one was staying with the older one. I suspected it had something to do with Leonora's mother being indifferent to her husband's kids with another woman.

She'd even added a note to the alarm: *Get up!!! I know the bed is comfortable, but Angelo and Phoenix are waiting for you!!!*

So was the fucking day. It was the anniversary of Portofino's grand opening, and we had a celebration every year for it. So did Paradiso. We even shared a firework display. It lit up the sky behind both of our casinos with a merger of the American flag and the Italian flag. Our grandfathers thought it was symbolic.

Leonora would be on my arm. The entire city would know she was mine after the night was over. That meant that any man who looked at her twice would be gambling with his eyesight.

After I did the basics in the bathroom, I dressed in a suit and took Leonora's phone with me to the bedroom. I set it back on the nightstand and took a seat on the edge of the bed. I placed my hand in the dip of her hip and leaned in close to her ear.

I breathed her in, and before I could wake her up, she said, "That's creepy, Big."

A laugh tore out of me, and her eyes fluttered open.

"Why are you waking me up so early?"

"You set the alarm."

She popped up like she'd been electrocuted and snatched her phone. Her face immediately relaxed when she realized she was ahead of the clock. "I need to see my brothers. They don't like it when I'm late."

I leaned in and pressed a hard kiss to her forehead. “I don’t either. Today is a big day. I need you ready by 5 o’clock.” I pulled my wallet out and set a card with no limit next to the bed. “You’ll need a dress. The designer store downstairs has plenty of options, but if none of those will do, the world is your playground. Do your worst with that card.” I lifted my arm and checked the time on my watch. “Lidia should be here now.”

She stopped me by calling my name before I left. “What about you? No breakfast?”

“I usually have a schedule, but I’m breaking it today. I have a few pressing issues that need to be taken care of.”

She nodded, getting comfortable in the bed again.

On my way out, a picture of me with my mother on a table stopped me.

My mom was half Greek, half Italian. Her mother and father still lived in Greece when she moved to Las Vegas and married my father. When things would get particularly bad between her and my father, she would take me to Greece with her.

It was the only peace I knew as a kid.

I even remembered Kitty taking me to Big the older when she thought they might kill each other. Big the older liked my mother more than he did his own son. He felt being reliant on anything was a severe weakness for a man.

Occasionally my mother would try to quit drinking, but he never did. Together, they were toxic. She knew it, but she always went back. He’d promise to quit, to get help, but he never did. And she’d hold all her frustration and anger inside until she started to drink again, and they would drive each other to the brink.

The fucking cycle would start again.

Those times when she’d take me to Greece, though, I had a mother, a parent, and Greece came to stand for more than a place.

It was a section of heaven.

It was home.

“Oh!” Leonora slid out of our bedroom when she realized I was still in the penthouse. She’d been rushing out and couldn’t put the brakes on fast enough. “I thought you’d left already.” Her eyes glanced down at the photo. She came to stand beside me. “That’s you and your mom?”

“Yeah.” I set it back.

“She’s such a natural beauty.” She studied the picture more carefully.

“Are you in Greece here?”

“We’d go occasionally. Her mom was Greek.”

Her eyes stilled on the photo, but I could tell her mind was churning. She bit her lip for a second before she asked, “How was it? Greece? I’ve never left Nevada.”

“It’s warm. Smells like sea water, night-blooming jasmine, and fresh herbs—basil and rosemary. A place worthy of Aphrodite. It always felt like home to me.”

“Sounds like the description of my body wash. It even says something about Greece.” She smiled at me, and then her eyes froze on mine when she realized what it meant.

Home wasn’t an actual place but a person.

Her.

She was my home.

She carried with her all those things that makes a man like me tether himself to a woman.

I knew it the moment her eyes met mine in Paradiso. It was confirmed when my mom’s favorite song came on in the car. Like she was letting me know she approved of Leonora. She liked her.

Her stunned eyes were still on me as I left.

GIO CALLED as Umberto and I were leaving the casino.

“How’s it going, Mr. Big Stuff?” He started to play the song in the background.

The line went quiet when I hung up on him. A second later, he called me back.

“I need a cousin with a better fucking sense of humor.”

“You have one. His name is Corrado Capitani.” Corrado was his cousin on his grandfather’s side. Old Gio and Emilio, who was Corrado’s grandfather, were brothers. Emilio was the head of one of the five families in New York.

“Get the fuck out of here with that ballsy lie. Corrado wouldn’t laugh if someone was falling. But speaking of the devil. Emilio’s giving him shit about being married already. You know how those old-timers are. Makes it

look better if he has a wife. It's like having a good credit score when you're looking for insurance. Corrado is in town to get away for a while. Anyway. I have more information on that situation we were discussing. That guy we were talking about has been having meetings here."

That was interesting. Lou was having meetings with someone in Gio's casino.

"Who?"

"That's the million fucking dollar question."

For some reason, Gio not knowing who Lou had been meeting with made me uneasy. Most of the time a rat wasn't hard to sniff out, but occasionally one or two blended.

Gio changed the subject, warning me that it was going to be a full moon and all the unstable population would be out.

"That little minx needs to tie you to the bed then."

He hung up on me.

"And he says I don't have a fucking sense of humor."

Umberto grinned.

My first stop was to buy a house for Leonora. Her brothers needed a different atmosphere to grow up in. I was going to have a talk with them before the oldest left the hospital. I knew what it was to be a man living in a boy's body, and it seemed like the oldest was similar.

Our next stop was Dynamic. Georgia Fedele got there early sometimes to look over the costumes. It was rumored that she was sick, and that Joe had married her so she'd have health insurance. I knew Leonora had no clue about the situation. I would have never pried before, but it seemed like something Leonora should know. I could tell they were tight. It was something I wanted to prepare for.

After that, I bought the apartment complex Leonora lived in with her mother and brothers. I had a talk with Linda Davies, who didn't care where her daughter went as long as the rent was paid and she had what she needed.

Umberto, who was usually quiet and reserved unless provoked, hit the target when he said Linda Davies checked out a long time ago.

In between business, I checked on Leonora through the men I had trailing her. She spent some time with her brothers, then went shopping.

A text came up on my phone from her number, even though I didn't give it to her.

You're right. I love Lidia. We're best friends now.

How did you get my number?

My best friend.

At least she hadn't upped her armor considering my earlier confession. It wouldn't have been unlike her. Whenever she got close to dropping her guard, she'd look at me like she was convincing herself that I was going to bolt. That she somehow scared me.

I wasn't the type to cower. Period.

My phone went off again.

She also told me about your sex rooms.

I called Lidia, and she started screaming at me in Italian when I asked her why she'd lied. Then the phone was pulled away and Leonora said, "Grow a sense of humor, Big!" I heard her muttering about the translation app on her phone before she hung up on me.

The last thing was a shit show, but by the end of it, justice had been served. Freddie Money had moved on from the girl who had Leonora arrested. He didn't want to find his head disconnected from his body if he didn't drop her. It wasn't a threat if I made good on my word.

After a few calls, the only place in town who would hire her was me.

The man who'd be married to the woman she hated.

When I finally got home, the entire place smelled different. Like perfume and women's products. The people Lidia had hired to help Leonora get ready were in action.

I used a spare bedroom and bathroom to shower and get ready. I'd texted Lidia earlier to tell her where to bring my tuxedo. I didn't want to disrupt the flow of anything going on with Leonora.

Thirty minutes ahead of schedule, I poured myself a drink—my once-a-year allowance—and walked over to the window looking out over Vegas.

Another thirty minutes went by, and Aphrodite was making me sweat in my custom-made tux.

I texted Lidia. ***ETA.***

Venus has landed, her response was almost immediate.

Best friends must tell each other every fucking thing. Lidia had called her Venus, the Roman equivalent of Aphrodite. I'd never called her that in front of anyone, so I knew Leonora had told her.

I fixed my tux and made sure my hair was in place before I set off to find the goddess I was waiting on.

She was on the other side of the penthouse, gazing out of another

window.

My feet stopped in their tracks.

She was wearing an embellished Grecian-style dress that was made for her body. Her hair was half up and half down, and I could smell her essence floating in the air.

Her eyes moved to the right a little, and she startled when she realized she wasn't alone.

A slight smile lit up her face as she turned around to face me. "I'm your Aphrodite, so..." She did this weird little curtsy, showing off a thigh-high slit and sexy heels that wrapped around her ankles.

"You don't need a dress to prove it." My voice was rough.

"I know," she whispered. "I just..." She looked away for a second before she met my eyes. "I wanted to wear something special. Something that spoke to you."

"All I can see is you. All I can hear is you. Everything else is foreign. Translate for me."

"This dress says... *this woman says yes, even if she wasn't asked. Because you can't just ask a woman like her. The answer will always be no, until a man like you makes her stubborn heart admit it's ready.*"

I closed the gap between us, pushing her against the wall, kissing her until she melted into my arms.

It was never about what she owed me. It was always about this. Getting her right here, to this moment of surrender.

I'd fucking surrendered to her the moment I'd seen her.

For her heart to turn, I knew I was going to have to turn her resolve. She would have rather I cut off her hand instead of marrying me. And in my own fucked-up way, that was how I knew it was real between us. Real fear will make a person do crazy shit, and if she wasn't truly afraid of what existed between us, she wouldn't have put her hand down and told me to take it.

She was offering it to me now.

She was quiet as I bypassed everyone vying for my time, until we set foot in the ballroom of the casino, and she repeated vows to me that would last forever.

The rest of the night, I introduced her to my world as my wife, Mrs. Bigatti.

CHAPTER 13

Mr. Big

BEFORE MY WIFE'S alarm went off, I took her phone and turned it off. We'd just gotten to bed an hour ago. Angelo was being released from the hospital, and she wanted to be on time to pick him and Phoenix up. I wanted to get to her brothers first. She'd told them she was getting married, but she didn't go into detail about how much she'd told them about me—about us.

She was my wife, and it was time I introduced myself as her husband. Depending on what time Angelo was released, Leonora could meet us there or at the new house. She didn't know about it yet. It was going to be a surprise for all of them.

Except for my time in Italy, I'd never lived outside of the casino. Even though I was only going to be a few minutes away, it was going to be an adjustment. I'd made a bed for myself at Portofino and made it my life.

How fucking wild the twists of life could be. I hadn't planned on her either—or ever expected to get married after I decided not to marry in Italy.

Different time. Different place. Different man.

After a shower, I dressed in a suit and met Lidia and Umberto in the kitchen. He was finishing his coffee and cornetto. Lidia mirrored his breakfast but gave it to me to go.

I didn't want to be late.

While I dodged traffic, I turned on the radio. An old romantic song played, and I turned it up. Umberto looked between the dash and me. It was usually Gio who was into this sound, but what the fuck. I was feeling it.

"I see you, boss," Umberto said in Italian, and he grinned at me.

The entire population of Vegas could see me. I was fucking burning for a woman who was so hot, I was lit up like the biggest neon sign along the strip.

At the hospital, Umberto went to talk to the men I'd ordered to watch Angelo's door since I found out what happened with Jerry Rispoli. It wouldn't be beneath him to kill Angelo, even Phoenix, if he thought they were ratting on him.

The Rispoli brothers usually kept a low profile, but they could be paranoid. Especially if they saw me or my men hanging around. The only thing worse would be the cops.

I knocked on the door once with my knuckle before I let myself in. Angelo was sitting on the bed. Phoenix was sitting on the sofa, a pull-out bed situation the hospital had. Their bags were packed, and they were dressed. Both of their eyes widened when I walked in and introduced myself as Leonora's husband.

"Where is Leonora?" Phoenix asked.

"She's either going to meet us here or at the new house."

"What new house?" Phoenix seemed like he was starting to get nervous.

"I bought it as a surprise for Leonora. That's why I came early. I wanted you two in on it."

"We get to come with her, right?"

"You go where she goes. The three of you are a package deal."

The entire time Phoenix was shooting questions at me, I could feel Angelo's stare on my face. I met his eyes.

"I know who you are, Tullio Bigatti. They call you Mr. Big around town."

"How does a kid your age know who I am?"

He laughed, but sarcastically. "I'm not a fool, Mr. Big, and that's what it would take not to know who you are. Leonora went to you, right? When she found out who I was working for? Because Rispoli works for you. And you fell in love with her. She should come with a warning sign, but everything in Vegas is a gamble, right?"

"Smart kid."

"You're in love with Leonora?" This from Phoenix.

"Yeah." I looked at him. "I am."

"Good." He nodded. "She needs someone to treat her right."

"Phoenix." Angelo narrowed his eyes at him, a clear signal to shut up.

"It's true, Angelo. She's exhausted because she works too much. She

doesn't even have a bed in the apartment. We stress her out. Linda stresses her out. And for the past couple of years, she's dated nothing but losers." He looked at me. "You won't take off with our crap paper, will you? Because it's expensive and restaurant napkins feel like sandpaper when you can't afford it. You dress real nice, though, but so did—"

"Shut the fuck up, Phoenix," Angelo snapped.

"That really happened?" I asked.

Phoenix kept his mouth shut even while I stared at him. I turned my attention to Angelo.

He sighed and his shoulders came down. "Yeah, it did. Phoenix is right. She's dated nothing but losers who burned her—bad. I'm not calling you a loser, Mr. Big, but again, I'm no fool. I know what this life means for a woman. Our dad was in it. Leonora doesn't deserve it. And now it's my fault she's...trapped."

Leonora had never outright told me these things, but I knew she'd been burned to the point where she built a fireproof guard around what was left of her heart. She still had it up, and full entry was something I was going to have to earn over the years. She wasn't like the rest—she was a hard win. And she was fucking worth it. Just like she thought these kids were.

"I take care of what I love, understand?"

Angelo used his good arm to swipe his dark hair to the side. "You really love her?"

"I do. She's home to me too."

Angelo thought about that for a second. "Yeah. All right. But I'm just warning you—I'll buy your words for now, but all promises come with a return policy. One day I'll be older, and I'll be just as dangerous as you are. If you hurt her...I won't forget it."

This fucking kid. I liked him already. Both of them. "Noted."

"Is Jerry Rispoli going to try to kill Angelo?"

The turn in conversation made me whip my attention to Phoenix. "You've been worried about it?"

"Yeah. He's the only brother I have. And Rispoli left him with the broken arm as a warning. He might have even killed him that night if it wasn't for someone else showing up."

"You're under my protection. No one touches either of you."

They visibly relaxed, and I took a seat next to Phoenix, questioning Angelo about what he knew about the operation Jerry Rispoli had going. He

was reticent, at first, like he was rattin'. I knew what I had on my hands for the future—a man who'd find himself in similar shoes to my own. It was already apparent in him. But maybe I could turn his direction some. Keep him on a path to success, but without the bloodshed.

He didn't know that much, only what he'd put together. He knew he was delivering drugs, but he said he purposely didn't ask questions, just did what he was told for the money he got in return. If he was late to the meet-up point —

He motioned to his arm. “Lesser of the punishments. I figured it was because it threw everything off, and it made the people Rispoli was delivering to nervous.”

Yeah, that either I or the cops would find out. Either way, a death sentence.

My phone went off. Aphrodite. She was breathless on the other end. “Big? I'm going to *kill* you! You shut my alarm off and now I'm late—you have no idea—”

I put the phone on speaker. Phoenix told her to chill out and she grew quiet, though I could still hear her breathing.

“Phoenix?”

“It's me! Angelo's here too, but he's being Angelo. Say something as proof of life so she'll chill.”

“What up, Leonora?”

“Big, take me off speaker.” She exhaled loudly when I did. “You're at the hospital?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“It was time I met your brothers. Thought they might need a ride too. Seems like one of them has been released from this joint.”

Phoenix laughed.

“You were on time?”

“Early.”

She grew quiet, but I could tell she was pacing. “Okay. Okay.” I'd never heard her repeat herself before, but I could hear the immense relief in those two words. “Lidia said I should meet you there?”

“Nah, we're about to leave. Meet us at the address I texted you before I left.”

A second later. “Shit. Okay. I didn't see this text.”

“Relax, Aphrodite. I got this.”

“Thank you, Big,” she whispered, and hung up.

“That’s a nice name for her,” Phoenix said. “Aphrodite. It’s not cutesy, because she’s definitely not. She’s more like a lioness, though there’s something about her that’s soft, like beauty, and romantic.”

Angelo nodded, agreeing.

I texted Umberto and told him to have one of the men come in and bring the boys’ things out, then I went to use the bathroom. I heard the door open to the room a few seconds later.

At first, I thought it was Umberto or one of the men coming to grab the bags, but Angelo’s voice was loud as he said, “What do you want, Rispoli?”

As quietly as I could, I cracked the door. Rispoli’s back was to me, and he was wearing an orderly’s uniform. My eyes went to the floor. It wasn’t much, but he’d tracked blood in the room. He must have killed someone for that uniform.

He pulled a bloodied knife from his pocket, confirming my suspicion. He pointed it at both boys and ordered Phoenix on the bed next to Angelo. Phoenix looked to Angelo for permission before he moved.

Angelo’s eyes flicked to the bathroom door, and I held a finger to my mouth before he hurriedly looked back at Rispoli.

The motherfucker was going to slit their throats. It was quieter than a gun but not as fast. He was probably gambling on making them feel like he was only going to threaten them, right before he went in for the kill.

“You been talking, you little shit?” He pointed the knife at Angelo.

While he was occupied, I stepped out without making a noise and hit him in the back of the head with my gun.

The boys’ eyes were wide, and I could tell they were hyped up, but keeping it pent up.

I grabbed a pair of gloves from a box on the wall. I slipped them on and took him by the collar, dragging him with me to the bathroom. I shut the door behind me before I drowned the motherfucker in the toilet.

A few minutes later, Umberto came in and shook his head. “This should be easy. We just need to roll him to the right room.”

“Too bad we can’t just fucking flush him.”

He agreed and I shut the door behind me.

Angelo and Phoenix were still in the same spots. Almost frozen to one another.

“Rispoli won’t be bothering either of you.”

They nodded, almost in tandem.

I sighed. “Whatever you do, don’t tell your sister about this.”

Angelo grinned and Phoenix hopped down from the bed.

We left.

CHAPTER 14

Mrs. Big

IT WAS OFFICIAL. On all legal documents, because Big pushed them through, and on my license plate. And more than in those ways combined, in the eyes of my husband.

I was Mrs. Big.

It had only been—what?—twenty-four-hours, but he'd changed my name, my address, and the guard around my heart.

It was softening, conforming to fit this new addition inside of it.

My husband.

Once he was in, it was just like in his world. He would never be out.

This change was big, though, and there was a lot of fear in letting go of past hurts and let downs, but when I looked at him, I was never more certain in my life of this one thing:

He was worth the gamble.

Maybe some would say worth the heartbreak that comes with love, because it's just a part of it. But I had faith that as the years flew by, we would both be in it to win it.

Together, we were home.

I sighed and shielded my eyes from the blazing sun as I looked up at the new house Big bought for us. It was big, like his presence, but I loved that he gave the boys a room to share. They had plenty of space in the house for themselves, but that small thing would keep them close.

That was what I wanted for them. For all of us. Always.

My mom...that was a different story and always would be. When I looked at my situation from a different perspective, it was time that I

accepted her for who she was: a woman who had not guarded her heart, but hardened it to the point that no one was allowed in.

Not even me.

It saddened me, always would, but there was great power in acceptance. And it softened my heart toward her some.

Again, I was thankful that Mr. Big wasn't just a nickname for my husband. He was teaching me things in big ways and helping me make big changes in my life. Like seeing how I was on the road to becoming my mom.

This was a huge beginning for all of us, and for once, I couldn't wait to see where life was heading.

"You coming, Leonora?"

I startled when Angelo came to stand next to me.

"In a minute. I'm just enjoying the view." The house looked like it belonged in the Mediterranean, and the boys had been checking out the sea, aka, the pool.

"It's nice. But I was okay living in our apartment."

I turned to him and questioned his statement with the look on my face.

He shrugged. "As long as you're there with us...it doesn't matter. Like Big said. You're our home." He touched my hand, then followed behind Phoenix into the house.

I couldn't move. All the fractures seemed like they were healing at once. The feelings behind his words. The courage it took for him to say them out loud...

It was the medicine I needed to heal.

"You okay, Aphrodite?"

Big's voice snapped me out of it, and I flung my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his, burying my face in his neck. It took him off guard, because at first, he wasn't sure where to set his hands. Then he pulled me to him and hugged me so tight, I almost couldn't breathe.

Without a word, we separated some, but we were still close. I had to look up at him to meet his eyes. I realized he hadn't been to work all day.

"Don't you have a casino to run?"

"Not right now. This is my honeymoon."

I laughed and wiped my eyes, even though I wasn't crying.

He took my hand and started leading me to the hundred-car garage. "Where are we going?"

"For a ride." He held his free hand up. "Lidia is in love with your brothers

already. She's even appointed herself Nonna Lidia. She's teaching them how to make pizza as we speak."

When I realized just how much their lives were going to change for the better...my knees almost went out. I knew Lidia was good people the second I met her. She would be wonderful to the boys.

Big opened the door to a car I'd never seen before. A Bugatti with the top down. I had to ask what the model was. W16 Mistral.

"Another gift from the Fausti family?"

He grinned. "A gift for my wife, for our drives."

I slid inside, knowing this would be our thing. Rides when the world felt too small so we could get lost in the big sky, or in times of celebration when we just wanted to absorb life and be together.

There was just one thing I wanted to add to our ritual.

"IT'S PINK." Big held the cup up, examining the strawberries floating around in the liquid like they were suspect.

"I should warn you now...you'll get addicted. And if not, more for me." I took a long drink, hoping it would make it the entire drive. That was why I always got light ice.

He took a drink. "All right." He took another. "All right. I can see how this could be worth a trip to the slammer."

A grin I couldn't dislodge came to my face. He kept drinking it. I wasn't sure if he would, or if he would have a hard time admitting he liked the taste of it because it was pink. It took Vinny and Sam a while to admit it. We'd busted them in the office with them. Then Vinny said he didn't give a shit, men enjoyed strawberries too, and that was that.

By the time we got to Red Rock Canyon, I had the radio playing low, and the sun was just starting to set in the sky, the stars flowing out above us after daylight sank into its bed.

We both gazed up for a while before he took my hand. "You're fucking cold." He tucked my hand underneath his shirt, and the warmth from his chiseled stomach enveloped my skin.

"Not really," I whispered. "It's just from the drink."

He looked into my eyes. "I can't promise to always have this much time,

Aphrodite, but I always want you close. At the house or at the casino.”

I nodded. “I want that too.”

He pulled an envelope from between the seats and handed it to me. “Open it.”

A picture of Greece. My eyes met his.

“A place we’ve never been together, but somehow we have.”

His comment wouldn’t have made sense if he hadn’t told me I took him home, to the only place he’d ever found peace. But it made complete sense, and my heart skipped to a funny beat.

A part of me had been with him before he even knew it.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against his. “What about the Italian Riviera? We’ve never been together, but somehow, we have.”

A part of him had been with me before I even knew it.

It was the reason why I was so angry at the thought of being with him. Because someplace deep inside, I knew who he was to me—the man who’d hold my heart—and it scared me. Even when I’d heard his name, it seemed to awaken something inside of me, a voice that blamed him for my entire life being the way it was.

It was the fear talking.

The fear of getting burned again, because not much of my heart wasn’t damaged.

Tullio Bigatti wasn’t the bane of my existence. He was the heart of it, and I knew he was the reason mine was still intact. I’d saved it for him.

“I love you the sky big,” I whispered.

“That moment in Paradiso big?”

I grinned. “Even bigger.”

He told me he loved me big too and kissed me underneath the stars.

CHAPTER 15

Mr. Big

PRELUDE TO ITALIAN ROULETTE

MY WIFE HAD her eyes closed as we drove back to our house. The wind tugged at the scarf she had over her hair, trying to steal it. But the sight of her so warm and so fucking relaxed...it made me feel impulsive, like when I was in Italy, and the world was a different place for me. My car was home, and the tracks were roads that led to forever.

I wanted her in Greece, her body hot from the sun and from the touch of my hand. I could already feel myself buried deep inside of her. Fucking her right until she shattered around my cock.

My phone rang, and my dash told me it was Gio calling.

Perfect fucking timing.

“Bigatti.”

I expected him to ask me what was up. I looked down and Leonora started laughing.

“Tullio.” Gio’s voice was completely serious. He rarely called me by my first name. “We have a problem.”

My body went rigid.

“Come see me at Paradiso.” The line went dead.

Leonora looked at me, her brows tight. “What was that about?”

“I don’t know, but we’re about to fucking find out.”

I drove straight to Paradiso and took Leonora’s hand as we walked inside. The doorman greeted us. “Mr. and Mrs. Bigatti.”

Leonora looked down at herself, like she was self-conscious of being in a T-shirt and jeans. I lifted her hand and kissed it. “You look beautiful.”

“This is not exactly the dress code in here, Big.”

“You’re my wife. You have no codes unless it comes to me.”

“Mind if I chill in the bar and grab a bite to eat while you have your meeting? I’m starving. The music sounds really nice too.”

I nodded, then made eye contact with the bartender. He was the same one who was on duty the night I found Leonora. He’d given me the information on her. I nodded to my wife and gave him a look—a look he knew meant he better take care of her, or his luck would run out in Vegas.

I kissed her hand. “I won’t be long.”

“I’ll save you a seat. Should I order you anything?”

I told her to surprise me and watched as she claimed a table close to the stage.

When I made it to Gio’s penthouse, he was pacing in his office, his two dogs staring at him. He was still wearing the tux from the night of the celebration, the bow undone and hanging loosely around his neck. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had a five o’clock shadow. He smelled like old alcohol and sweat.

He slipped me a piece of paper across his desk.

Lou Rispoli came into the casino for the meeting. Thought it was going to be too busy for anyone to notice, like I thought. Corrado and I chased him out. He was with the man he’s been having meetings with. Turns out, the guy was a fed. Both are eating sand.

My eyes flashed to his. *You killed an undercover agent?*

He nodded at the question in my eyes.

“Fuck.” I sat back and took a deep breath. I used the lighter on his desk, next to the cigars, to burn the paper.

Gio sat in his chair, more like plopped, which was unusual for him. He guzzled whiskey straight from the bottle.

“Old man Gio?” I asked.

He felt Bugsy was too impulsive, and this was exactly why. He might even pass him up to officially run the casino after this. All Bugsy ever truly wanted. It all depended on the fallout.

He ran a hand down his face. “Not happy. He gambled with my future, Big. Made me throw the dice, let that decide whether I was in or out of Paradiso’s future. If the dice would have landed a breath the other way, I’d be banished to New York. *New York!*”

No one could ever accuse Giordano Capitani of fitting in in New York. He was Vegas through and through.

“What happened after you rolled the dice?”

He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. “Marriage.”

“To who?” Since his eyes were closed, I grinned some. “And when?”

“To *whom* has been taken care of. As of when?” He opened his desk drawer and produced a gold wedding band. “Done.”

“Who is she?”

A knock came at his office door. He told whoever it was to come in.

She looked between us. “Oh. I’ll—”

“I remember you.” A shit-eating grin came to my face. She worked at Dynamic.

“I remember you too. Is Leo here?”

I told her where she could find her, and when I turned back to Gio, he looked like his face had been drained of blood.

“I’m truly fucked.” He drank down the rest of the whiskey.

It would take Gio time to accept this. He was an eternal bachelor and had one of the hardest heads I’d ever encountered. But I thought marriage was going to be good for him—eventually.

I poured myself a glass of water. “You’re in a new club now.” I tapped my glass against the bottle and said, “*Saluti*,” before I downed it.

Mr. Big Extended

Months Later...

CHAPTER 16

Mrs. Big

SUMMER CAME in as hot as Lady Luck at the blackjack table. The arid heat was expected, since...Vegas. But it still took my breath away when I stepped outside. The cool air from Casino Portofino seemed to dissipate, and goosebumps scattered on my arms from the jump in temperature. I slid my sunglasses on and tried to ignore the chaperone we had following us to where Angelo pulled the car around.

My hands were nervous as they kept smoothing out my dress. My engagement ring snagged on a piece of fabric. When I looked down to fix it, the diamonds on my left finger shimmered softly, caressed by the natural light. They were fairly new, but like the fairly new husband beside me with his hand on the small of my back, I knew even when my hair turned silver and my skin wrinkled, they would always serve as a reminder:

I was his.

Just as the rings felt the warm kiss of the sun, I felt when the warmth of his protective hand seemed to ooze deep into my skin and relax my bones, even if my heart sped up.

It sped up even faster, but in a cold way as my eyes darted around. Casino Portofino was packed with tourists, the summer rush, but I couldn't stop the instinct to search for any signs of danger, like I'd be able to stop something terrible from happening before it did.

"Aphrodite." Big's voice was deep and calm as the pressure on my back increased. "You're good."

I took a deep breath in and tried to push down the panic that seized my chest like a hand squeezing my heart. "It's not me I'm worried about," I

grumbled. “It’s you.”

Before I could stop and face him, he lifted me off my feet and set me in the back seat of the armored SUV. The windows were tinted dark.

We faced off.

He lifted his eyebrows. “Now you’re just acting like you love me.”

I touched him where the bullet had gone through his shoulder. He didn’t wince, but I knew he was working hard to control his features. Beads of sweat rolled down his face.

“You’re human, Big, and the situation could have *easily* gone an entirely different way.”

A month ago, some fucking crazed person decided Tullio Bigatti needed to die. He was coming out of a business meeting, and he was lucky the shooter didn’t have a great aim, hitting Big’s shoulder instead of his neck.

Thinking of it—all of it—made me feel bloodless. The guy was still on the loose.

“It didn’t.”

“But it *could* have.” Like him, I was trying to disguise my pain, but the sources were coming from two different places. His was physical. Mine was much deeper than skin. And my voice reflected the truth, even if I was trying to hide it.

His face softened and he lifted his hand, barely touching my hair. “I like your hair like this,” he whispered.

I’d pumped my hair full of volume at the top and did a wrapped side ponytail. My wrists jingled with diamond and gold jewelry as I set my hand over his before he could take it back fully. “Enough to come with me today?” I whispered.

I’d never been so...needy (maybe even clingy) before. Being close to him seemed to be the only cure for whatever I was going through. It felt a lot like separation anxiety.

He didn’t seem to care enough about his safety, which made it worse. I seemed to be going overboard with it. He was obsessed with mine, though, concerned that whoever was after him would maybe try to get to him through me.

Distance from me—if they were after him, I wouldn’t be close—gave him peace. It was driving me mad. My need to keep him close at all times felt dangerously close to an unhealthy fear. Whenever the phone rang or he was late, I assumed the worst. I knew being with a man who had a dangerous

“job” wasn’t for the faint of heart, but I had never expected to react the way I’d been.

I never expected to fall for Big as much as I did either.

He came into my life so unexpectedly, and when I fell, I fell fast and hard. A first for a woman who was used to being so independent.

Big kissed my palm, keeping my hand in his after. “You’re more dangerous than a bullet.” He sighed, resigned. “I can’t fucking say no to you or dig you out.”

“Would you want to?”

“I’d die before that happened.”

I leaned forward and kissed him before I scooted over and made room for him. He fixed his jacket and then held my hand. As my brother Angelo pulled away from the casino and into traffic, Big made a call to rearrange his schedule, and my eyes went to Angelo for a brief second.

I wasn’t sure how it happened, but my brother seemed to have turned into a man in just the short time Big had been in our lives. Big had become a role model to both of my brothers. Angelo wanted into Big’s family business, while Phoenix was interested in the actual business part of it. Even though I hated to think of Angelo doing what Big did, I knew Big was leading him into it in a safer way. And he was teaching him the value of a dollar, which was why Angelo was driving us around, Umberto next to him. For the summer, he had the job of my chauffeur whenever he wasn’t carting Big and Umberto to wherever they needed to go.

Phoenix really liked Gio and his two dogs, so he’d been spending some time with Gio during the summer. Phoenix kept asking for a dog of his own, and he wanted to know everything about training them. It had made me uneasy, at first, to let Phoenix spend time with Gio, because...Bugsy. That wasn’t a nickname that was just given to him. He’d earned it. But Big told me Gio considered Phoenix a little cousin. Big went as far as giving me his word that Phoenix was in no danger of Gio himself.

In so many ways, big and little, both of my brothers were growing up.

It sent an unexpected feeling through my chest. I was half wistful for the past—I’d been so overwhelmed with taking care of two boys that I wasn’t sure I had fully appreciated the small moments—and half hopeful for the future. I looked forward to watching whoever they were going to become.

Trying not to get too choked up, I gazed out the window until we came to the local coffee place. I turned and faced Big, who just shrugged. Angelo

inched up until the back window was to the drive-through speaker. Big gave the girl our order—three coffees and a special pink cold concoction for me—and we pulled up to retrieve it.

The young girl at the window flashed Angelo a dazzling smile, but he was all business as he paid her and then handed the holder to Umberto, who distributed the cups.

Big took a drink after we pulled back into traffic. “How are you feeling, Aphrodite? Ready to drink up or fling the entire cup at someone’s car?”

I rolled my eyes and took a big sip as the three men laughed.

Big squeezed my hand and set his coffee down. He faced me, his entire demeanor hardening. “I’m not going in with you,” he said.

A grin came to my face. “Superstitious, Big?”

He nodded, nothing softening about his face. “We don’t walk under ladders, we spit if a black cat crosses our path, and if you have dreams of blood or water, you let Kitty know.”

“That’s right,” I said. Kitty, his grandmother, had mentioned dreams to me before. “Dark water means trouble. Dark blood means defeat. Bright blood means victory. And bright water means...peace.”

“What about frogs?” Angelo asked. “I had a dream about them not long ago. They were all over me.”

Umberto seemed to think about this. “What color?”

“Green,” Angelo said.

“I would think money.” Umberto’s tone was completely serious.

“Yeah?” Angelo sat up a little taller and squeezed the wheel, like he was excited.

Umberto nodded, and he and Angelo discussed the theory behind this as we pulled in front of the small, exclusive designer wedding boutique. I pulled my phone out of my purse and sent a text to Georgia, wondering if she’d made it yet. My phone chirped a second later. She was already inside.

I stared down at my phone, even after the screen went dim and the text disappeared.

“Aphrodite.”

I sighed as I turned and met Big’s eyes.

“I take care of you, *capisci*?”

“I know.” I squeezed the words around the lump that had formed in my throat. I hated to be vulnerable, because in the world I used to live in, the word meant being eaten alive. I was still getting used to Big and his “nothing

is bigger than me” presence in my life. “But I’m here to take care of you too.”

“You do.” He barely touched my lip. “When the doctor wasn’t quick enough to get the bullet out, he thought you were going to knock him over to do it.” He grinned, but it faded fast. “But it’s more than that.”

I glanced forward. Even though Angelo and Umberto were still talking, I could tell Angelo wasn’t all that into the conversation anymore. I knew he was keeping one ear on me. My brother worried about me.

Big caught the quick glance. “We’ll talk later.”

I nodded, knowing I should be honest with Big about my fears, but I was trying to work through them alone. I always did. But even without me sharing, I knew he instinctively knew what I was going through. He was so in tune with me, it was almost scary.

Angelo stepped out of the car and opened my door. I thanked him as I glanced at my husband. Angelo shut the door and set his hand on my lower back, trying to be as protective as Big, and I smiled.

“Are you sticking around?” I asked.

He slid a hand through his jet-black hair and adjusted his dark shades. “I need another adjustment on my tux for the church wedding,” he said, fixing his dark designer suit, then cleared his throat. “Georgia’s here?”

He opened the door to the store for me, but I stopped just outside of it. I lifted my sunglasses and my eyebrows at him. “Why?”

I’d caught Angelo staring at Georgia quite a bit. Most men did. She had an hourglass figure, a sweet southern accent, and red hair. Phoenix had a few crushes on the girls I worked with over the years, but Angelo had never shown any interest. His sudden interest in Georgia sent up a red flag.

He shrugged. “Just asking.”

I wanted to say more, but the bridal attendant rushed toward us, ushering us in with a wide smile on her face. “Everyone is here, but we can’t start the appointment without the bride!” She had an Italian accent.

The bride.

She was talking about me.

Big and I were already married, but when he’d made plans to take me to Italy and Greece, he’d made plans for us to get married again. Big said the first wedding was for us, but the second would be for my brothers and his grandmother, who said we didn’t put on a *big* enough show. With Kitty, it was always about the glitz and glamour.

I really didn’t want to do it. Unlike Kitty, I didn’t think a wedding should

be a show. I liked that our ceremony had been about the vows and us, but the idea got embedded in Big's head, and when my brothers got all excited about it...

There I was.

The entire place hustled with women trying on dresses and personal attendants attempting to keep them all happy.

That was another surprise.

Big, probably feeling guilty about the gunshot wound because it had worried me, had rented out Dynamic for the entire month we'd be in Greece. Included in that was the girls Vinny employed. Everyone I worked with could attend because Big paid their salaries and arranged this day at the bridal salon—so that each girl could pick out a nice dress. He also bought their plane tickets and secured hotel accommodations for everyone, including Vinny and Sam. Vinny grumbled, but he agreed when Georgia threatened him with our resignations.

Yeah, Big was *big-time* rich. Rich like I'd never expected to experience in my life.

Most of the girls at Dynamic hadn't had an easy life, and to see them all excited about a new dress and an all-expenses paid vacation to the Mediterranean? It almost made me turn around and rush back out to the car and show Big how much I appreciated it.

My husband might be a dangerous hard-ass to the rest of the world, but he had a soft spot for me. Almost as big as the one I had for him. That soft spot was what made me feel weak in the knees. I'd never really had anyone to depend on, besides Georgie, and I'd started to depend on him.

Thinking of Georgie... my eyes scanned the place until they landed on my best friend.—More like sister.

The dress she'd chosen not long ago was too big. and she had to get it taken in.

Georgie had been keeping a secret from me—from everyone—because she didn't want anyone to worry. She had ovarian cancer. Big had talked to her and encouraged her to be honest, especially with me.

I'd taken it hard. One, that she didn't want to tell me because she didn't want to be a bother. And, two, the most important reason: the woman I considered a sister, someone who had always been in the trenches with me, had a life-threatening disease.

Her marriage to Joe had always been about the insurance, as long as

Georgia played the devoted wife in his life. It all made sense once I found out the truth. She'd married him because the doctor had suspected cancer. Her new doctors gave her a good prognosis after she had a hysterectomy, but I worried about her a lot.

Then, with Big getting shot...my world had been rocked.

Probably feeling my eyes on her, she looked away from what the seamstress was doing and met my stare. A blazing smile came to her face. Her teeth almost seemed too big for her face because of all the weight she'd lost. Her eyes were a little sunken in, along with her cheeks. It wasn't just from the cancer and the treatments. I was sure it was from the stress of it all, even if she refused to admit it. She'd say it was from all the healthy food she'd been eating. She was trying a cleaner diet, which I'd started eating with her.

She dropped her head a bit, shook it, and then ticked her mouth as she lifted her beautiful dress and walked toward me. "Did you lose something today?"

"No."

"Then you have no business wearing that look on your face."

I cracked a smile.

She pinched my cheek. "The sun's out and we have a rainbow, Ladies and Gents!"

I hugged her so tight she made an exaggerated noise and pulled away.

"How do I look?" She turned so I could get the full view.

"Like a million bucks, baby girl."

"That's about how much Big is spending!" She laughed, then sighed. "This was a really nice thing your man did for these girls. And what he's done for my girl...priceless." She pinched my cheek again. Then her eyes went over my shoulder for a second. She waved and told Angelo hello.

He lifted his hand in greeting, and when she turned to talk to the seamstress, I noticed how he was watching her. I couldn't truly explain the feeling that went through me then. It was more than a feeling. It was intuition. Angelo wasn't the type who had crushes. And the way he was looking at Georgia, like she was the light in a dark life...it made me uneasy.

I didn't want to make a scene by calling him out on it, so when Georgia came back and he walked out, I acted like nothing was wrong.

We talked about the dresses and Vinny and Sam's suits. When the attendant went to grab my dresses for one last fitting before they were flown

to Italy and Greece, Georgia took a seat on a plush chair.

Crossing her legs, she gave me a firm look. “How are you feeling about... coming face to face with Big’s past?”

I shrugged. “I’m somewhere in the middle. I’m not too nervous, but I’m not feeling confident either. The Fausti family will be there. You know Big used to race for them. There’s some pressure there, especially since Rocco Fausti is married to Rosaria, whose sister used to be engaged to Tullio.”

“The songbird.” Georgia tried to hit a high note and we both laughed. “You think she’s going to show up?”

“Maybe not to the wedding, but maybe at some point...” I shrugged again.

Rocco had asked Big to race for a charity event while he was in Italy. I’d never been to a Formula One race before and was eager to see what Big could do. But I wondered if his ex was going to show up. Abree Caffi was Rosaria’s sister, and from what Big had told me, she wasn’t okay with the broken engagement. He said it was because her pride was hurt. I knew it was more than pride. Big was a triple threat: gorgeous, successful, and had a way with women.— And she had lost him.

Georgia waved a hand. “I’ll take care of her if she starts something. You know I’ll finish it.”

I raised my pretend glass to her, and she raised hers. We made a clanking noise.

“Finish what?” Rocky said, flying into the room. Her hair was half up and half down, and she had on boots and an old pair of overalls with oil stains on them. She stopped and looked at us, lifting her hands. “I swear I won’t get grease on anything!”

Rocky was Rocky Barcelona until she married Gio, and then she became Rocky Capitani. I’d warned her and Penelope about the full moon the night it all went down. Rocky and Gio had an arrangement, and even though I was always there for my girls, I tried to stay out of whatever they had going on.

One loud knock came at the door and Vinny peeked his head in. “I’m not going.”

“Why did you just sound like the Grinch when you said that?” Rocky laughed.

He rolled her eyes at her. “I meant what I said.”

“Me too,” Georgia said. “Consider us gone if you don’t show up.”

He blew out a heavy breath and stepped into the room. The three of us

started applauding. He looked good in his suit. His cheeks turned the color of tomatoes. “What is this anyway? A Mob Wives of Vegas episode?” he demanded as he stormed out.

A round of applause seemed to go through the entire place a few minutes after.

The three of us looked at each other and grinned.

“Granny Hot Legs here!” Georgia laughed.

Georgia had started calling Kitty “Granny Hot Legs” after she found out who she was. Kitty ate it up. After I brought her to Dynamic to meet all the girls, she seemed to adopt them, and they adopted her. She was known as everyone’s Granny, even though it seemed like everyone had a special name for her. She irritated Vinny to no end, but we all knew he secretly loved it. Deep down, we all expected Vinny was a masochist, and Kitty had proved it.

Rocky whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “I’d love to know *her* story!”

“Oooh,” Georgia sounded just as conspiratorial. “The story of how Diamond Legs seemed to have a torrid past—with two of the biggest gangsters in Vegas.”

That did seem like a juicy story, but a story people only speculated about. Even Big and Gio didn’t seem to know what had truly happened between the three of them. Only Kitty and Gio’s grandfather were left, and I wasn’t sure if either of them would ever come clean. Whenever I hinted to Kitty about it, she’d say, *that’s a story for another day*. Big said she’d been saying that for as long as he could remember. He didn’t even want to know what had happened between the three of them.

A *meep meep* echoed through the air as Kitty cut the corner in her bejeweled motorized scooter and came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the three of us. She flung her *Golden Girl* style eyeglasses from her face and grinned at us.

“Now that the main attraction has arrived—*me*—let’s get this story started!”

Here we go...

CHAPTER 17

Mrs. Big

THE PLANE RIDE to Italy was my first, and besides all the things that could go wrong with the aircraft itself—a bird getting wedged in the motor, a wing catching fire, both pilots going out at once—I breathed easier than I had in months while high up in the sky, sailing over thousands of miles of water below.

Unless Big's enemies had sabotaged the plane, which apparently they hadn't, no one could try to kill him. I almost wished we could stay airborne for the rest of our lives. Being in the air felt safe to me. Safer than I'd felt in months. Since we took a night flight out, and I couldn't really see anything anyway, I'd slept—or gotten broken sleep. It didn't really help the dark circles underneath my eyes, but I looked less sleep-deprived than I did before, at least.

I took a heavy breath when my foot touched the ground for the first time in hours. My chest suddenly felt tight, and my heart raced inside of it. Being back on the ground reminded me of the anxiety I'd promised Georgia I'd leave in Vegas.

My eyes focused on Big as he spoke to a man who had met us at the private airport. I clutched my over-sized wicker purse in my hands, trying to get rid of some of the panic in my chest.

The new man was from the hotel Big and Gio owned. Big told me it belonged to Kitty, but since she didn't want anything to do with the business part of it, she relied on her grandsons to manage it. A car came flying onto the tarmac. It was red and vintage—that much I could tell—and the top was down. Big and the man he was talking to didn't pay the new arrival any

attention—they were expecting the the car. The driver put the car in park and stepped out, waiting by the driver's door. Like Big, and like the man talking to Big, the driver seemed to have stepped out of a fashion magazine.

Instead of hyper-focusing on my husband, I looked down and breathed a sigh of relief at the way the thin white material of the summer dress I wore allowed my skin to breathe in the muggy weather. But the heat in Portofino felt different from Vegas. Not less or more, just...different. Like my skin recognized I was somewhere I'd never been before. I just hoped the message made it to my brain, and it would bring me back to a normal state of mind. Or an elevated one. I'd never dreamt that when I finally made it to Italy, the fear that was planted inside of me back in Nevada would be sprouting a dark tree in a place that was so bright.

Big finished his conversation and looked up, a grin coming to his face. Despite how I was feeling, I grinned back. He'd left me at the top of the steps, and in a few of them, he met me. He took my hand, then my purse, and led me to the waiting vintage car. The driver greeted him in Italian, then left us to meet the man Big had been talking to. Big dug through my purse, pulled out a silk scarf, and showed me how to tie it around my head. He leaned in and kissed me, and it took me a second to open my eyes once he was done.

Like the heat, Big seemed different here too. I didn't know—exactly—how yet, but I could feel an energy running through him, an energy I'd never felt before. Maybe it was complete freedom? He was away from Vegas and the hold it had on him. I could almost feel his bones sigh and his entire body relax. As if this was *his* place. The ground where he was free to race without rules or boundaries. No one to tell him to stop or slow down.

He'd taken off for Italy when he'd turned eighteen, at the time not planning on running the family business, instead saying yes to an offer from the Fausti family to become a racer for their F1 team. He'd become one of the team's best racers. I could almost feel the same freedom that had urged him to do it coming off him like a manly, musky cologne.

Big lifted my hand, placed a warm kiss on it, then opened the door for me. He gestured as if the fast car was my waiting chariot. I laughed a little and took my seat. Big's infectious energy was starting to knock on my bones.

As we flew through the streets, my eyes could barely keep up with all the beauty. The bright pastel colors of the villas. The unbelievable blue of the Ligurian Sea. I'd heard Italy was stunning and had seen pictures, but being there in the flesh, feeling the hot sun on my face and the tepid wind whip

against my skin—trying to place all the smells, free to reach out and touch the actual land and my husband, the person who I'd want to experience this with the most...it left me breathless.

So did his driving.

He was racing to get to the resort he and Gio shared, but instead of feeling rushed, the way he took every turn and controlled every dip and rise felt as natural as the rocking of the sea. I wasn't paying attention to the time, so before I knew it, we were turning down a road lined with thick foliage to the hotel.

Hotel Tre was built sometime in the late 1800s, I remembered Kitty telling me, and was the color of a sun-touched apricot with black iron details. It seemed like a jewel planted in the middle of a wild jungle, except for the front, which was manicured and welcomed guests under the shading of waving palm trees. Behind the hotel, I could see sparkles off the sea, which stretched out for miles. The hotel looked out over a steep hill, and way down below, boats rocked against the shore—another arrival and departure point.

The place reminded me of Kitty—a 1920s-era jewel that was guarded but had lived a glamorous life. Big had told me the hotel had seen dignitaries from way back to its beginning, even though Kitty had told me the hotel had hit its prime in the 1920s. I could almost feel that about it. Like the place had fallen in love with that era and refused to budge, even if the world around it did.

It felt almost...magical.

I smiled at the music playing. Cocki Mazzetti's, "Tango Italiano."

Big's voice broke through the spell as he talked to a man in Italian, and they shook hands. The man seemed to be an employee of the hotel. He wore a uniform and a name tag. After he darted back inside, Big circled the car and opened my door, lending me a hand as I stepped out.

He twirled me around, then started moving in perfect rhythm to the beat of the song. My sudden lack of breath wasn't from the unexpected action. It was because whenever he looked at me—like he might just go crazy if he didn't touch me—it did insane things to my heart and body.

"Your fear stops here," he said, his voice strong but husky at the same time.

We hadn't truly had a candid discussion about what happened to him and my reaction to it after. I was still holding it in, trying to suffer in silence, then just get over it. Fear, like most sicknesses, had a course. I'd always beaten it,

but lately, it was starting to feel like a chronic disease.

“It’s...”

“You’re waiting for something bad to happen.” He stopped moving us, and the look on his face changed. His eyes were still wild, but the set of his face was determined. He wanted to kill whatever was causing me fear.

I’d learned that was how Big dealt with life in general. If something, even people, attempted to encroach on the safe space he’d built for himself, he’d go after it. If something made him uncomfortable, say sky diving, for example, he’d jump just to conquer it.

Because of that, I wasn’t sure if he was going to understand what I was going through or know how to help me. I took a deep breath, slowly releasing it. I looked away from him, my eyes finding Kitty on the second-floor balcony, her vintage gold silk robe billowing in the summer breeze.

It was time to give him a little honesty, though. Maybe I would feel better. Not have to carry around the pressure in my chest that kept ballooning.

“I’ve always dealt with bad things in my life, Big. I think everyone with a pulse has. Maybe not to the degree that some of us have, but life is...life, right? It comes in seasons—some good, some not so good. George and I figured that out together. We were okay with not having far to fall, because we knew where we were, in terms of what we had to lose. This is all apart from my brothers. I tried not to obsess over losing them...well, until Angelo got into trouble. But you get my point. Then...George gets sick, and you dodge death. I’m looking down now, like I’m back on the plane, and realizing how it would kill *me* to lose either of you. That’s how far I have to fall.”

He turned my face toward his. “Stop looking down and fix your eyes on me. You won’t need to be caught because I’ll be holding you the entire time.”

A grin came, but it hurt. “If you’re not there to?”

“I’ll be there.”

This time my smile came easier and didn’t cause as much pain. He truly believed that, and because he did, it made me believe too. I just had to find a way to stop fixating on what *could be*, and instead, concentrate on *the moment*.

“I’ve never been so human before, huh?” I laughed a little when he dipped me.

“Good to know I’m not married to a cyborg.” He grinned down at me, and if he wouldn’t have been holding me, I would have hit the ground. He

was so fucking overwhelming, in looks and personality.

“Were you starting to think that?” I laughed even louder, and his smile matched it.

“Your brothers and I had our suspicions. You’ve debunked them.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I’m just glitching.”

“Not enough to cause smoke.” He chuckled. “Unless you count the bedroom.”

He kissed my hand and started to lead me toward the hotel. His steps were faster than normal, and my heart started beating to match them. I couldn’t wait to be alone with him in Portofino too. Even though we’d only been together a short time, we were starting to become so in sync, we didn’t always have to communicate with words. I wondered if fifty years from then, would we even need them at all?

I stopped his stride when we came closer to Kitty on the balcony. The light was bright, especially off the water, but by the time it made it to her, it softened. It created a halo around her, and I could have sworn she was fifty years younger. For the first time, I noticed how sad she looked. How alone. It made my heart feel heavy, and I wasn’t sure why. Maybe because, like Rocky had once said, Kitty was an untold story begging to be told.

It took me a second to realize Big was staring at my face. “What?” I whispered, meeting his eyes.

His fingertips skimmed my cheek, and I shivered. “I’m going to romance you so fucking hard on this trip, you’re going to go home smelling like roses.”

“Three weddings, Big.” I grinned. “Counting the one in Vegas, the one here, the one in Greece—that’s enough romance to last a woman a lifetime.”

“The entire world will know you’re mine.”

I lifted my left hand. “If this ring doesn’t let them know, my new last name does it.”

“Not enough.”

“What am I going to do with you?” It wasn’t a rhetorical question either. I had no idea how I was going to keep up with him.

A devilish smile came to his face, right before he took my face in his hands and kissed me until I had to lean into him. All I could do was sigh when we separated.

I could’ve sworn another sigh drifted down from the balcony above, but it seemed to melt with the breeze as Big picked me up and carried me inside the

hotel.

CHAPTER 18

Mrs. Big

WAKING up in Portofino felt like waking up on a cloud, just like it had on the plane. But...even better. The room was warm but filled with a sea breeze that made the sheets and air feel softer and cooler. Even though my mind was alert, I refused to open my eyes. I just wanted a minute to take in where I was and relive in my memories the day before.

After we'd taken a quick tour of the hotel—a place I could see myself living in forever—Big had taken me to our room and wore me out. Before I could succumb to the plush-looking bed facing the picture window, with views of the sea that were almost unreal, he'd pulled out my luggage and handed me a bathing suit. We'd spent the entire day at the beach and had an amazing dinner before I passed out. Big said it was easier to overcome jetlag by not giving in to it.

Even in Vegas, my schedule was screwed up, though. I'd worked nights for years, and after my shift was over, I'd rush home to bring my brothers to school, sleep while they were gone, then wake up not long before I had to pick them up. Phoenix never felt comfortable riding the bus. He had a thing about being left behind, and the bus made him anxious. Angelo went along with me picking him up because of Phoenix.

It was hard to undo years of a rigorous schedule that sometimes left me not feeling the best. Working nights went against the bodies' natural rhythm—there's a reason night work pays more—and I hadn't felt just how much my body had suffered until Big forced me to take a break.

We were both forcing each other to let go of controlling factors in our lives in different ways, and because of it, we were holding tighter to each

other.

Big's work felt like it was twenty-four/seven. Casinos never sleep, and it seemed like neither did he. *When* he slept, it was in what I considered naps. Kitty had said that was why we were so good for each other. I could relax in my downtime—when I had it—and I was teaching Big how to do the same. He was helping me with the sleep thing, and...there we were.

A slow smile came to my face when I felt the fire of the sun—his eyes—on me. I opened my eyes in a rush, and I knew he closed his in the same way. I laughed, and a grin came to his face. He was messing around with me.

“How was your workout?” I asked, stretching my arms.

He fake yawned. “Work. Out? Who *works out* in Italy?”

“Tullio Bigatti.” I touched his warm chest. “The man who has an unnatural amount of energy.”

“Like a cyborg?”

“Takes one to know one.”

We grinned at the same time, until we were just staring at each other.

“It's funny, though,” I whispered. “Together, we're not like we are with the rest of the world. We're human when we're like this.”

His eyes lowered, and I knew that look. It was the culmination of all the passionate looks he gave me from across numerous rooms, or when he held me in his arms and danced with me outside of fancy Portofino hotels, and when we were alone, he consumed me with it. I kept my eyes on his, lifting my hand to fix the impeccable side-part of his inky black hair, but his hand locked around my wrist like a cuff. He ran his other hand down my free arm in a soft sweep until he reached my hand. He intertwined our fingers and then brought my hand to the side of my face, pressing it into the pillow.

Our eyes held until he kissed me.

His lips were firm, his tongue languid, and his skin as hot as the sun sneaking in through the sheer white curtains. The breeze danced off the Ligurian Sea, fluttering them like gossamer wings.

“What did I tell you, Aphrodite?” he breathed out, his mouth slowly moving down my face, my neck, as he placed a mixture of soft and rough kisses against my skin. “I'm a man of my word. I'm going to romance you.” He nipped at my pulse and my heart stuttered, tripping but recovering in its race.

I forgot to breathe as his tongue started to lick my breasts, around and around, so close to my nipple but not close enough. I pushed against his

mouth and his eyes rose, meeting mine. He grinned a little before his mouth closed over the sensitive peak, sucking. It felt like every ache inside of me rushed up before it went in the opposite direction, crashing into my lower stomach, making me gasp and then moan.

“That’s what I love to fucking hear.” His warm breath fanned over me, before he licked the other side and then sucked. “My wife, *my wife*, letting go so only the two of us exist. You melt into me. I fucking melt into you.” He placed a kiss in the center of my chest, his tongue flicking out to sample my skin. “You taste so good. Salty, and so fucking sweet.” His mouth came to up ravage mine, and he groaned into it, making me whimper.

Yeah, I whimpered, and he ate it up.

His dick was rock hard before, and I could feel it harden even more when I made the noise. It slid against my leg as he made his way toward the end of the bed. I was ready for him. He positioned himself between my legs and entered me in a slow push.

We both groaned.

He kept the rhythm slow, but he filled me up, stretched me out so good, it felt a little rougher. The perfect combination between all-consuming ache and all-consuming pleasure.

I came around him on a soft cry, and he picked up his pace, holding eye contact, until he spilled himself inside of me with a deep, uncontrolled groan.

When I could open my eyes, I blinked at him. He was staring at me. He gently moved a piece of hair from my face, his touch like a whisper against my skin. Big and I hadn’t been married that long, even if it felt like we’d been together forever, and we were in an era of our relationship that had a name.

Discovery.

We were still discovering each other, and it was as intense as a newly bloomed cactus would absorb and process its first touch of rain.

We were both starved for whatever it was we both had needed—for such a long time. And like a cactus, we were going to save the nourishment for... forever. I knew without a doubt I was.

It almost felt right to ask him, *what?*, to break the intensity between us, but I couldn’t. I forced myself to stay in the moment with him and allow it to consume me in whichever way it needed to. At first, when it would happen, it was awkward. I had never experienced anything like it before, and my first reaction was to shy away from it, but he was in it with me, and we were both

learning to surrender to it.

He leaned in and kissed my forehead. “*You are altogether beautiful, my darling; my wife; there is no flaw in you.*” His voice was close to a whisper and rough.

At his words, my entire body felt light. Light enough that I wondered if the breeze had picked me up and carried me outside of my body for a second.

If he turned out to be a cyborg, I was really going to be mad.

Or if he ever left me, like every other man I’d known...he might just break my heart hard enough to let all the blood escape from it and kill me.

That was how hard I’d fallen for him.

“*You are altogether beautiful, my darling; my wife; there is no flaw in you.*”

I didn’t know where he’d gotten those words from, but wherever, they did a crazy thing to my heart. Crazy enough to seal my lips until I could find the breath to clear my throat. “What are we doing today?” I whispered.

Big lifted my hand and kissed my fingers. I hadn’t even realized they were trembling some. “Breakfast on our terrace. We’ll check out the wedding places after. We’ll have lunch after that. Then explore Portofino for a bit.”

Big left the planning up to me, and since Kitty was from this area, she helped me. The only request Big had—which had shocked me—was that we get married in the local church. The reception was going to be held at the local castle overlooking the water. It would be the first time I’d see it in person.

“We’ll explore the beach again?” I could feel my eyes widen—like a kid’s—at the thought of going back.

Big chuckled. “Yeah, Aphrodite. The beach. Wherever you want to go.”

“Then after the beach, where to?”

“We get dressed and get on a private plane to Maranello.”

“Maranello, and...Rocco Fausti.”

“He invited us to his home.”

“For the racers, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Since I had to have an expensive dress for it, I figure it’s going to be fancy.”

“Rocco enjoys throwing a good party.”

I blew out a heavy breath. I felt like a new swimmer who was going to be thrown into the deep end for the first time. *Sink or swim, baby girl.*

Big seemed to feel my tension. “You’ll be walking next to me—with me. It’s me who should be fucking concerned. You’ll probably get me killed.”

“You haven’t even seen my dress yet.”

“The dress doesn’t matter, Aphrodite. Not when you have a goddess on your arm.”

“You do know you’ve already secured this, right?” I lifted my left hand, my ring catching the light and causing a spark. “*This*, meaning *me*.”

He bit my finger, but it was only hard enough to make me suck in a breath at how good it felt. “For the rest of my fucking life. And I’ll make sure of it by doing whatever it takes.”

“I’m not a woman who needs all the sweetness.”

“Nah, you don’t.” Standing from the bed, he slipped on a pair of light sleep pants and met me on my side.

I blinked up at him. The morning light pouring in from the window was at his back and haloing him. I closed my eyes, sniffing the air. The warm weather seemed to make his masculine scent stronger, and I wanted to keep breathing him in.

After a few seconds, though, I sighed. “Why does it feel like you were about to add ‘but’ after...*nah, you don’t?*” I asked.

“Because I was.” He lifted me up, helping me into a silk robe. He must have grabbed it when my eyes were closed. Still were. “You can open your eyes now, Aphrodite.” I could hear the grin in his words.

“I’m almost too afraid. This all might be a dream.”

“You can pinch me if you want.”

“How is that going to help me?” I laughed, opening my eyes, meeting his. Damn...the color of his eyes was close to the color of the sea here. A combined blue and green that almost made them teal in some light. In the darkness, they seemed more blue. In the bright light, more green.

“It’s not, but it got you to open your eyes.” He leaned down, set my arms around his neck, and then lifted me up. “Back to the *but*...you might not need all the romance, but you like it.”

Okay, I did, but I didn’t want to admit it. Admitting it might make it go away. I’d have to knock on wood, and the only thing close to it was Big’s head when he was being stubborn, which in that moment, he wasn’t.

Big brought me out to the terrace and set me down in a chair at a table. The view, worthy of a painting, spread out around me for as far as I could see. I couldn’t help but think of Georgia—she and Rocky were the only two

of my girls who were going to the wedding in Italy—and how much she was going to love it here.

It didn't seem like anything bad could happen in this place, and if a person carried around heavy luggage filled with darkness, the water would wipe it clean, and the warm air would make the light stick. I hoped this new view would give her fighting spirit a safe place to hide while offering it peace. I was feeling it for her. Manifesting it for *her* life, if such a thing were possible.

A few minutes later, after we both seemed to enjoy the view in silence, a man delivered our breakfast. I laughed some at the drink that was brought out for me. It was pink. The fancy glass had a little silver bracelet around its stem with a handcuff charm.

“Well earned.” Big raised his cup of dark, hot coffee to my glass of cool, pink liquid heaven.

“I'm flattered.” I bowed some. “*Saluti.*”

We clinked and then took drinks.

Conversation flowed easily as we ate and drank. It was a gorgeous morning, and I knew it was only going to get better. We talked about the plans for the day, the wedding stuff, where we could go after the castle for a while, and then I asked him about Rocco and the Fausti family. I knew Abree Caffi was connected to them, and I wondered if she was going to be there.

“Probably.” He set his napkin down next to his empty plate, stood, and offered me his hand.

I looked at his hand, him, and then at his hand again before I took it. I should have pressed him, because I could tell he was trying to fly right past the topic of Abree Caffi, the ex, but I wasn't sure if I was going to be ready for her either. I'd seen her picture. Even showed it to Georgia. We weren't the type of women who judged other women just by picture alone, but we both decided we didn't get a good feeling about her. Georgia even broke out in a country song she knew by heart. “I'll Think of a Reason Later.” But she customized it to my situation.

She'd been trying to make me laugh, downplaying the situation a bit, but I knew she was lying, especially after she left, and I realized she'd drawn horns and a devilish-looking mustache on the picture I'd printed of Abree from Google images. She'd written underneath, *the resemblance is uncanny...*

I sighed.

By the end of the night, I'd find out if that was true.

CHAPTER 19

Mr. Big

WATCHING Leonora in Italy was like watching the sun rise in the sky and transform the world. She reflected the light differently here, and it revealed a different side to her that I'd never seen before. She was learning to let go, enjoy the moment she was in instead of worrying about the next, and she was fucking breathtaking.

I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

Honey-blond hair that flowed through my fingers when I got my hands on it. Stunning blue eyes that stopped my feet and stole my breath when they crashed into mine. They were so vivid, they almost seemed neon, especially in the sun and against her tan skin. The white summer dress she wore was flirty, showing off her curves, the deep V giving a tease of what only I would ever see, and gorgeous legs. Even her feet were perfect, wrapped in a pair of leather sandals that allowed her toes to breathe.

Leonora Kallistos Bigatti was a woman worthy of the name Aphrodite.

And she was mine in every fucking way.

It had always been that way—even when we weren't together.

It would always be that way—I'd do whatever it took to keep her satisfied.

Her eyes were fixed on the yachts floating in the sea, and when a sharp wind blew, she set her hand against the straw hat she wore. She'd told me before we left the hotel that Georgia had convinced her to buy it.

Like she had to catch the hat before it took air, my hands had the same instinct to keep her close. She didn't gasp at the sudden contact or pull away—she melted into me, holding my arm around her waist as tightly as I was

holding on to her. Her body fit with mine, as perfectly as the Ligurian Sea fit with the coast.

She inhaled and released it slowly. “You always smell so good.”

I leaned down some, setting my mouth next to her ear, and whispered, “Good enough to lick?”

She laughed a little, but it was breathy. “Considering you smell citrusy... it’ll be like sucking on a sweet orange with a lemony twist.”

I threw back my head and laughed. “Yeah?”

She tried to turn around, but my hold was too tight. I gave her a little breathing room and she faced me. She looked into my eyes, and it felt like I was bewitched for the umpteenth time since I’d first seen her in Paradiso’s bar.

“I’d lick you all night if I could,” she whispered.

“*If you could.*” I leaned down and set my mouth against her racing pulse, letting my free hand drift down her exposed skin from the deep dip of the dress to settle on the curve of her hip. “You don’t need an invitation.”

“That’s not what I meant. I know I can. And would happily try.”

I put her words together. “Are you implying I don’t have the self-restraint to let you?”

“I don’t have the self-restraint to do it. After a while...I’d be begging for more. You feel so damn good inside of me.”

You feel so damn good inside of me.

Her words were sexual, in one way, but I knew they went deeper than that. Leonora had a hard time sharing her feelings, and in her own way, she was telling me that letting me inside of her world felt good. I belonged.

I took her chin in my hand. “You beg for nothing. You belong to me, therefore, whatever you need or want is already yours.”

Our eyes met, communicating in a way I never had before—silently. These conversations with my wife were the most powerful conversations I’d ever had or ever would have.

Her eyes flicked to the side for a second, before a mischievous grin came to her face. “If that’s true...you’d dance with me here?”

The streets were packed. She thought I wouldn’t.

I positioned her hand in mine and started moving her to the beat in my head, and then I did her one better, singing “Love In Portofino” loud enough to get people to stop and stare. The surprise on her face was easy to read, even if below it, a look of soft romanticism was starting to reach the surface.

“That’s it,” I breathed against her lips after the song and dance was over. “That’s the look.”

She said nothing as I took her hand and led her through the thick crowd. We had an appointment to see the *castello* where Kitty had helped her plan our Italian reception. We’d already been to the church.

Leonora was quiet the entire time we walked there, either looking at me or at our surroundings. She stopped for a second to admire the lush gardens at the bottom of the hill the *castello* was perched on. The only time she opened her mouth was to breathe a bit heavier as we made it up to the *castello*. The views of Portofino stayed with us the entire time, spreading out even further as we looked down at the city from above.

“From the inside, with all the stunning touches, to this view...this is...” Leonora set her hand over her heart, something I’d never seen her do, and her eyes devoured the scenery. “I don’t even have words to describe it all. I love it here, Tullio.”

I cleared my throat to loosen the tight fist that had seized my heart when she called me by my given name, and kissed her temple. “*Molto bene.*”

The organizer came back out to talk to us, but I deferred her to Leonora again as she squared away any leftover details. We took lunch there before we headed back down.

Leonora stopped me at the bottom and nodded up. “Are you sure about this?” she rushed out. “I mean...it’s a lot.”

“The cost is nothing,” I said. “Or I wouldn’t have matched the cost of the wedding to the donation.”

In the beginning, Leonora was against having three weddings. She said it was something rich people did when they had too much money and time on their hands. Maybe some of them did. It wasn’t why I wanted them. I wanted them for her. I wanted them for me. I wanted them for us.

Our wedding in Vegas made our union legal, but this was romantic. We had roots in all three places, and they would be witness to our promises to each other. One day, the pictures would grace our walls, and if we had children, they would see them. But she still wasn’t sold on the idea. To make it worth her while, I made a deal with her. If she agreed, whatever she spent, I’d match it and donate it to the charity of her choice. She finally agreed, and the money was going to a local shelter for women and children in Vegas.

“That’s not what I meant. Take the money out of it.” She sighed. “This is a lot because...so many people are going to be here. You know, watching

us.”

“You’re nervous about being vulnerable.”

She nodded. “Our vows felt like they were just for us when there was only the two of us. Next weekend, *the church* will be filled with people. Smaller than the reception, but still...more people, and...it’s making me nervous for some reason.” She blew out a heavy breath. “Are you nervous?”

“No, but you being nervous tells me something.”

“That I’m a chicken?”

I laughed. “No, Aphrodite. You’re nervous because this means something to you, and when something means that much, sometimes it’s hard to share it.”

“How come you’re not nervous then?”

The honesty and vulnerability in her eyes held me captive. “The moment I found you, you brought me home. I want the world to know it. To see it when I look at you. If being vulnerable is a death sentence, then you’ll be the only one doling it out.”

She kept my eyes for a second before she nodded. “I’ve come this far.”

“One step at a time.”

“Rushed steps.” She laughed. “But still steps.”

“We have the rest of our lives to take it slow.”

We grew quiet as we walked hand in hand through the thick crowds of people visiting Portofino in the summer. I watched as Leonora window shopped and sampled some of the local foods. She was quieter than normal, especially after she’d look up and get a glimpse of the *castello* looking over us.

As the day grew thinner and so did the sun, we returned to the hotel to get ready for the party hosted by Rocco. He was going to promote the gin company I’d started. It was going to be Casino Portofino’s exclusive brand. Only a certain, exclusive label would be served at the casino; another at the hotel in Portofino; and the general label would be served to the world.

I wasn’t sure if anyone could use the term “friend” when it came to the men I dealt with in my life, but Rocco was close to it. We’d grown close when I was a racer for his family’s team. When I’d called to personally invite him to the weddings, he eagerly accepted—for as ruthless as Rocco could be, he had a deeply romantic soul—and had asked me to race for an event. I’d been a big draw in the racing world. My retirement came as a shock and disappointment to a lot of people.

After our talk at the *castello*, Leonora had relaxed some, and we'd enjoyed our time out, but as she started to prepare her things to get ready, I could tell she was getting anxious again.

"Unsure about which dress to wear?" I asked, watching her.

She stopped looking through the closet. "No. I know which one. Why?"

"You keep searching."

She shrugged. "Moving things around, more like." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "What do I expect tonight?"

"Rich. Rich. Rich." I took a seat on the bed, relaxing back, using my elbow as a prop.

"That part is written in stone. Tell me something I don't know."

"Rocco wants to sing at the wedding."

"That's nice, but not where I was going with that, Big. Stop dodging."

"I'm not dodging."

She snatched a pad from the desk and flung it at me. I moved and it hit the bed, then I started laughing.

"Seriously! I'm not going to have a pink weapon in my reach tonight. I need to know how many women you've left scorned here so I can prepare. Especially for the previous fiancé."

Leonora was fishing for reassurance, but there was no reassuring where Abree Caffi was concerned. She was a wild card with a wicked temper, and she didn't appreciate that I broke off the engagement. If Rocco wouldn't have gotten to know me, she might have convinced him to kill me on her heart's account.

If anything, Abree and her sister, Rosaria, knew how to play on Rocco's romantic heartstrings. But after I'd explained to him how my mother's death had brought truth into my life, he understood why I'd broken the engagement. My parents were toxic together, and to end that cycle, I refused to enter a marriage where I knew we'd become the same way. Ending it was for mother—to honor her, in a way.

I'd hesitated to accept his invitation to the party he was hosting when I'd spoken to him about doing the charity racing event. He'd sensed it and knew why. He assured me all would be fine, and I knew he could keep the sisters in check, but a woman had to hold her own around them. If a man came to her rescue, they would see her as weak. Leonora was a defender of women, an advocate of them, which made her an ally when it came to her job. But this was a different playing field, and the Caffi sisters didn't view the world like

everyone else. Still, I knew Leonora would find her way and take no shit from them.

I sat up. "Come here."

She made it to the bed, and I took her hips in my hands. "Here's the truth. Abree's a jealous woman, and it makes her mean."

A small smile played on Leonora's lips. "Mean? That's it?"

"Fucking vicious."

"Yeah, I sensed that about her." She sighed. "Was she that way with you?"

"Depends."

"On whether you gave her her way or not, right?"

"Right."

"I know there's no reason to be, but thinking of you with her makes me so fucking jealous. It's not normal. I might get vicious with *her*."

I had no fucking clue why that made my chest feel weird, but it did. I pulled her onto the bed with me, and she gasped as my lips moved toward hers. "The opposite wouldn't be fucking normal." I claimed her mouth, my hands roving over her body, still warm from the sun and smelling like salt and lemons.

We were an hour late arriving in Maranello.

CHAPTER 20

Mrs. Big

SOON, I'd be wearing a lot of white. Or shades of it. So, I decided to go in a different direction for the dress for Rocco's party. Georgia and Lidia had been with me when I'd gone shopping for it. It was a wine-red stunner with a deep v neckline, off-the-shoulder sleeves, and a mermaid train with a slide slit. The satin material sat against me like skin. Lidia had said all women could wear red, but it took confidence.

I didn't know if I had enough of it at first to pull it off, but...I'd bought it.

The woman Lidia had hired to do my hair and makeup for the trips had slicked back my hair into a chic chignon and kept the makeup simple—winged liner and a lip to match the color of the dress. Big had gifted me jewelry to wear: a simple necklace with a few dripping diamonds at my throat. A diamond bracelet. And a pair of diamond filigree teardrop earrings. I didn't even want to know how much the set cost. I almost felt like telling him to buy me fakes and leave the real stuff in the casino's safe, but I knew what he was going to say.

"That's what insurance is for."

Big couldn't take his eyes off me. The entire flight from Portofino to Maranello, to the chauffeured car ride to Rocco's Italian mansion, he kept staring at me.

I had enough confidence to wear the dress on my own, but knowing he felt I looked *that* good in it...I was ready to take on this crowd with him. My eyes flicked to him for the umpteenth time. I couldn't take my eyes off him either. He wore a custom-made tux that made him look like he was straight out of a James Bond movie. His dark hair was parted to the side, and he

smelled like his usual: bourbon, suede, and cigar smoke. I held tighter to his arm as we made our way toward the entrance of Rocco's home to let every woman who kept glancing at him know he was taken.

My husband was a mixture of Italian and Greek perfection.

And he was all mine.

"Wow," I whispered as we walked arm in arm toward Rocco's door. "This place is something you find on a pamphlet to see while you're in Italy."

We were following behind a line of people. Even though I couldn't see past the doors lit with shimmering light from behind, the villa was grand enough to host an event where black tie was required. I'd heard the Fausti family had money, but damn...the place was ornate.

One glance at it and there was no doubt it belonged to Italian royalty of some kind. Big had told me Rocco's grandfather had married into a luxury car and racing family, and Rocco's grandmother had been a movie star who belonged to the family. This place fit that bill.

Georgia's voice came at me from the other side of Big in a whisper. "Are you sure we're at the right place?" We both had an arm, she on his left and me on his right.

I breathed out a laugh and Big grinned, kissing my hand. Georgia had decided to fly in earlier and had arrived at the hotel in Portofino while we'd been out doing wedding errands. Big invited her to Rocco's party, and she jumped at the chance. She was interested in seeing all of this, but I thought she was more interested in seeing Abree. Or getting between the two of us if Abree decided to start something.

I'd have to come up with a different weapon of choice. There was no way I was throwing a drink in this place. If I ended up ruining some ancient family heirloom...I thought jail was the least of my worries.

As we made our way up the steps toward the open doors, opera music floated down to greet us. The light was buttery, maybe from all the candles, and an exotic scent permeated the warm air. I couldn't place it, but like Big had said, rich, rich, *rich*. It was a perfume that had the power to transport me back to that exact moment if I ever smelled it again.

"Is this the entire racing team?" Georgia asked as we both declined champagne from a server. "How does that work?"

Big asked for a water with lemon, and the server rushed off to grab it. "The Fausti team has four drivers. The rest of the guests probably work for the team or are people Rocco had a reason to invite."

“Four racers,” I said, squeezing Big’s arm. “Not very good odds when you’re looking for a racing job. You were one of four—and one of the best, if all my research on you is correct, which I do believe it is.”

“I’m good with odds.” Big grinned.

Georgia peeked around him. “Your man is talented, Leo. Still not good enough for you, but...I’m somewhat impressed.”

“Finally, a fucking crumb,” Big said, taking the water from the waiter.

Georgia laughed, and so did I.

We moved further into the Italian mansion, and I could tell Big had a direction and destination. That destination had a crowd surrounding him as he made all his admirers laugh at something he said. *Him* being Rocco Fausti. It was the first time I’d ever seen him in the flesh. His pictures did him no justice at all in person. Tall, broad shouldered, and built. Eyes of a shimmering green that were paired with silky black hair cut into a gentleman’s style, olive skin, and bright white teeth made for an after-braces commercial.

Big fit with this family because he, too, had pictures that did him no justice at all in person. Even his vibe meshed with...all of this. I didn’t know whether to be severely impressed or overwhelmed.

We made our way closer to Rocco, and when his eyes fell on Big, his smile grew wider. He stepped forward, and the crowd around him seemed to disperse as he and Big embraced.

Georgia occupied the space where Big had been and leaned in. “If they do the cheek kisses...I might faint.”

I nudged her with my elbow and she laughed. If Rocco Fausti would have been some kind of hunting animal (which, like Big, he no doubt was), his ears would have perked up at the noise, and he would have scented the air after. As it was, his nostrils were flared a bit, and I didn’t question that he was sniffing us out.

“Rocco,” Big said, taking my hand and setting me next to him. “My wife, Leonora Bigatti. Leonora, Rocco Fausti.”

I felt it when Georgia sighed. It was her swoon. Big had a way of introducing me like I was the most precious thing to him, and he couldn’t wait to say those words, *my wife*. Georgia gave him hell because she was my best friend and, well, she was Georgia, and she liked to keep the men in our lives on their toes. But deep down, she loved Big.

Not as much as I did, though, and when he introduced me with such

pride, it almost made my knees go weak from the rush of blood to my heart.

Rocco took my hand and lifted it to his mouth. His eyes rose to meet mine, and he spoke in Italian as his warm breath fanned over my skin. Then he translated. “Charmed to meet you, Mrs. Bigatti.” Rocco’s eyes turned to Big, and Rocco grinned at him.

Big grinned back, but his hand on my hip was burning a brand through the fabric and onto my skin. Big set his free hand on Georgia’s back, about to guide her forward, but Rocco stepped up and took her hand as Big introduced them.

“Rocco, Georgia Munro Fedele. Georgia, Rocco Fausti.”

Rocco took her in while he held her hand—no rush. From her eyes to her glimmering red waves, to her black, formfitting, glittering dress, to her heels, and back up to her eyes. He held hers while he kissed her hand just like he’d done mine. He told her he was charmed, and after she cleared her throat, she said, “Not as charmed as I am to meet you, sir.”

I always had to give it to Georgia. She could always hold her own, even when the guy was drop-dead gorgeous and his sex appeal needed a warning label. I always thought that was one of the most attractive things about Georgia. She exuded confidence when she was turned on. It was the times she hid in the darkness, the ones I’d been witness to, that gave her a complexity most people would never know.

The charm must have been mutual to a degree they both felt moved by it, because after a short conversation, they ended up on the dance floor in the *great hall*. I had no idea of the Italian translation, but that was exactly what it was. Candle sconces and dripping wax, marble floors and frescoes, all that.

“That was...fast,” I breathed out, and then laughed some, meeting Big’s eyes.

His demeanor had changed some. I could feel it. He always had a relaxed confidence about him—nothing seemed to shake him—but I could tell something had rattled him some. “He likes you.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Rocco.”

“That’s...good?”

“Depends.”

“You’re losing me here, Big.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“If it wasn’t for his respect for me, and what exists between us, he’d have made a move on you.”

I exploded with laughter. I thought he was messing around with me. Big didn't flinch or even crack a smile.

"You're joking, right? He said, what? Four words to me? That's it. Then he turned his attention to Georgia."

"I can tell." He sighed, stepping closer to me, wrapping his arms around me. "I expected it—Rocco has fine taste—but I wasn't prepared for it. I don't like it. I know his thoughts."

So, this was Big being jealous. It shouldn't have warmed me like it did, but it did. I stood a little on my toes and kissed him on the lips, using my fingers to wipe any lipstick off. "I love you big," I whispered.

He sighed and his minty breath fanned over my face. "You're my existence." His eyes were hard on mine. The color was spellbinding, like watching the Ligurian Sea at the hottest time of the day, when the color of the water is truly brilliant.

I entwined our fingers and set my head against his chest, breathing him in while slow Italian music floated through the massive villa. He kissed the top of my head, and we stood that way for a while, just letting the world exist around us, but holding tight to each other.

This had become my safe space in life—his arms.

I hated to admit it, even to myself, but it was true. Like he'd told me, I'd become his home, and he'd become mine. I hated to admit it because, like Big had said about making vows in front of people who knew us, it made me vulnerable. I was easing into it, had been for some time, but that didn't mean it was always easy.

A throat cleared before a man tapped Big on the shoulder. We both stood straighter, but Big didn't release my hand, not until he realized who it was. They shook and then hugged, and then Big introduced me to another driver on the team. Luigi Galli. He was older, with salt and pepper curly hair. He was pleasant, and after a few minutes of conversation, he told Big they were waiting on him for a picture.

Big held my hand as he led me through all the guests. We walked up an ornate staircase and followed Luigi to a room set up for photographs. I wasn't sure why, but I was thinking it was for promotional reasons. Big was doing this event for Rocco, and in return, Rocco was going to help Big promote his new investment: Casino Portofino's gin.

At the edge of the doorway, I dug my feet in. "I have to go to the bathroom. Bad." I purposely avoided any trays with food and drink on

purpose. This dress was tight, and it showed every bulge. I didn't want to look bloated. But I'd drunk right before I put the dress on, hours ago, and I had to *go*. Big looked at the men waiting in the room and then at me.

I smiled. "I can go to the bathroom alone. I'm a big girl."

He didn't look so sure. He checked down the hallway before he sighed. The photographer came over with his assistant and told Big in a broken accent that his assistant was about to take a break. If I needed directions to any place in the villa, she would show me.

"The bathroom," Big said. He looked at me. "Then right back here."

"Got it." I nodded.

He narrowed his eyes at me and I grinned. I wasn't going to explore. I wasn't the type of person to go looking in places where trouble could be found. I'd always had enough of my own. But I thought it had more to do with the Caffi sisters. I hadn't seen either one of them, but I figured since Rocco was still romancing a woman who wasn't his wife, maybe neither of them were at the party—or event. It was hard to call it a party after being in the middle of it. A party brought to mind a plastic table covering, cheap decorations, and a homemade cake. This...this was an event, even if only for the backdrop.

I thanked the photographer's assistant as I rushed inside the bathroom, shutting and locking the door as I hustled to get the dress up in time. I moaned as I emptied my bladder, then washed my hands and fixed my hair a bit before I exited a lighter, and more comfortable, woman.

The photographer's assistant was waiting for me when I walked out.

"Oh!" I gasped a little, surprised. "You didn't have to wait."

"This is a big place," she said, and I couldn't automatically place her accent. "I will show you back."

We made pleasant small talk as I followed close behind her. She was nice, and it was nice to have someone to chat with about the Italian mansion. Georgia, it seemed, was still keeping busy with Rocco Fausti. Lili, the assistant, told me she was from France, and when I asked her how she ended up in Italy, she put a hand to her ear. She couldn't hear me. I went to step around her, so we could hear each other better, when a body rammed into mine. The knock almost sent me back a few paces, but two hands caught me by the arms.

"What the—"

The man apologized to me in Italian.

I didn't speak the language fluently, but I could recognize those words. I opened my mouth to say, *I wasn't sure if it was you or me who was at fault, and if it was me, I apologize*, but the look in his eyes stopped me. It was like he had recognized me—from where? I had no clue—and he was searching my eyes to see if I recognized him too.

I had no clue who he was. But because he was staring at me the way he was, all I did was nod at his apology, not wanting to say anything and make this more awkward.

“Amaryllis?” he barely got out.

Okay, so he *did* think I was someone else. That was sort of a relief.

“No,” I said. “I’m not Amaryllis. My name is Leonora Bigatti. I’m—”

“My wife.” Big seemed to come out of nowhere and set his hand on my back.

The man’s eyes immediately hardened when they landed on Big. I looked between them, but then looked away because the tension was so thick. It was awkward. No one was saying anything. Even Lili seemed like she couldn’t wait to run back to the room we’d found her in.

A few seconds after, she cleared her throat and said she had to get back. The two men eased back some, but it was only a formality. Whatever it was between them hadn’t moved an inch. Then the man nodded at me and cut a line through the guests.

“Who was that?” I barely got out when he had disappeared.

“He doesn’t matter.”

That was an odd answer. “You apparently know him.”

“He’s a racer.”

“Ahh,” I breathed out. “It didn’t seem very sportsmanlike between you two. Who’s Amaryllis? Do you know?”

“Of course he does,” an accented voice said from behind us.

Big didn’t turn to look, but I did. Rosaria Caffi. Like her pictures, she was beautiful. Long black hair parted down the center and pulled into a chignon. Sparkling eyes. Tan skin. A red dress to match her red lips—like mine. She stopped when she was close, and her spicy perfume drifted in the air around us.

“Amaryllis was engaged to Mario—the man who just stormed away—before she fell in love with Tullio. Tullio, of course, didn’t want her, not when he had a treasure like my sister. Mario is still stung about it. And now that Tullio shows up here with you?” She looked me up and down. “It’s

really going to stick the knife in Mario and twist. You could be Amaryllis's twin."

Tullio hadn't told me much about his time in Italy as a racer. Mainly why he left Vegas—to find himself away from his family's business—and why he returned. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life in an unhappy marriage after his mother had died.

A moment passed, filled with Rosaria giving us looks that were almost aggressive in their directness. Then she sauntered over to the top of the stairs and looked down, her eyes searching before they stilled for a second.

My lungs stopped taking in air when I got the feeling she had found her husband, and he was still lavishing his charm on Georgia. Big put a hand to my arm before I went down to make sure Rosaria didn't take Georgia by surprise. Big had told me Rocco had affairs, and so did his wife, but I wasn't sure how that worked. Was it all behind closed doors? Or would Rosaria seeing them together push her into action?

"She's not going to care about Georgia," Big whispered in my ear.

He was right.

A second later, she turned to us and watched us until we left, as if she were her sister's eyes and she was plotting my demise.

CHAPTER 21

Mrs. Big

BIG AND I were both quiet on the ride to wherever we were staying for the night. “Wherever” was a quaint place on what seemed like Rocco’s land. It was traditional, with green shutters and an apricot facade, and it felt comfortable. It had been a long day, and I couldn’t wait to climb into bed and...think. Think about the last twenty-four hours without Rosaria’s eyes on my every move. And without worrying about Georgia.

Though I was still somewhat worried about her. She had left with Rocco as we left. She kissed me on the cheek and whispered in my ear, “I’ll be okay.”

I trusted Rocco, for whatever reason, but I didn’t like that Georgia had a husband at home who could be malicious, and the same for Rocco’s wife. I knew if anything happened between her and Rocco, it would be a one- or two-night thing, but I wasn’t used to Georgia being the one who slept around on Joe. It was usually the other way around. Their marriage was mostly for show, but...it was just a lot to take in.

Then there was the “my husband-Mario-Amaryllis-Abree” situation.

I sighed as Big helped me out of the dress. We took a mostly silent shower together, and after, while he slipped into bed, I finished my usual nighttime skincare routine. I’d never really had one before, but Lidia had gotten me into it.

Big sat up, no shirt on, just thin sweats, and watched me through the mirror as I pulled my hair up on the sides. His eyes dipped down when the long silk nightgown opened enough to show my thighs as I crossed my legs. The scent of the facial cream drifted through the room.

He met my eyes again. “I love watching you do that every night now.” His voice was hoarse. “I don’t think I could go to sleep without watching you do it.” His words had weight to them, and they made me feel...sad.

“What’s going on, Big?”

“My past isn’t a place you should be.”

“Why?” I set the container down, rubbing the leftover cream into my hands, and turned to face him. “Did something happen with Amaryllis?”

“She told Mario it did. It didn’t.”

I went to stand, to turn my back on him and that bullshit answer, but he jumped from the bed and stopped me by taking my arms in his hands. “I was drinking a lot at the time. Mario wasn’t doing it for her, she wanted me to fuck her, and she came to me when I was so drunk—I can’t even remember why I turned her down. I never drank while driving or during practices, but during my off time, I drank like a motherfucker. Like my parents.

“Even after she told Mario we’d slept together, I never corrected it. She wanted to sabotage her relationship; that was on her, not me. Mario and I have never gotten along, which was why he never admitted to anyone what she told him. He never wanted anyone to think he lost her to me.”

He’d never confided in me about drinking, and I never asked. He only had one drink once a year—that was it. He was water and lemon in a whiskey glass eighty percent of the time. I called him wild when he decided to try something new, like fruit punch.

“This confession isn’t about Mario or the bullshit surrounding all that. This is about you and drinking.”

He nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” I whispered.

“Nothing controls me.”

I breathed out. “Drinking did? Before, I mean?”

“Part of me—the part that was weak enough to continue the same cycle as my parents. In our house, it was love or hate. When they loved each other, it was good. When they hated each other, they drowned it with whatever was in the liquor cabinet, but their feelings only surfaced even bitter.”

I wiggled out of his hold and touched his face. “We all have pasts. We’ve all done things we’re not proud of. You’re one of the strong who could take control of the half that threatened...everything.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” he said.

“Finish?”

“Nothing controls me, except for you, Leonora. Your love. Your hate. Everything in between. It drives me to take risks, to become vulnerable in front of people—to say our vows, to show the world what exists between us. You. That’s how you control me. You’re unhappy, I’ll find a way to make whatever’s wrong right. You’re happy, I’ll find a way to keep you that way.”

I wasn’t sure if it was all men in Big’s line of work, because I’d never associated with men as deep as him in that life before, but I found it to be very important to read between the lines with him sometimes. I knew what Big was telling me without him having to spell it out.

The cycle his parents had started was spinning in him, and once he got back to Vegas after Italy, he controlled the drinking part of it. But he had closed himself off. He was showing me, by having all these public weddings, that he wouldn’t tire when it came to keeping us healthy.

He’d opened himself up to being vulnerable...for me. And for a man like him, that went much deeper than love. It almost felt like he was gambling with his life.

“There’s no other place I would want to be.” I locked our hands together. “I belong here with you.”

“Fucking right you do.” He pulled my face toward his, and when our lips met, his kiss made me melt. That was how he’d gotten past my fireproof heart. Only he had the secret weapon to my armor.

We kissed until I was whimpering into his mouth, and even though he said I never had to beg, I needed him to be inside of me. He turned me around and ordered me to put my hands against the bed. I braced myself after he lifted the silk over my ass.

I sucked in a breath when he entered me. And with each stroke, my chest and lungs started to burn, because he was relentless, like he was chasing some high that only I could give him. My hips were going to be bruised, and I might not walk straight for a week, yet I started to meet him thrust for thrust, groan for groan, until our bodies were slapping, and we were both sweating and breathless.

“Fuck!” he roared.

A scream tore out of me when my entire body gave in as a surge of pleasure washed thorough every cell and stopped my heart for a second. He came inside of me a second later, and I collapsed on the bed. My eyes closed, and my entire body trembled. I was still able to open my mouth, though.

“Big?” I whispered.

He kissed my head in acknowledgment.

“I’m not sure what you do, but whatever it is, keep doing it. I’ve never been happier.”

A shallow breath left his mouth as I fell asleep in his arms.

THE NEXT DAY, we left for the F1 track in Monza, which Big told me was close to Milan.

Two days after that, before the sun came up, we left for the track. Big had told me this race was mostly for enthusiasts of the sport who had bought tickets in support of whichever charity Rocco was championing. That was nice, but I was eager to see what Big could do. From everything I’d read, he was one of the best, and I knew so many people were going to be anticipating his return.

He set his hand over my knee and squeezed. “Calm,” he said in a soothing voice.

“How can *you* be so calm? You’re about to go over a thousand miles per hour in a car going around loops.”

“A thousand miles per hour?” He grinned. “Sounds like fun to me.”

“It would.”

“You’re more dangerous to my heart than the car I’m about to drive. I live for a challenge.”

“*Ha ha*,” I mock laughed. “You’re hilarious, Big.”

“That’s a first. No one has ever accused me of having a sense of humor before.”

“How does it feel?”

He took a second. “I like it when you do the accusing.”

We looked at each other and grinned, and my heart skipped a couple of beats. He was so gorgeous. The kind of gorgeous that was refined, but with a rugged edge to it. And the way the light in the car kept playing with the color of his eyes...more green than blue in that light...

“Has anyone ever accused you of being too beautiful for your own good?” My voice was a bit breathless.

He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to. The sly grin that came to his face was answer enough. I smacked him on the chest and we both started

laughing. Before I could pull my hand away, he took it, kissing a trail from my elbow to my wrist, his mouth lingering on my pulse.

He said something in gruff Italian that sounded so beautiful. “I savor every moment of this life with you, Leonora Bigatti. Living with you is living.”

I rested my head on his shoulder and got as close to him as I possibly could. I never thought I’d be the type of woman who felt like she had to be attached, but in so many ways, I wanted to be attached to Tullio Bigatti. Almost like I wanted to melt into his skin sometimes.

The track came into view, and Big kissed my temple as the car stopped. When the driver opened Big’s door, Big held his hand out for me, and we walked together to wherever he needed to be. The place swarmed with crews getting the cars ready for the drivers. These cars were different from the cars I’d seen for NASCAR. They were single-seated with an open cockpit and open wheels. Sleeker looking, closer to the ground, with thick wheels. The engine was behind the driver.

Big showed me to his car. It was red with the name brand of the car painted on the back. Or as he called it, *the rear wing*. He dissected the areas of the car for me as he pointed them out.

“Rear wing, camera mount, engine intake, cockpit, front wing.”

“What makes these cars different from the ones from NASCAR?”

“You have your Mustangs, Camaras, even Toyotas for NASCAR, but F1 cars, even though they’re only eight to twelve miles an hour faster, can take corners up to five times as fast. It all has to do with aerodynamics and the downforce they create.”

Everything about this car fit Tullio Bigatti. It made sense. Just like him running a casino that brought in millions of dollars a day did. He seemed built for both, even if I couldn’t find a connection right away.

Or...maybe there was one.

It took a powerful man to do either of these things. A man who was like a jaguar in terms of speed, and as fierce as one with his bite.

I fell a little deeper in love with Tullio Bigatti at the thought.

“Was this one yours?” I asked. “Or is this just a loaner?”

I wasn’t sure if I should touch the car. Maybe it was like boats and women and bad luck. But my finger itched to trace the number thirteen painted on the slim hood around all the companies who had their logo displayed. Or I guess that was what it was called—a hood. Big never gave it a

name, but it was connected to the front suspension.

“Mine,” he said, giving me a peculiar look. “Rocco retired it and keeps it in their F1 museum.”

“You chose 13 because 13 is a lucky number in Italy, right?”

He nodded, almost warily. “No one else uses it. Superstition.”

“But here comes Tullio Bugatti, the Younger, and says...fuck it. It’s lucky because I believe it’s lucky.”

“You have me all figured out, Aphrodite.”

We stared at each other. It was intense, especially since so much was going on around us.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” I finally asked.

“I’m returning the question.”

“Oh, you noticed.”

“I notice everything.”

“Yeah, not going to argue about that.” I sighed. “This. You. Here. It makes me...proud of you, and...all of this is turning me on.”

He slow-stepped toward me, crowding me against the car, leaning in. “Wait till you see me drive.”

“Fuck,” I breathed out. “I might combust.”

He chuckled, but it was the truth. A man came over and interrupted our moment. He was older, with dark eyes and pure silver hair tucked underneath a Tullio Bigatti hat. Tullio’s Great Uncle, Flavio, who managed him and saw him out of the paddock. He was Tullio the Older’s youngest brother. He was warm and kind, and he insisted I call him uncle, but he wanted Tullio, *my* Tullio, to get his mind on straight and get to business. Big still had to walk the track.

“To remember it,” Uncle Flavio said to me.

Big snatched the hat off his uncle’s head, causing him to reach up a second too late to snatch it back.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” His uncle waved his hands, mad that he’d been taken.

“It’s for a good cause, Zio.” Big set the hat on my head. “My wife needs something of mine to wear.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Uncle Flavio grumbled, running a hand through his messed hair.

Big kissed me and told me to enjoy the race. I was led toward an area where family and friends would wait. On my way, my eyes connected with Mario’s. He winked at me and grinned.

A sense, when it came to Big, had started to develop, and it made me turn my head a little. Big was watching and had caught what Mario had done. Outwardly, he wasn't reacting, but I knew Big. He wasn't going to just let that slide. I kept my face forward as I continued forward.

My pace increased when I saw Georgia waiting for me. She looked... beautiful, like she was glowing. We hugged like we hadn't seen each other in years.

"You okay?" I asked her.

"Can't walk all that straight, but I feel better than I have in a long time. Like he worked the kinks out or something."

Our eyes held, but it wasn't the time nor the place to talk.

"Oh!" She sucked in a breath. "Here. Check this out. Rocco showed it to me and he thought you might like it. I knew you would!" She pulled out her phone and worked some magic. A video came up. It was a compilation of videos of Big while he was in the cockpit driving and talking to Uncle Flavio. It was all from practices when he used to drive for the team.

Georgia and I started cracking up when Big would start to sing and Uncle Flavio would start grumbling and griping at him. I'd started to see this side of Big in Italy, though more romantic, but I loved hearing it. I could tell he was younger, enjoying the freedom he probably never had in Vegas. I loved that for him.

"I know I give him a hard time, Leo," Georgia said, forwarding me the clips so I could save them. "But I think he's all right in my book."

"I know."

"But don't tell him!" She turned to me, her shiny new glasses giving me a glimpse of my reflection. "It'll go straight to his head, and we already know how *big* it is."

Our laughter faded as Rosaria and Abree came to wait in the same area. It was easy to tell they were sisters, but I found Abree to be slighter, with more bird-ish features. She had a youngness about her that seemed like it would be with her even after she'd grown old. Rosaria's physical appearance didn't straight away give her age, but there was a maturity about her. I wondered if she'd had it since before she was able to talk. One thing that was striking about the both of them—and not in a pleasant way—was how they both seemed to look down on everyone else.

From the moment our eyes met, I knew Abree thought Big had to be insane for ditching her and marrying me. It wasn't like he left her for me, but

I don't think it made a difference in her opinion. He'd decided not to marry her, so everyone associated with him should suffer.

It was so clear in her eyes.

Honestly, I didn't want to be around her either. I didn't like where my mind was going. What she and Big did together... But I wouldn't have purposely put myself in this situation. She did it to try and make me uncomfortable.

Rosaria and Abree turned to talk to someone, and Georgia slid her hands up and made horns behind Abree's head. I pushed them down right before they turned, but maybe because of the goofy looks on our faces, they narrowed their eyes at us.

"Just one tooth," Georgia whispered to me. "Let me just knock out one. Or two. If the sister decides to get involved."

"What did you say?" Abree said, her attitude bigger than she was.

I'd always enjoyed working at Dynamic because of the women. Life had chewed most of us up and spit us out. We bonded over it. Bonded over being female and getting knocked down, but I'd learned how to be strong over the years too. And both Georgia and I wanted to connect with the women who maybe didn't recognize that same strength in themselves. Georgia and I tried to show them that even if life was hard, they could be stronger than their circumstances. Even if we had our weak moments—those were just moments. So, I'd dealt with a lot of girls and women who were hard to like at first, but I knew. They had gone through some tough shit.

These two—they were just bullies. And Georgia and I never put up with that kind of behavior. It was toxic.

And I really got it then.

Why Big decided to break it off and return to Vegas.

Georgia put her hands on her hips and took a step forward. "Not today, Satan's Sister. You don't want to start something with me you can't finish. And I promise. I'll finish it."

It was like a standoff in an old Western. A few seconds after the metaphorical whistle and tumble weeds, Rosaria set her hand on Abree's arm and they both turned away, shoulders stiff.

Georgia gave me a look, as if to say, *yeah, I thought so.*

Even though I knew they were intimidated by Georgia, because she never backed down and they could sense it, Abree kept flipping her hair and giving me side-eye glances. More like glares. Especially after she decided to look

down at my left hand, and the ring Big gave me would catch the sun and almost blind her.

I blocked them out when Angelo and Phoenix arrived, and the race was about to start. Big's position in the lineup was first, and I knew that meant something. He'd gone out in first place and had resumed his spot. Maybe it would be different in a competitive race that counted, but that was what I took from it. I remembered reading about the positions and what they meant before.

The race itself was fucking intense.

My leg was bouncing again, and I started to bite my nails, which I'd never done before. It felt like I was in the car with Big, and we were going over a hundred and sixty miles an hour while taking turns along the winding track. Georgia was cheering for Big, but she grew quiet suddenly. She pointed out how close Big's car and another car kept getting to each other, especially when they'd make a turn.

I'd noticed it too.

"No, no, no," I chanted underneath my breath. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that the other car was Mario's. This was supposed to be for charity, but it had gotten personal for them.

I looked around for Rocco and found him standing off to the side, eyes glued to what was going on. The set of his face seemed chiseled out of stone, but I could tell he was seeing what we were. The other cars would get close, fall back, and then get close again. Big and the other car just kept getting close—dangerously close.

Then a moment that made the entire track go quiet.

It was like Big's car and the other car came together from the side, but instead of crashing into each other, the cars seemed to spin out in opposite directions. Big's crashed into one barrier, and the other car crashed into another.

"Oh my God," I wanted to scream out, but the words only came out as a whispered prayer. I wasn't even aware that I'd gotten to my feet, or that Rocco held me back while I tried to get over the barrier.

A car with swirling lights that had been trailing the race stopped, and men from the crews were rushing to each crashed car. Maybe it only took seconds, but it seemed like an eternity before both men got out of the cars while the team checked them out. I hid my face in Rocco's chest as he held me up, and I sobbed out of sheer relief. That was when I noticed my brothers and

Georgia surrounding us. My brothers were watching what was going on with Big, and Georgia had her hand on my back, her eyes on my face.

“He’s okay, Leo. He’s okay.”

I nodded, about to wipe my face, when my eyes met Abree’s. She and Rosaria were walking past, and I caught the smirk on her lips.

She was glad this had happened, but not glad enough, because Big was still standing. I went to go after her, but Rocco held me by the arms.

“It is not worth it,” he said. “Your man is unharmed. Let us be thankful for that.” Then he cursed, and my breath caught because I thought something else had happened to Big. But when I turned and looked at the track, Big and Mario were fist-fighting in the middle of it.

CHAPTER 22

Mr. Big

HOTEL TRE'S lawn had been turned into the launch spot of Casino Paradiso's gin. Like the labels, it was Mediterranean inspired. The color blue was dominant. The exact color of my wife's eyes. Even down to the food, everything was locally sourced. Two hundred people graced the property, and most of them had a long reach when it came to publicity.

The guests were raving over the gin, and I expected it to be sold in numerous restaurants and bars around the world. The exclusive labels would be limited, but still available to everyone if they visited the casino or Hotel Tre.

My grandfather had loved gin, and this project was his baby, but he'd died before it got to this point. I'd put it on the back burner until I got a grip on the business. Since he had done a lot of the work, I picked it up to get it out there in his honor.

Everything he touched had turned to gold.

Everyone said the same thing about me.

If any of these people were to ask my wife if that was true about me, in that moment, I didn't think she would agree.

After the race in Monza, and after the crash, and subsequent fight with Mario, she ran into my arms and almost knocked me over. Then...things turned ugly. Her relief turned to anger, and she had been giving me the silent treatment ever since.

She kept her distance by standing on the other side of the lawn, looking like Aphrodite in a light blue dress, her blonde hair catching the light and the breeze. And if one more of these rich fuckers gave her another look, I was

going to start breaking bottles over heads. Which was why she was giving me the silent treatment in the first place.

The crash and then the fight had been too much for her to handle.

After I'd been shot, she started acting differently. She wanted to be attached to me, and I fucking loved it, but I knew there was fear behind it, and I never wanted her to be afraid. She'd let go of some of it after we arrived in Italy, but it resurfaced again after the race.

This time, instead of pulling closer to me, she was pulling away.

I lifted my glass of water and lemon and listened to the ice cubes crack as I took a deep drink. I was keeping my eyes on her, and I didn't fucking like what she was doing. Locking me out.

I didn't fucking like all these wandering eyes on mine.

I didn't fucking like Mario winking and smiling at my wife, like he'd gotten it in his head that he was going to try to use my wife as payback for Amaryllis.

If I wouldn't have needed permission from the Faustis to kill him, I would have—probably on the track for everyone to see. I was never messy with my business, but Leonora did things to me I wasn't used to. When I told her she had control over me, I wasn't fucking exaggerating. Any other time, I would have rebelled against the feeling and conquered it. It's what I do, conquer, but I knew better than to fight it.

I knew my odds.

I never would have won.

She had known it, too, which was why she had fought so hard at first to accept the truth—she was mine and I was hers.

Whatever existed between us was too powerful for each of us.

Aphrodite's eyes flicked to mine, giving me a quick death glare, while she talked to Georgia, Rocky, Kitty, and Dulce, who came to the party with her husband, Giosuè. Their yacht was anchored in the water in front of the hotel. They were regulars, and his family had started a world-famous Italian luxury designer brand. House of Sicilia. Giosuè, himself, had designed the labels for the gin. They were known for their romantic and feminine aesthetics, while incorporating their rich history in Italy—the culture—into their designs.

As their brand name noted, the family was Sicilian. I had called them in to design Leonora's dresses, along with all the wedding clothes. Their company was estimated to be worth billions—his family worth the same.

They were friends with my grandparents. Kitty wasn't exaggerating when she went on about who she used to be back in the day.

Georgia excused herself from the conversation and headed my way, probably to grab a drink from the open bar. She stopped next to me, staring in the same direction I was. At my wife.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. She looked good, better than she had in Vegas.

"The sun is shining, the air is warm and clean, I'm with people I love and who love me, and I'm still breathing. I'd say pretty darn good."

I nodded and took another drink of water.

She became quiet for a few seconds, then she cleared her throat. "It's crazy how much Leo's life has changed. She went from a struggling single aunt, to...talking it up with the owners of House of Sicilia, who dressed her for this event. But no matter what, Leo will always be Leo. None of this matters to her, because she has heart. She'll go back to Dynamic, wearing her thrift store T-shirts and cutoff shorts from Walmart, ready to be there for a scared girl who feels alone in the world. Because she knows how it feels to have nothing and no one. All of us there do." She looked up at me and squinted.

"If she hasn't spelled this out for you yet, I will. Not your money. Not what you can give her. Just you. That's all she wants. A man she truly loves and who truly loves her back. I know that's a scary word for men in your line of work, but deal with it. You're turning into everything to her. And you scared the shit out of her. *Twice*, in under a year. I might not always be here to be by her side." She lifted a hand before I could say anything. "I know you'll take care of her; you already do. But I need to know you'll take care of yourself *for* her. You *could* be reckless before. Try not to be so reckless now. Not when you have someone like Leo to love and watch out for."

Before I could respond, Georgia finished her trek to the open bar. Rocco met her there and said something that made her throw her head back and laugh. Leonora's eyes went to the sound, then our eyes crashed when she went to turn them forward again.

Fuck me.

When she attempted to steal from me, she stole more than my money.

Leonora Kallistos Bigatti stole my entire life.

Her silence was driving me mad, and I was about to reach a breaking point.

A few guests slipped into the conversation with Dulce and Giosuè, and Kitty, Rocky, and Leonora seemed to go in separate directions. Kitty came straight for me, Rocky went toward the hotel, and Leonora went to stand with her brothers. Phoenix was staring toward the water, but my eyes went to Angelo.

He was staring at Rocco and Georgia.

I didn't fucking like the look in his eyes. And if I didn't like the look in his eyes, neither would Rocco. He might have been paying attention to Georgia, but like any man who was used to feeling out a room, keeping an eye on every other man in it without making it obvious, he felt Angelo's stare.

I'd been keeping an eye on Angelo for a while when it came to Georgia. Angelo wasn't the type of kid to ever be a kid. He had to grow up too fast. And he was a serious motherfucker. He didn't date. He didn't find fun in doing stupid shit most kids his age would. He had goals, and those goals would be met. He wanted to follow in my footsteps.

His interest in Georgia, a woman much older than him, and married, wasn't a simple crush. It went beyond that, and I knew when he got to a certain age, he wasn't going to worry about messing the waters when it came to her.

I knew this because he told me. He was going to marry her someday. That was not only an issue because of the age difference. Georgia was like a sister to Leonora, and Georgia was already married to Joe Fedele. Joe and I didn't run in the same circles. He was mid-level, and I didn't fuck with mid-level men. But I knew who he was, he knew who I was, and if in the future he decided Angelo was disrespecting him by going after his wife—Joe was going to come to me. It would probably go further than that. It would go to New York.

I wasn't sure what the fuck the kid was thinking. Georgia was a lonely woman with Joe, but I didn't think she would ever see Angelo in an amorous way. He was hell-bent on changing that view as he got older, but he wasn't masking his jealousy in that moment. I felt like I could smell it in the air when the wind would blow. Bitter as sour fruit.

My eyes went back and forth between Angelo and his sister, even when Kitty brushed my shoulder as she breezed past, going straight for the bar. If she wasn't careful, she'd need her bedazzled scooter before the night was over. Then I'd have to have a man on her to make sure she didn't fly off a

cliff. She'd probably go *weeee* as she did.

"My little Tullio is not used to the silent treatment from women." She mock-pouted. "Neither was your grandfather, but groveling was a good look on him when it happened." Her laughter echoed as she passed me. It reminded me of a witch's cackle sometimes.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

Umberto, who called with daily updates on the casino and business issues. "Business issues" meaning whoever had tried to off me after my meeting about the gin. But I'd already had a conversation with him earlier. The casino was running like a well-oiled machine, and he was still hunting for information on who might've had the balls to shoot at me.

"Boss," he said. "The apartment building your wife's mamma is living in has been torched. No casualties, but a few tenants are being looked at for breathing issues and burns."

I cleared my throat, my eyes hard on Angelo. "Linda Davies."

"Standing outside in her pajamas, watching as the place continues to smoke. One of the firemen said she used the fire to light her last cigarette." Umberto pronounced cigarette as *sigar-etta*.

"Find her a safe place until I can get this all sorted out. This wasn't an accident." I didn't have to tell him to keep me updated. It was his job to keep me updated, and if he didn't, he wouldn't still be around. People who didn't have common sense were not on my payroll.

Umberto told me he agreed in Italian, and we hung up. The shooting was aimed at me, but torching the building seemed to be sending a different message. It was mine, but Linda lived in it, and Linda was connected to my wife.

My wife, who finally met my eyes when she noticed how Angelo was staring at Rocco and Georgia dancing to a catchy Italian song the band was playing. I nodded once, *I'll take care of it*, but before I could talk to Angelo about keeping his insulting eyes off Rocco Fucking Fausti, the dance ended and Rocco came to me.

We spoke in Italian.

"The boy," he called Angelo. "He is your wife's brother."

I refused to lie, and calling what Angelo felt for Georgia a crush was a lie. It was more than that. Angelo was convinced he was in love with Georgia, and she was his. I decided to go with the truth, since it might appeal to Rocco. When it came to a love story, it usually did.

Rocco's eyes were on Angelo's the entire time I spoke. Angelo was holding his own, but I had no doubt he was sweating underneath the suit, and not from the heat. Angelo knew who the Faustis were. He'd inquired about joining their ranks. He found their MO of stealing hearts in the name of love romantic. But not every man was given that right. It was their thing, meaning only men of the blood had the honor. The rest of us had to get more creative.

Rocco nodded after I was done talking. Then he looked at me. "Your feelings on this."

I shrugged. "He is still young. She's my wife's sister, even though they do not share blood."

"She is married," Rocco said.

"She is."

"She is stunning."

I didn't touch his comment. Sometimes Rocco's romantic thoughts came out and there was nothing to say to them.

He fixed his suit, and whatever else he was thinking, he kept to himself. But if I could have guessed, it was that Georgia's husband was wasting a beautiful woman, and he might even kill Joe himself. Rocco told me someone would be in touch about what I owed the family and Mario for what I'd done on the track after the crash. I'd broken Mario's jaw. Mario would owe the family, too, but since I came out unscathed, he owed me nothing. He wasn't smart enough to keep his helmet on. The one or two hits he landed on me only damaged his hands.

The money was well spent. I'd pay triple just for the chance to feel my fists breaking his bones again.

Rocco left me with that and walked over to Leonora. He took her hand and kissed it, and I could hear him thank her for giving him the honor to sing at our wedding. They chatted for a minute or two before he stood before Angelo. I couldn't hear the entire conversation, but I knew my wife was holding her breath the entire time, especially when Rocco said easily, "Your romantic heart saves you, *ragazzo*."

Angelo probably didn't catch it, but Rocco had insulted him by calling him *boy*. In his world, if you were not a man, you were a boy, and you were treated as one. If Angelo had been a man in Rocco's eyes, he would have killed him for the disrespect.

I sighed into my glass of water. For something that was meant to put fires out, it wasn't touching the ones blazing around me. Especially the one in the

center of my chest.

CHAPTER 23

Mrs. Big

“YOU'RE STILL STICKING with the old silent treatment, ah?”
Kitty lifted her over-sized Bloody Mary and took a slurp.

We were waiting in the dining area for Georgia and Rocky after finishing an early breakfast. We had a day of pampering and shopping in Portofino planned for my girls’...whatever anyone wanted to call it. I wasn’t a bachelorette, so this wasn’t to celebrate the end of my single status. I was already locked in tight to a man who didn’t mind free falling from absurd heights. I wasn’t a person who didn’t take risks, I took them too, but I guess where Big and I differed on opinion was the worth-it factor.

I wasn’t feeling our plans. Not time with my girls, but more pampering and shopping. Big had told me about the fire to my mom’s apartment the night before, and I was still mad at Big, and the thought of getting made over just didn’t appeal to me for some reason. I wanted to blow off some steam, just not with his credit card. I know, I know, call me crazy, but I had a lifetime of that sort of life, if I wanted it. For some reason, I wanted to set my feet on the earth and sweat. Release all the pent-up tension and aggression that felt trapped in my pores.

Maybe because with my silent treatment, I wasn’t having sex with Big, and having sex with Big was a cathartic connection, and not having sex with Big felt like it was messing me up in ways I wasn’t used to. I felt blocked from...relief.

Part of this, too, was that...I just missed him.

I sighed. “I don’t have anything nice to say to him right now.”

“Why wait until you do?” Kitty raised an eyebrow at me before she took

another drink of her Bloody Mary. “When men do wrong, it’s best not to sugarcoat. It’s best to walk them down a path of thorns so they won’t forget it. Baby Tullio is hardwired a certain way. He needs the thorns. Not all the time, like that *chic* he had a momentary lapse in judgment with, the one connected to the Faustis, but...what he did was reckless. I’m not going to give him right when he’s wrong. Your anger is coming from a place of love. That *chic* doesn’t know what love is, and she wouldn’t, not even if it bit her.”

Kitty got a grin out of me. She was the only one who could get away with calling Big Baby Tullio. Hitting his heels with her scooter too. And *chick*? She must have picked that up from Dynamic, but she was saying it like *chic*.

“You know I wouldn’t allow just anyone to get close to my grandsons. I made that mistake with my sons. I released them to the world and hoped they would follow their happiness.” She took another deep drink. I could smell tomato on her breath as she sighed. “I fell in love with Eleni the moment I met her. She used to sing for Casino Portofino. But...my son was prone to addiction, and I think her love for him made her weak enough to join him. My son could never quit. She could. She’d always go back to him, and it wouldn’t be long before they were right back where they started.”

“I know,” I whispered. “Big told me.”

“He never talks to anyone about it. Not even me.” She looked behind me for a second. “They both wasted away before his eyes. My husband—Tullio—tried tough love with our son, but nothing seemed to help him. In the end, it was like they went under together. My son told me after Eleni died that, if there was a heaven for men like him, Eleni would be there to meet him. He missed her and always regretted the man he could never be for her. At her funeral, he sang “Are You Lonesome Tonight.” There wasn’t a dry eye in the place.” She wiped at her eyes, smearing her makeup.

“That’s so sad.” I wiped my eyes too. They were burning from holding back so much emotion, even though tears slipped down my cheeks, which I quickly dried. I hated that Tullio—my Tullio—had to experience that. I hated that anyone did. I also hated that Kitty had to experience the death of a child. No matter how old, I couldn’t imagine a child not always being a baby to the parents. It should be that way, in my opinion. That was why my heart always broke for my brothers. Their parents didn’t see them that way. But I would. They would always be my baby brothers.

“Gio’s dad?” I asked to change the subject. I could see Kitty was slumping in her seat, something I’d never seen her do. It made her look her

age.

She took a deep breath and sat up straighter in her chair. She waved a hand. “Lives in Palm Springs with his wife. He goes by the name Loyd Johnson most of the time. He tries to hide who he is—who he came from. My husband—Old Gio—knew our son wasn’t made for that life years ago. I love my son, but he’s a whiner. But who am I to judge? Everyone, especially in show biz, calls me Kitty. You know my real name.”

“Canta.”

“Canta Maria Ducci. I never changed my last name, though. There’s nothing wrong with Johnston if it belongs to you, but...” She scoffed, sending another blast of spicy breath my way. “I told him I had his Johnson for him when I first found out he was doing it.”

That elicited a laugh from me. First, she said Johnson, and then she said Johnston, and then she was back to *I told him I had his Johnson for him*. Kitty wasn’t feeling any pain from the drinks she’d had.

“You’re one of a kind, Canta Maria Ducci.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” She smiled. “I’ve been told that all my life.”

“That’s the truth.” Rocky sauntered up to the table. She must have caught me telling Kitty that she was one of a kind.

Speaking of one of a kind...seems like I was surrounded by those types. Rocky, or Raquel, Barcelona fit that bill too. Her hair was a dark auburn in this light, but in darker rooms, it was close to chestnut. She had a lot of it. Her hazel eyes were cattish, streaked with honey stripes against a backdrop of green and blue, and her skin was fair, but bordered on tan. It was flawless.

Even though I understood what drew Gio to her, I didn’t think he realized it yet. Like his casino, his tastes seemed to be flashy. Rocky didn’t need to be. She was the flash. And her aesthetic was a perfect mixture of rough around the edges and feminine. She was the type of woman who could pull off a lace dress with combat boots.

Actually, the first time I’d ever seen her feet was on this trip. She always had them hidden in either boots or sneakers in Vegas.

Georgia and I loved her. So did Kitty. I knew it was only a matter of time before Gio did too. Or recognized it.

Rocky pulled out a chair, and the plate she ordered from her room was delivered to her a few minutes after. She thanked the waiter and then dug in. She enjoyed eating.

Georgia joined us a few minutes later. She was wearing a dress from House of Sicilia. Dulce had said she had to have it. It was from their new summer line, and it was blue and flirty. Her small purse was similar in color to her dress with a majolica pattern and lemons. Her sandals were platform wedges. Her glasses were sitting on top of her head, holding her hair away from her face.

All that noticing of what she was wearing, and I still didn't miss the accessory who let his hand slip from her hip before he took off in another direction, fixing his suit as he did.

Rocco Fausti.

The three of us raised our brows at her as she took a seat.

She totally ignored us. "What's for breakfast?"

"You already know," Kitty said to her. "You ordered ahead of time like the rest of us."

And like magic, the dishes Georgia had ordered ahead of time were set down in front of her, piping hot. Rocky was almost finished with hers, and Georgia was picking, mostly at fruit. Kitty continued to guzzle her Bloody Mary until nothing was left and another one was delivered to her without asking.

Rocky cleared her throat and set her napkin down. "So, another day of shopping? Massages? Waxing?"

"Whoever called waxing pampering must have been a man," Kitty said.

"Amen, Ms. Kitty," Georgia said with a sweet Southern twang, lifting her cup of espresso in toast.

I stood abruptly and all eyes flew to me. "We're in Italy!" I rasped out. "Let's connect to the land, get our hands dirty, our feet on the ground! Let's talk to locals and eat local dishes. Let's just...be."

I looked at Kitty, and it was almost like I'd pointed at her or pushed her back. She sat back in her chair some.

"You're from around here, right?" I asked.

"Portofino, right?" Rocky said.

"No, Tullio, my husband, his mamma was from Portofino. His father from Sicily. That's how I met him. He was at this hotel visiting. I was born three hours from here. In Triora." When she said the place, her accent became more pronounced. It was there all along, but she'd mostly buried it.

Rocky did a quick search on her phone. "They had witch trials there in the fifteen hundreds!"

“Yes.” Kitty’s voice was somewhat quiet.

“You can’t get any dirtier than that,” Georgia said.

“Exactly!” I felt a rush of excitement push out the worry and ache I’d been feeling the last couple of days. It had been months on the worry front. But I had a feeling I was just burying too. I hoped this trip helped me uncover it, or just gave me a chance to catch my breath so I could.

Rocky was muttering about tours while she stared and tapped at her phone.

Kitty sighed and looked at the three of us. “If we’re going to do this, we’re all going to need more sensible shoes.”

LIDIA, who was always like a ray of warm Italian sunshine, even in Vegas, was going to drive us. Kitty called shotgun. She said she knew the way and could direct Lidia. She told Lidia to put it in the GPS just in case, and then she started complaining about GPS because they didn’t have it in her day.

Georgia and I took the middle seat, and Rocky took the very back. She’d called dibs on DJing, and as soon as we were in the car, she slid a USB cord between me and Georgia and told me to tell Kitty to plug it into the connection to the dash stereo system.

“Keep it low,” Lidia said. “I need to hear when to turn!” She took the cord from Kitty and leaned over, plugging it in when Kitty started cursing at the thing.

“I understand now why some men have trouble with this,” she said, cracking her window when the car started to roll.

“Trouble with what?” Lidia asked.

“Finding the hole and keeping the connection,” Kitty said without missing a beat.

There was a beat of silence in the car before everyone but Kitty exploded with laughter. It would have been awkward to say it out loud, but...her grandson had *no* problem with that. He was an excellent hole-finder and keeper-inner for the long haul.

I sighed at the thought of Big, and how he looked at me before we left. It was so full of ache that it made me almost go to him. Then the thought of him

crashing into the wall came back to me, and how it all could have ended because he wanted to seriously injure Mario for winking and smiling at me. It turned my heart cold, and I'd left without either of us saying a word to each other. I wasn't sure if he thought he was in the right or not, but he was keeping quiet too.

"Not that I would know," Kitty went on after the car died down. "Both of my husbands were excellent in bed. The faulty hole-finders were just hearsay from my girlfriends."

"Okayyy," Rocky said from the back seat. "Moving on. Let's talk about the dresses and boots situation instead. It feels sort of meant to be, doesn't it?"

Before we left, Rocky offered each of us a pair of boots to try. Oddly enough, her boots fit all of us. Then Kitty said she had dresses stored in the attic of the hotel from when she left Italy. Even odder than the boots, her dresses fit all of us. Even her after all that time. We took sandals from our own closets in case our feet got hot after exploring.

Georgia nodded. "It does."

"It's like that book, or was it just a movie?" Rocky asked, sliding forward, setting her head between me and Georgia. "The traveling jeans, or whatever it's called. I've never seen it, but I read the description on Rotten Tomatoes. All the friends fit into one pair of vintage jeans, and they each take turns with it on special trips."

We all just nodded because it didn't seem like any of us had seen that one either or heard of it.

"What happens if we each have something that fits, though?" Lidia asked. "And we're wearing the items at the same time?"

"I don't know," Rocky said. "But it's bound to be good, right? It has to be."

After a few minutes of driving, I watched as Lidia's eyes kept flicking to the rearview mirror.

"Let me guess," I said. "He's having us followed."

In Vegas, especially after the shooting, Big always had someone with me or tailing me. The one security guy, whose name I still didn't know, had racked up enough membership points at Dynamic to become a VIP member, since Vinny was trying a new rewards system.

"I didn't doubt he would," Kitty said. "I'll tell them to keep their distance once we get there."

The car grew quiet until Georgia interrupted the silence with a question for Kitty. “Tell us about where you grew up, Ms. Kitty. Where we’re going.”

“I think I need a few minutes to close my eyes,” she said. “Rocky found an article on it. Let her read it to you. You’ll see the rest for yourself once we get there.”

Rocky must have found either a blog post or a website with details on Triora, because she was reading verbatim.

“In the Ligurian hinterland, in the province of Imperia, at 765 meters above the valley of the Argentina stream, there is the small village of Triora, a historically very important place from a strategic, military and religious point of view. Located on the border of Piedmont, it had five fortresses, accessible through seven gates, and its military force actively participated in the campaigns of the Republic of Genoa. The name, of Latin origin, means ‘three mouths’ and refers to the three food resources produced locally: wheat, wine and chestnuts.”

She gave a little more information on the village. Then she switched gears. “This is from an Italian blogger who’s been. She says Triora is known as the village of witches. The trials happened between 1587 and 1589. She says Triora was suffering from a terrible famine at the time, and *‘people were dying in numbers, and residents became convinced that only the work of witches could have caused such a horrible event’*—wait.”

It took her a minute to continue.

“The first article reads a bit differently. It says this about the witches: *The spirits of the population flared up to the point that, in a short time, the people accused of witchcraft became two hundred, in what was a real all-local witch hunt. In reality, it was an excuse for the families of Triora, poisoned by old grudges and personal hatreds, to wage war with each other. The Inquisition then sent a special commissioner and initially thirteen women were imprisoned, then six more plus a man, all accused of witchcraft and subsequently sent to the prisons of Genoa. One of these women died under torture, and another killed herself by throwing herself into the void, so the Republic of Genoa involved the Holy Office in Rome, which took two years to condemn the witches to abjuration. Meanwhile, five other women had died in prison in Genoa and seven in Triora. Although there was no burning of the bodies, like usual death sentences performed, the deaths were numerous, and the trials ended with prison sentences.*” She paused. “There are a few festivals too—not just for witches. And they’re known for two types of wine,

a red and a white, and bread! Do you think we can try some?"

"I still remember how to make it," Kitty mumbled from the front seat. "In case the one place in town that makes it is out."

"Do you think you're related to any of the accused, Kitty?" Rocky asked.

Out of respect for her age, we all would have called her Mrs., but only Georgia was able to get away with it because Kitty thought the way she said it was cute.

"Mamma told me we were. We were good with herbs and things like that for healing."

"With a name like Canta, I can see it," Georgia said.

"Canta means beautiful song in Italian," Lidia said.

"You girls are spoiling me too much," Kitty said, her eyes seeming to close tighter as a hot beam of sunlight hit them through the cracked window. It showed every line and crease in her face, but it also made her silver hair glow, and I thought she'd never looked more like a diamond.

"Never," Georgia said with a big smile on her face, but it didn't seem as natural as it usually did.

As the car continued climbing higher and higher, the turns sharp and the roads narrow, our conversation took the same turn. It seemed like all our thoughts were free to roam in the air, and they were heavy. Some of that could have been how high we were climbing. Lidia and Kitty were the only two who didn't gasp as we made the trek.

Triora wasn't far from Liguria, but we were moving up, and the sea disappeared with how high we'd climbed, swallowed up by mountains and woods. When Rocky had mentioned the void one of the accused witches had jumped in, I could see how that would be possible here. Woods, nothing but greenery, surrounded us. The village itself was so charming, though. A place where tourists would flock to find *il paese delle streghe* (the village of the witches) and celebrate their festival during August, but on a regular day...it seemed like it was only us and the locals.

All of us, it seemed, watched Kitty's face from time to time, to see how it changed as she studied places she'd seen through a young girl's eyes. Rocky was full of questions, and some Kitty would answer and some she wouldn't, but one of them stuck with me.

"Do you ever visit?" Rocky asked. "This place is so...real."

She'd go as far as Portofino, she said, to the hotel, but she hadn't returned to Triora since she was sixteen. She said there was nothing to return to.

No family, I took it. We didn't meet anyone on the street she might have known, or visited the place she grew up in. Or where she was born. She said she was born at home. Back then, she said, that was the way of things.

Mostly, though, we had a great time. And after the tours we took, we switched out our shoes and found a table to enjoy the snacks we bought. We were able to try the bread—which was delicious—and we all shared a few bottles of red and white wine. Georgia and I weren't going to have any at first, because I was sticking with Georgia on the cancer fighting diet she was on, and because I didn't drink out of respect for Big, but Kitty said while in Italy, drinking wine was like bathing in hot springs or throwing a coin in a fountain.

“Besides, a glass of red wine a day is good for the heart, like olive oil is good for more than just food.”

We all lifted our glasses and toasted.

Georgia sighed into hers after taking a sip, then stood from the table, stretching. I watched as she walked to the edge of the mountain and looked out over the rolling valley below. While Kitty, Lidia, and Rocky were chatting, I went after her.

“Hey,” I breathed when I got close.

“Hey.” She kicked a rock that was close to her foot and watched as it tumbled down.

“What's going on, George?” I asked. I hadn't had a moment alone to talk to her, and Georgia was even more stubborn than me when it came to sharing. She was usually trying to grease my problems out of me so she could help, but when it came to her, she hit the brakes. I sighed when she didn't answer. “Tell me about Rocco.”

“What about him?”

“Anything.”

“He's stunning—you've seen him. I think besides your brothers and your husband, I've never seen a man so beautiful.”

“My brothers?”

“You're their sister, but you have eyes, Leo. You know they're both beautiful boys.”

Okay, I'd give her that. Both of my brothers were going to be extremely handsome men, just like our dad. Which got him into a lot of trouble, in my opinion. He was good-looking and knew it. He used it to his advantage. Not only did he deal in criminal underworlds, but he was a philandering gigolo.

“Is it over?” I whispered. “Between you and Rocco?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It was never meant to last. I’ve just been...”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, giving her a fat kiss on her temple. “I know. Lonely.”

“He made me forget for a while, and I made him forget...” she took a deep breath “...how lonely he is.”

“I guess the mutual agreement he has in place with his wife is for a reason.”

“We didn’t talk about her, but I could tell. He was as starved as I was for a connection that runs deeper than just the flesh. It’s all in his eyes. His touch. The way he kisses...”

“Is that what you found? A connection that runs deeper?”

She was quiet for a minute or two. “No. Maybe if he would have offered it to me...I would have thought about it. But it wasn’t on the table. I mean...” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, but it took off again with a gust of wind. “He’s perfect, but not the boring kind of perfect. It would have been hard for me to spend another day with him and *not* fall in love. He sang to me. He cooked and fed me in bed. He danced with me, like...he’s from another time. Then he’s rough, protective, full of honor he would die for. But my heart would only get broken—I didn’t look beyond the second with him. I’m done with that. Having my heart broken. The situation with Joe works for me.”

“Until it doesn’t.”

“I’ve never been unfaithful to Joe. Not until recently.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me, George. Life is complicated.”

She looked at me and smiled. She knew I’d be the last person to judge her. Georgia wasn’t the type of woman who ran around with married men. Like me, she was an advocate for women and would help them in any way she could, but I knew the situation with Rocco was different. He was married but had an agreement with his wife—she had affairs too. Even if we thought she was a complete bitch, Georgia wouldn’t have done that to her if she wasn’t doing the same thing with other men.

Georgia nodded to the opposite side of me. Rocky. She had gotten up from the table and had made her way to the edge of the mountain too. She was looking over it, moving her wedding band up and down her finger, like she was contemplating throwing it over the side. I wasn’t going to stop her if that was what she really wanted to do, but I could tell she was torn. Georgia

and I made it over to her, wrapping our arms around her.

“Want to talk about it, kiddo?” Georgia asked.

She opened her mouth, then shut it. “That’s a deep void.” She nodded down.

We agreed.

We stood there for a few minutes until I felt eyes on my back and turned. Kitty had stood and was watching from the table, but her face...it wasn’t stern, but it was easy to tell she wanted us to come back.

“I think Kitty wants us to come back,” I said. “Maybe she’s ready to go.”

We walked back and Kitty nodded to our seats, telling us “sit” in Italian. Or I thought that was what she’d said.

The three of us glanced at each other before we took our prior seats. Lidia poured us each another glass of wine. Lidia was having the time of her life, and I knew one of the men from the car Big had sent was going to have to drive us back.

“What’s going on?” Kitty asked us in a tone that matched the set of her face—stern.

“Oh, you know,” Georgia waved a hand. “We were contemplating the void.”

“Thinking about the accused and all they went through,” Rocky added.

Kitty nodded. “While we were walking earlier, I remembered something my mamma had once told me.” She took her glass and drained it. Lidia half-way filled it again before she could ask for it, but she pushed her glass closer. She wanted it filled to the brim. “*Every woman has a story, and every woman has been burned like a witch in one way or another for the secrets she keeps.* That was what my mamma had said to me.”

“You have a story to tell,” I whispered.

Kitty shrugged and said something in Italian. Lidia translated and said it was close to *don’t we all*.

“Will you tell us yours?” Rocky asked. “I’d love to hear it.”

Georgia set her nose to the fragrant liquid in her glass before she took a sip. “We all have secrets. We won’t burn you for yours, Ms. Kitty.”

A minute. Two.

“We were poor.”

Georgia grabbed my hand underneath the table, and I grabbed Rocky’s. The three of us seemed to squeeze at the same time. Kitty was doing this. She was about to tell her story.

“What most people would consider poverty-stricken. My father left for America when I was a baby. He was supposed to save up money once he got a job and send it back, and once we had enough, we were going to sail to America. But after he left...we didn't hear from him again. Mamma said I never felt poor because I lived inside of my head. She said that was because...”

CHAPTER 24

Canta Maria Ducci

I HAVE BIG DREAMS.

For as long as I can remember, I've had them.

I dream of leaving Italy, of taking a boat to America, of becoming so much more than I am. Which, at the moment, is a cleanup girl at Hotel Tre. I've been here since I was sixteen, four years now. Since I decided to leave Triora and take the first steps in my future.

Instead of the girl who picks the lavender to set on the fresh pillows each day, I long to be the woman who deserves to be sleeping in this magnificent bed. I long to know what it feels like to have staff rushing after you, catering to your every whim.

Mamma would have told me this is why I could never keep still. Why I never truly felt the harsh winters or the brutal summers. Why I did not whine about being hungry or having to work at such a young age.

I lived inside of my head most of the time.

Inside of my head, I was a performer, an actress, a dancer. Even a singer!

Mamma said I had a way of taking all that stood against me and using it to fuel something inside of me she could never understand.

Being away from Triora, I believe I finally understand what that thing is in me that Mamma could never understand.

A hunger that went much deeper than the stomach. It is what an American from New York told me is called "drive." He also told me that it was the Golden Age of Hollywood, and I had a face and body that would fit in.

Sometimes I wish I could tell Mamma these things. Tell her about the hotel and all the fancy guests who come and stay, but since Mamma went home to be with the angels, or that's how I like to imagine it, I can only tell her these things in my thoughts.

That's why I decided to leave Triora. Mamma died, and I had no one else.

The truth is, though, I think she always knew I would leave. Sometimes I would catch her looking at me like it was the last time. Like one day, she would wake up, and I would be gone. The only note left behind was the warm kiss I'd leave on her cheek. Most of the village had slowly been leaving, anyway. One of my friends told me she overheard the men talking. The village might be abandoned in a few years because of a lack of opportunities.

Mamma left me first.

I cried for two months after. I was scared and alone. Not entirely alone. I was surrounded by people. People who knew Mamma and would come to her for herbs that have healing powers. But it's hard to put into words what I mean by "I felt alone." Maybe it felt like she gave me life, shared hers with me, and that flame had gone out. Maybe it felt like no one would ever love me like she had. I could run to her with all my secrets. All these fantasies that played in my head about leaving for America. Making something of myself. Making something out of nothing. Then coming back to get her and letting her live with me in a house with people who would cook for us! She would not have to lift a finger, and she would have to wear dark glasses so the streets made of gold would not blind her.

She would tell me my dreams might have been big, but my hunger turned out bigger.

I sigh as I turn around to make sure the lavender is situated on the pillow just right and the room is as clean as it can be. The bellhop comes in and delivers fancy traveling bags and dresses that are to be hung up in the closet. He's young, not much older than me, and winks at me as he leaves the room.

I get a lot of winks.

I get a lot of compliments.

None of them have taken me to America yet, even though a few have tried to take me to bed.

I know better than that. A young American actress with an older gentleman had come to stay at the hotel last summer. Her man winked at me. She caught it and gave me a sincere warning I took to heart.

"Darling, you're a beautiful Italian girl with stunning features and

dynamite legs. Don't let the winks and compliments fool you. One minute they're winking at you, and the next, they're winking at the beautiful French girl in the maid's uniform who is carrying a feather duster. Understand what I'm telling you?"

"Do not be fooled by flattery."

She laughed. "That's exactly what I'm telling you. Give 'em hell before you give it up."

I smile at the memory before I turn and stop. The light is bright outside, and it's touched something in one of the hang-up bags that flashes in my eyes. The bag is clear, and the dress inside of it is gold. I look behind me. The bellhop is gone. The hallway is quiet. I overheard Mr. Davies, the property manager, earlier telling Signora Faraldi, the woman who tells me what to do, that the guest in this suite would not be checking in until noon. I've already finished the other room I was to clean and make perfect. It's exactly like this one but with small differences to make it unique.

Two hours then.

I bite my lip and turn back to the bag. Slowly, not to make a noise, I unzip it. My hand seems to reach out on its own. The entire dress is gold and encrusted with diamonds and pearls. I've seen a lot of fancy dresses come through Hotel Tre, but this one...my big dreams tell me it is made for me.

No questions asked, if I am caught doing this, I will be fired on the spot. I cannot seem to help myself as I quickly undress in the bathroom and slip the dress over my head. It has a hidden zipper, but I have no one to help me with it. I have to yank it down to get it to fit. It sucks me in and hugs every curve. My breasts are squished together and pushed up.

I stare at myself in the mirror.

Until I rush to release my hair from the bun and let my dark, reddish-brown hair tumble down my shoulders in waves. I try to run my hands through it, but it only puffs out. I become gentler with it before I stand back and admire how the beads catch the light and shimmer against my skin. The inside of the dress feels like heaven. It's lined with silk or satin, but it's hard to take a full breath. It's tight.

I look down.

My shoes are old and ratty.

I kick them off and wonder if a pair of matching heels came with the dress. I rush out of the bathroom and do a complete turnaround when a man walks in. All I catch is his suit and the spice of his cologne, but all I can

concentrate on is getting the dress off.

I'm stuck!

I can't get it off. It's too tight. I'm wiggling like a worm caught on a hook when he comes into the bathroom, and we scare each other. I start to rush out words in rapid Italian, and he puts his hands up in surrender. He speaks Italian, I can hear it, but the rushing of blood in my ears is drowning out the meaning. I'm still fighting to get the dress off.

The man becomes a bit snappy with me, and I stop struggling, the dress stuck over my face. I'm breathing in silk or satin. Then magic. The constricting dress is down again, and I'm looking into a pair of eyes the color of the Ligurian Sea. The lighter shades of it right before it meets the darker ones. His hair is jet-black, and it's parted to the side. He is taller than me, and I can tell from the fit of his suit that he has a nice build.

He's older than me, but not old.

I realize in that moment how much trouble I'm in. I start to apologize as I start to struggle with the dress again. He stops me again.

"Rosanna?"

I blink at him. "No. My name is Canta. Canta Ducci."

He studies my face. "The resemblance is..." He doesn't finish.

It occurs to me then that he thought I was an actress from Italy. It was not the first time I'd been mistaken for her, but he seems truly shocked that I am not her.

His eyes are hard to meet. I have been caught doing something wrong, and I know I am going to be fired. I will be homeless. I have a little money saved, but not enough for my trip to America yet. Sighing, I apologize to him in Italian for touching his things. I would take this moment to leave, but I cannot. I'm still stuck in the dress.

"I don't care about the dress," he says. Then he speaks to me in Italian.

"I can understand English," I say. "I learned working at the hotel."

He nods. "Impressive. Are you from around this area?"

I tell him I'm from Triora. He tells me his mamma's family is from Portofino, his father's family is from Sicily, but he lives in America now. That's fabulous for him, but I'm still stuck in his wife's dress, and any minute Signora Faraldi is going to come looking for me.

It's not her that enters the room, but Mr. Davies. He announces himself and then says that he came to check that the room was suitable for Mr. Bigatti. He stops at the bathroom and then turns quickly to shield his eyes.

He'd assumed Mr. Bigatti was alone in the room. Without thinking, I slap my palms over my eyes and groan.

This is worse than I feared.

Mr. Bigatti removes my hands from my face and our eyes meet before he steps out of the bathroom and shuts the door. I clearly hear him talking to Mr. Davies from the other side. He takes full responsibility for me having the dress on. There is a pause in the conversation, as if Mr. Davies is waiting for an explanation as to why his employee has on a dress that she could never afford, but Mr. Bigatti never gives him one.

A few seconds later, a knock comes at the door, and I open it.

"He's not going to fire you. Turn around."

I do as he says, keeping my eyes on his through the mirror as he unzips the dress. He stops right above my tailbone, but I do not miss how warm his hands are. How they cause goose pimples to pucker my skin. My heart flutters like a butterfly in my chest, and my breaths feel shallow, hard to catch.

"Grazie," I whisper, holding the dress up so it does not slip down my body. "I do want to lose my job. I need it."

He nods and shuts the door, giving me privacy. I rush to hang the dress back up, put my old one on, and fix my hair. I slip my shoes back on and notice a few of the diamonds and pearls had come loose from the gown and are lying on the floor. I use my pointer finger to gather them, slipping them into my pocket to save. I might need to try to trade them for room and board later. They look real enough.

Mr. Bigatti is sitting on the bed when I exit. He stands when I step out, heading toward the closet to hang the dress back up. I do not expect him to say anything, he has done enough, so the entire time I am trying to think of something to tell Mr. Davies, or Signora Faraldi, since she deals with the cleaning staff, but I cannot come up with a reason why Mr. Bigatti would have wanted me to try on his wife's dress.

I go to leave when he calls my name. I turn to him.

"Keep the dress."

I narrow my eyes at him.

He grins and lifts his hands. "No strings attached. It's yours. And don't worry about Davies. I'll take care of him."

"Why?" I whisper. "It's such a gorgeous dress. Your wife—"

"I have no wife."

“Is it yours then?”

He does not miss a beat. “Wrong size. Wrong color.” He stands and goes for the dress. He plucks it off the hanger and holds it out for me.

I’m not sure why, but I stand there, biting my lip. It feels like if I accept this dress from him, I will be accepting more. I set my hand over his, over the hanger, and my heart speeds up again when our skin touches. I wonder if he feels my breath as it flows out of my mouth in a rush and breezes over our touching hands.

As I go to pull away with the dress, he doesn’t let go.

“Have dinner with me in the dress tonight.”

“You said no strings attached, Mr. Bigatti,” I say.

“Call me Tullio. And there are no strings. The dress is still yours if you say no.”

I smile a little. “I’d love to, but I have no shoes to match.”

He turns and goes to his bags. He digs around and comes back with a box. The top is stamped with the name House of Sicilia.

He gives me a number, a shoe size, and my eyes meet his. He taps the top of the box. I nod. They’ll fit. I’m out in the hallway when he stops me again.

“Eight o’clock, after the candles are lit.” He steps back in his room and the door closes. I turn, feeling giddy, and crash into a hard chest coming down the hall. The box falls to the floor, and the dress is flattened between us. I almost drop that, too, but the man saves it from falling. He hands it to me and then bends down to pick up the box, handing me that, as well.

I’m quiet as this all takes place because again, I cannot find my breath. I even look behind me, at Mr. Bigatti’s room, to make sure he is not holding it hostage. But when this man smiles at me, the butterfly starts to flutter again in my chest.

“Do you speak English?” he asks me in Italian.

“I do.”

He’s similar to Tullio, but different. They both seem...refined in a worldly way, but this man has hair the color of toasted chestnuts, and his eyes are a light brown. Almost the color of whiskey. There is something so delicious about him as well. Maybe it’s his crooked smile.

“You work here, Ms....?”

I try to hold my hand out, but I almost drop my things again. “Canta Ducci, and sì, I do.”

“Canta,” he repeats. “I’m Giordano Capitani.” We stare at each other

until he grins. “Has anyone ever told you that you resemble Rosanna—”

“Sì,” I say louder than intended.

He laughs and holds up his hands. “Listen,” he says as he drops them. “I’ll be in town for a few days. Have dinner with me.”

“Tonight?”

“I see you have a dress and a pair of shoes.”

It pains me to say no to him, but I do not want to break the date with Tullio either. “What time?”

“Eight.”

“I am not available until ten.”

“The restaurant here.”

I feel his eyes follow me down the hallway until I’m back in the hotel proper. I want to duck my head when I pass Mr. Davies and Signora Faraldi, but I keep my chin up instead. Neither of them says anything to me, and I know it’s because of Tullio. I do not want to push my luck, though, so I finish whatever Signora Faraldi tells me to do, and before she can complain that I’m not doing it fast or good enough.

After my shift is over, I rush back to the small place I share with the other workers on the property. I take a quick shower and obsess over how I’m going to style my hair. The other girls look at me when I walk out with my hair down and the dress on. I’m too excited to even care about their thoughts.

However, I am a bit nervous about dining in the restaurant. It will be dim with all the candles, but I’ve worked at this hotel for years, and the staff knows me. I don’t think Mr. Davies will be pleased with me dining with guests. I haven’t before. I’ve always said no. But there was something compelling me to say yes to both Tullio and Giordano. It was the blood racing through my veins when they both had touched me.

I take a deep breath and keep my eyes forward as I walk into the hotel and veer off for the restaurant. It has views of the sea, and the candlelight plays on the glass windows showcasing it. The restaurant goes quiet as I walk in, and I’m not sure if it’s the dress or something else. I’m pretty sure it’s the dress.

Tullio is waiting for me, and his eyes lower in a way that makes my heart drop to my feet when he sees me.

He sets his warm hand on my lower back, and I almost melt from the light contact. It was stronger than I remembered it from earlier. He smells like cigar smoke, leather, and suede. His tux is dark, and his eyes are shimmering

from the candlelight, just like my dress.

We're led to a table, and he holds my seat out for me.

Once he gives the waiter our drink orders, we stare at each other.

"You're even more beautiful than I remember," he says.

I wave a hand and he catches it.

Our eyes connect again and I'm not sure if I'll be able to stay seated. I almost want to pop up and run out. It's hard to meet such intensity.

"It is the dress," I barely get out.

"The dress is just an accessory." He sets his lips on my hand, over my fingers, placing a kiss on them. My hands are cold, even though the weather is warm, and so are his lips. "It's you, Ms. Ducci."

My breath has accelerated, and I can only nod in appreciation for his compliment. He keeps my hand in his as the waiter comes back to leave our drinks. We're silent for a minute or two while soft music serenades us from the band. They are playing "Always."

Tullio clears his throat, about to speak, but his eyes move up as a shadow darkens our table. My breath completely stops, and I try not to outwardly show my surprise. Giordano Capitani is the dark shadow, and his eyes are on me.

"Do you two know each other?" Tullio asks, and his voice sounds suspicious.

"My date," Giordano says.

Tullio looks at me.

I look between the two of them. "I take it you two know each other?"

"You can say that," Giordano says. "We're business partners." He sits down at the table without permission.

Neither of these men seem to need it—for anything.

And I'm sandwiched between them.

The waiter comes back and asks Giordano if he'd like a drink. He orders the same drink as Tullio. The three of us sit in silence, only the sound of the soft music to cut through some of the tension. I stand to go, because I was instantly attracted to both of these men, and I do not see how this can work. Both men are up as I am, and both men have a hand on my arm, and then both men have guns pointed at each other.

The entire restaurant goes quiet, a few gasps linger in the air.

There's a quiet, intense argument between them, about who I'd be leaving with while the piano continues to play.

“Enough,” I snap underneath my breath. “I am not a piece of property, and neither one of you get to decide who keeps me!” I fling the napkin I forgot was in my hand to the table, and then I walk out with my head held high.

In the hall, both men catch up to me. Tullio takes one side and Giordano takes the other. We stop. They are both looking at me like I have to make a decision. I cannot. I look into both of their eyes and cannot tell either of them no.

The attraction to both is sudden and fierce, and I do not know either one of them beyond that.

“This is not a good idea,” I say. “It was a pleasure to—”

“Date us both,” Giordano says, “before you choose.”

I look at Tullio. He nods.

“What happens after I choose? If I choose?”

“You marry the man you choose,” Tullio says.

I laugh a little. “You have only met me once.”

“Once is enough,” they both say at the same time. Then I catch the way their eyes lock into something that makes my heart race in a panicky way. It is a look that reminds me of the beginning of a war.

I tell them both no and bid them a goodnight, but the next morning, Tullio is waiting for me outside of the hotel. That night, Giordano is waiting for me after my shift is over. This goes on for a week, and by the end of it, tension is growing inside of me like the pressure from an oncoming storm.

Both men keep their distance from each other, but I know the idea of me choosing between them hasn’t been lost. And the fearful truth is...I’ve fallen in love with both of them.

AT THE END *of that week, I am on my way to deliver towels to a room that needs fresh ones. It’s dark outside, except for the full moon over the Ligurian Sea. It’s so bright its light ripples over the water, giving life to a usual void when the moon hides.*

My mind is in chaos, my heart is at war, and my stomach is in knots. I barely remember leaving the towels as I make my way down the hallway, going to the front of the hotel.

I stop short when two figures on opposite sides of the hall are waiting for me.

Tullio stands on one side and Giordano on the other.

Their eyes are bright, eager, almost hungry for an answer from me.

I know if I choose, I will lose them both.

One will kill the other, and I will resent the other for it.

They're both in love with me. Both men told me so.

I told both men I loved them back but made no secret of my feelings for either. I love them the same, but in different ways, and together they own my entire heart. Without one man, I will be left with only half a heart.

I stand between them—always between them it seems—and shake my head. Before I can speak, they start to shout at each other. I stand in front of Tullio, stand on my toes, and press my mouth to his.

It's the first time we've kissed.

I'm starting to lose myself in it when I sense Giordano lifting his arm. He has his gun out, pointed at us, but I force myself to break the kiss and turn to him. Tullio tries to stop me from facing his barrel, but I lift my hand, telling him to wait. The hurt in Giordano's eyes almost makes me whimper, but when I move his gun and say, "he saw me first, it is only fair," and I take his shirt, pulling his lips to mine, he gives me what I want.

His mouth.

Two men.

Two kisses.

And nothing has changed.

I love them both and need them both.

And after two kisses that almost stops my heart, I need more than love.

I need them both to touch me in places I've never been touched before.

Maybe the world would think this is shameful of me.

All I can feel is a pulsating hot need to have both of them claim me.

Tullio lowers his gun as I back up so I can face them both.

"Take me," I whisper. "Both of you. At once. It is only fair. And after...I will split my time as my heart has been split—between the two of you—or I leave tonight and do not return."

There is a tense moment where I do not know what will happen next, but as I start to walk, Tullio grabs me by the back of the dress and turns me around. He kisses me again. Harder. More passionate. I am breathless when Giordano takes his turn to kiss me.

My heart is beating wildly, and I am drowning in want.

I want them both to see me vulnerable and quivering with need.

We make it to an empty suite, neutral ground, and I am in one man's arms and then another. They do not touch each other, or even look at each other.

Their eyes are only on me.

And by the end of the night, I am claimed by both men, in the same way, but from different sides of my heart.

Neither man falls asleep with me, and when the morning comes, I'm by myself facing the dawn, not an ounce of shame in what I allowed them to do to me.

Sometime later, they both enter the suite. They had come to a decision—to the point.

The night we had before would never happen again. And from that point forward, I would spend time with each man separately, just like we'd done while we were dating, in the place in America they were taking me to. Las Vegas. I'd marry Tullio first, when the time came, and start a family with him. Giordano after. Since this was the order in which we had met.

Both men look at me expectantly, as if the night had been a lie and the morning had shined light on the truth. But I had never been happier, or more fulfilled, and even though it would not be traditional, I knew I had found my happily ever after.

CHAPTER 25

Mrs. Big

“OKAYYYYY,” Rocky breathed after Kitty had grown quiet.

“Wow,” Georgia said a little louder. “What a story, Ms. Kitty.”

Lidia lifted two fingers at me, as if to say, *really, two?*

I had no clue what to say. I was happy for Kitty if she was happy, but for me...I loved being in love with just...Tullio. Maybe I was more traditional than I thought, but loving more than Tullio just didn't sit right in my heart. And besides, two men seemed like an awful lot of work, especially when they had such different personalities. That was a lot of upkeep. And if my Tullio and Gio, his cousin, were anything like their grandfathers, that meant...Kitty was probably two different women with them. Like a hybrid of me and Rocky, but with all the glitz and glam she loved.

It seemed like the story had drained Kitty. She closed her eyes and turned toward the sun, like she was absorbing it for fuel. The day was waning and what goes up must come down—us. For a reason not immediately obvious to me, I was ready to go. I was ready to run to Big and have him wrap me in his arms and hold me tight. I wanted him to tell me that life was reckless enough on its own, but for us, he'd take more precautions since it was the two of us.

Not having Big in my life...even the thought made me lose my breath.

“You stay with Ms. Kitty,” Georgia said to me, getting to her feet. “We'll deal with the trash and then we'll go.”

“I'll go talk to one of the men in the security car after you get back,” I said. “Lidia can't drive.”

Lidia held up two fingers at me and grinned.

“Come on.” Rocky helped Lidia to her feet. “Or maybe we'll just help

you to the car. Too many voids around here for drunken steps.”

“Amen.” Georgia took Lidia’s other side.

I closed my eyes, facing the sun, letting it fuel me too.

“If I had to do it all over again, I’d do it the same way, with my love,” Kitty whispered. “Two men, two great loves, and my one heart.”

I opened my eyes, and she was staring at me. “I know,” I whispered back. I gave her a second before I asked, “After Mr. Big—your Mr. Big—passed, you stopped being with Old Gio too?”

She nodded. “It didn’t seem fair. And after all that time of them sharing, Giordano understood. They always understood. For me. That’s how much they loved me. They loved me enough not to make me choose between them, because like I said, it would have killed my entire heart. Like it would kill your entire heart to lose my grandson.” She closed her eyes again. “This is my first time back on this ground since I left. I can feel my mamma here. I think she knew I needed double the love of an average woman and sent them to me. I had big dreams. And nothing less would do.”

She sighed. “I’ll never return here. I’ll die in Portofino, so my loves will know where to find me. You know that’s why Tullio built the casino to resemble it. Yes, his mamma was from there, and that’s what the story is. But...he did it as a reminder. Portofino was the place we fell in love. And Giordano built Paradiso to resemble what I felt like to him. His heaven. They even bought Tres from Mr. Davies. I never returned with both of them again—it was one man or the other. They alternated summers. Just like I might have kissed Tullio first, but I’ve kissed Giordano last and will one last time when the time comes.”

The two places in Vegas sat side by side, a fake sea between them that Tullio Bigatti, my husband’s grandfather, had built with Giordano Capitani. A split line between all three of their hearts, Canta Maria Ducci the center of it.

“*Always the middle,*” as she had said.

We grew quiet again as we closed our eyes, faces still turned to the sun. Then, in what felt like too short a second, but too long of one too, because I was eager to get home to my husband, Georgia and Rocky were back. They had gotten Lidia settled in the car and dumped the trash.

Kitty’s eyes blinked open when Georgia touched her shoulder.

“Ready to go, Ms. Kitty?”

She smiled, but it was a trembling one. Canta had been saying goodbye to

the place she was born since we arrived. She had lost so much there, but she had found herself through big dreams. “I used to come here when I was little. I’d play in the summer. And I’d do this, turn my face to the sun, after I’d spent all my energy. It’s a small, free pleasure to have the sun on your face. But...it had always felt so rich to me. Like warm silk gliding against my skin.” She ran a tender hand down her cheek. “Then I’d open my eyes in a blink, and something would change with the scenery. Just a small thing. A leaf would have blown over my foot, or a rabbit would have come out to nibble. And that’s how life feels. Like a blink. Each year changes the scenery a little.”

Georgia squeezed her shoulder. “Do you feel you used up your time well?”

Kitty smiled. “So well, and I still have more to go.”

Georgia and Rocky each helped Kitty to her feet and started walking her toward the car where Lidia was sleeping with her mouth open.

“I’ll go ask one of the men to drive us down,” I said. “I’ll ride in the back with Rocky.”

I was in my own world, staring at everything but what was up ahead, my mind a jumble of thoughts as I made my way to the security car. When I looked up, I blinked and stopped.

Kitty was right. The scenery had changed.

My husband stood close to the car, his arms crossed, waiting.

He’d been in the car the entire time.

Maybe he noticed the surprise on my face because he said, “I’ll always be here to protect you. I’d kill for you. I’d die for you. You’re mine.”

I didn’t realize I’d crossed my arms. I relaxed them some, and he nodded toward the car. We walked together, and close enough, he opened the door for me. The other man was already making his way toward the car with Kitty, Lidia, Georgia, and Rocky.

The car ride was quiet. I set my seat back some and closed my eyes. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, we were close to Hotel Tre, and Big had my hand. He kept it while we made our way to our room. I stopped him in the hallway when I noticed a blown-up black and white photo hanging at the end of it. I’d noticed it before, and admired it, because the woman smiling back at me with a mischievous glint in her eyes was drop-dead gorgeous.

She wore a gold dress encrusted with diamonds and pearls.

She was the center of it.

Looking a little closer, I noticed for the first time the two men on either side of her. They were both dapper, in dark suits that screamed money and power.

Yet it was clear to see.

She had control of them.

Their eyes were glued to her.

I turned some, and Big's eyes were glued to me.

"That dress she's wearing." He nodded to it.

"Yeah?"

"All those diamonds and pearls are real. That's how my grandfather and Gio's used to transport stolen jewelry from Europe. Kitty even wore them in her hair and no law enforcement suspected it. They've gotten wise to it now, but back then, they had no clue."

He searched my eyes but didn't say anything after that. He set his hand on my lower back and then opened the door to our room. He shut it behind us, and I stood there for a second, thinking about everything Kitty had said to us. I thought about how each of her sons took after her more than they did their fathers.

What if her grandsons took after her, too, in ways that went deeper than the flesh?

I refused to make eye contact with Big while I grabbed a silk robe from the drawer and went to take a shower. He usually joined me, but when I stepped out, he was sitting on the bed, his eyes down.

"Am I enough for you?" I blurted. "Will I be enough?"

His eyes slowly rose to meet mine, and then they narrowed. "Kitty told you."

"Us. She told us. Over lunch." I cleared my throat. "She had big dreams, and that included a life of glitz and glamour, and two men to fulfill her needs."

"If I'm going to start getting measured by Kitty Ducci's life choices, just fucking kill me now, Aphrodite." He pulled a gun from behind his back and held it out to me.

He was being fucking serious.

"See!" I motioned toward it. "You also have a recklessness that I refuse to keep up with. Life is dangerous enough. Why call it to us unnecessarily?" Something snapped inside of me, and it felt like pent up rage exploded from it. "A life I can finally love is mine, *mine*, Big! And the man I love *big* is

fucking gambling with it! Why? *Why* would you do that? I'm not going to allow you to do it." I went to walk away when he took me by the shoulders and spun me around.

He forced the gun into my hand. "You walk away from me, from my life." He held the barrel to his heart. "Might as well pull the fucking trigger."

"Why does it have to come down to dying?" I cried.

"Tell me what it comes down to, Aphrodite, and I'll fucking do it!"

"Words, Big," I said, the anguish in my voice coming out through the tears on my face.

"Words? Fucking words?" He took the gun and flung it on the bed. Then he pressed me against the wall and crowded me in. "I love you more than life? My next breath? More than the blood in my veins and the air in my lungs? You're the arrow in my heart and the bullet in my fucking brain. Your very essence makes me drunk—stronger than anything I'd ever put to my lips before. Is that what you want to hear? Do you want to hear that I'll kill any man who even looks at you the wrong way—and I expect you do the same if a woman goes after your fucking territory? Me. Yeah, you don't think I know how this works? You're mine and I'm fucking yours—until we both close our eyes for good. Because you're my home. The place I'll live and die.

"Are those words enough? Or do you want to hear that I'd never leave you on purpose? I can't control death, but you control me. I've never been fucking reckless while I was racing. But I wanted to kill that motherfucker, and would, all because he winked at you and smiled. I would have killed him, but I knew killing him with my hands would only get me killed. You don't kill in this life without permission—Mario is owned by the Faustis." He pushed against me harder. "Are those words good enough, Aphrodite?"

A madness had overtaken his eyes. The usual blues and greens were as dark as the sea outside. And it was a polarizing moment for me. I knew Big thought differently, but it was almost a shock to my gut to make sense of his words. He thought he was keeping himself safe (for me) by not killing Mario with his own hands because the Faustis would kill *him* for it.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. "They are enough." I brought my voice down and leaned my head against his chest. "I just don't want you to take unnecessary risks."

"Crashing the car into his."

"Yeah," I breathed out. "Crashing the car into his. Or crashing any car into anything—on purpose." I looked up and met his eyes. "When I tell you I

love you big, I can't even put into words how true that is. I'm shocked by it. Besides my brothers, I've never loved this hard, and it's a different kind of love, but both I'd give my life to protect."

After what seemed like hours of trying to hold his stare, I rested my head against his chest again, but he refused to let me squirm away. He tilted my face up.

"I guess this means you love me big."

His unexpected comment made me laugh and cry at the same time. It was a weird sound that came straight from my heart. "Yeah, I love you big, and I guess this means you love me big too."

"Fucking huge."

"Since the love is huge, does this also mean it's just me and you—for good?"

"Get the fuck outta here." He lifted me up and flung me onto the bed. "Now you're just trying to fish for more words."

I laughed until he undressed, flinging his clothes to the floor, and crawled toward me in bed. When we touched, my entire body went weak, even though my heart was about to pound out of my chest. And when his lips touched mine, it felt like it was the first time in centuries. Then I pushed against his chest to put a little separation between us.

He had that insane look in his eyes again. My hand was over his heart, and it beat against my palm like a starved hunter.

"More words, Aphrodite?"

I grinned, breathless. "Is that a fear?"

"Not going to say it's a pleasant experience for me."

"But speaking vows in front of a church full of people is okay?"

He nodded.

I nodded. "We're getting married."

"We're already married."

"Not like we will be. You wanted the church wedding, remember?"

"I do." His eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed—he was suspicious.

I tapped the pillow next to him. "We don't make the marriage official until the wedding night."

"Fuck that." He was between my legs and pushed into my silk underwear. He didn't enter me but showed me what I was missing.

I had to bite my lip to stifle a groan. "Control, remember?"

He stared at me until he sighed. "What I'm getting from this is that words

were not the fucking bottom line.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s like when a damsel used to tell her knight not to swing his sword in a competition, because she expected him to get knocked off his horse—in her honor.”

“Something like that.”

He sighed, longer this time, turning over on the pillow. He set his hands over his chest and stared at the ceiling, his massive cock pointing to the side because it was too big to stand straight without reinforcements on either side. I curled up next to him, holding on as tightly as I could to his ribs. He relaxed some, wrapped an arm around my shoulders, kissed my head, and held me even tighter than I was holding him. Tight enough I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

I hadn’t slept so good since he’d been shot.

CHAPTER 26

Mrs. Big

I'D HEARD one of the girls at Dynamic tell another girl that her wedding day would be one of the most important days of her life.

I'd never considered that before.

I mean...a wedding was a wedding. Two people would stand before family and friends, and if the couple was religious, exchange vows that would be blessed. Maybe a reception after to celebrate. To dance the night away.

Something to remember.

A marker on paper that announced to the world that a union had been made. And a bookmark sealed in a calendar to remind the couple—*this is what we did in honor of...love.*

The wedding Big and I had in Casino Portofino, for the casino's anniversary, was only about the two of us. I wore a Grecian-style dress. He wore a tux. We exchanged traditional vows and then celebrated with each other all night long.

It *did* turn out to be one of the best days of my life. It was all about us and nothing else.

Simple, but profound.

Standing outside of the church with my brothers, who were going to walk me down the aisle, I knew this was going to be special, but...I was still okay with the first wedding being *the* wedding.

I got why Big wanted to do this, and I got why he wanted me to, because it brought both of us out of our comfort zones and made us vulnerable together as we faced the world and made promises in front of them. And our

vows would become sacred to more than just us—since this was a church, religiously speaking.

I looked down at my hands, and they were trembling. Angelo and Phoenix both took a hand and squeezed.

“You look like Grace Kelly in that dress, sis,” Phoenix said.

I had gone traditional for the church ceremony. A dress I wouldn’t have ever thought I’d wear, but when Georgia, even Kitty, teared up at the sketches the designer did, my face and build wearing the dress...I went with it.

I gave him a smile that was braver than what I felt. “How do you know who Grace Kelly is?”

He grinned. “I Googled her after Grandma Kitty said it.”

She loved that my brothers called her that, even though Big and Gio both called her Kitty, unless Gio was messing around with her. He called her a variety of “grandmother” names.

Angelo shook his head but smirked at Phoenix. “It’s true, though, Leo. You’re worthy of marrying royalty. That’s why you’re marrying the King of Vegas.”

I laughed. It was shaky. “You got that right. He is.”

“Yeah.” Phoenix smiled. “But don’t tell Gio that. They’d argue about it and there’d be no winner. Same reason I refuse to play Monopoly with them again. Guns were—”

Angelo held a hand over Phoenix’s mouth. “Time and place, bro. Time and place.”

I tried to take a deep breath, but suddenly, the dress felt entirely too tight, and my head went woozy because I felt like I couldn’t take a good one.

“You look pale, sis,” Phoenix said.

“Yeah, you do. You okay, Leo?”

I held my hand up, a signal for them to give me a minute. Georgia came out to tell us we needed to start heading in, and Angelo called her over.

“She looks pale,” Phoenix said, and I could hear a tremble in his voice. Phoenix still had underlying abandonment issues, but they had gotten better after I married Big. Phoenix trusted Big, and he was on edge, too, after the crash.

“She does.” Georgia’s voice was matter of fact and to the point. She knew about Phoenix’s issues and kept calm to keep him calm. “It’s called pre-wedding jitters, or in her case, she’s nervous about the performance of her

life. It happens all the time. Go inside and tell Rocco we just need a minute to fix her hair and makeup.”

“But it’s not her hair and makeup,” Phoenix said. “Maybe we need a doctor.”

“No!” Georgia and I said at the same time. It was a NO, like, *oh no, that’s silly. A true waste of time.* We didn’t snap it at him.

“Come on.” Angelo set his hand on Phoenix’s shoulder and directed his lanky body toward the church. “Here’s what all this means, bro. They don’t want Big to know she’s freaking out about getting married—again. Because if he finds out, he’s going to charge out here and throw her over his shoulder. Then all the blood is going to rush to her head, and she really will pass out. She just needs a moment to breathe. All is good. You know Leo is a tough chick. You can go tell what’s his name about her needing a minute. I’ll talk to Big.”

I stood a little taller after they started walking off, proud of them. I loved how they were there for each other, and I only hoped as the years moved forward, they would always stay close. It was a given I’d always be there for them.

Georgia was watching them too. “What’s Angelo’s issue with Rocco?” She turned to me.

I shrugged, but I had an idea. He was jealous that Georgia had spent time with him. Because there was something still going on there with Angelo when it came to Georgia, and it made my stomach roll. I didn’t even want to think about Rocco stopping to look Angelo in the eye and talking to him again. Angelo was a smart kid, and if I knew the warning wasn’t in Rocco’s tone or the words he used, it was the look on his face.

I started to hyperventilate again.

“I don’t have a bag,” Georgia said, her voice no-nonsense again. “Stand up straight and slow your breathing. Then when you catch your breath, tell me what’s going on. No excuses. Get to the point. Your husband is waiting to marry you, acting like every minute is a century, and *not* a whole lotta people, just your nearest and dearest, are dying to get a look at you.” She sighed. “You really are gorgeous, Leo,” she whispered, taking my trembling hand and squeezing. “It hurts so good to look at you. I’m so happy to be here for this. To witness the girl who deserves everything good to get everything good.”

Georgia’s words were so heartfelt, all I could do was hug her tight to me.

She was my first true friend, and we had been through so many tough times together, and one day—she just turned into a sister. Family I could count on. It meant the world to me that she could be here.

She set me away from her. Dabbed at her face. Then gave me a stern look. “Okay, no time like the present to spill it. Are you sick? Or are you nervous?”

“I’m having a hard time breathing.”

“Do you need medical help?”

“No, I need the help of a seamstress, but since the one who came this morning said there was nothing she could do on such short notice, I have to suck it up, literally, and really, *really* try to breathe.”

“The dress fit fine before we left.”

“I know.”

She stood back a little. “Are you bloated?”

“You can say that.”

Her eyes met mine.

“I’m pregnant, George.” I groaned and almost hit the cement. Not to pass out, but out of sheer relief that I told someone. I’d been carrying around the weight of the news since that morning. I thought of telling Big, but like Angelo said, timing. The pregnancy wasn’t planned. With the stress of Big getting shot and worrying about Georgia before we left, I must have forgotten to take a pill or two... and there we were.

“Oh.” She sucked in some air. “No wonder you’re nervous. A baby out of wedlock!”

A beat passed between us before we both started laughing. She pulled me toward her so hard, it felt like she was a rock holding me up. “What did I tell you?” she whispered, rocking me back and forth. “The girl who deserves everything good is getting everything good. You love those boys so fiercely, when I witnessed it and felt it, I decided I was going to love *you* so fiercely. You’re everything I ever wanted in a parent. You’re going to be a kick-ass mom, Leo. Don’t you worry about that.”

She knew me too well. I was worried about a variety of things, but that was top on my list. We pulled back when Angelo and Phoenix came back out, Rocco behind them. He stood back, eyeing the situation. I gave him a thumbs up as Georgia patted my face and fixed my hair and veil, and he nodded once, going back inside.

“Well, if there’s something that should motivate you to move, it should

be how tight the dress is feeling around the waist.” She stepped back. “You can’t tell from this side. Your waist is cinched in good.”

“That’s the problem.”

Angelo and Phoenix looked relieved that it seemed my dilemma had more to do with the dress than with my health—or my actual nerves.

It was a mix of it all.

Especially when anticipation reached a crescendo as we made it to the closed doors and my brothers each took an arm. When the music started to play softly, and a woman’s voice started to sing equally soft, the doors started to slowly open.

The woman’s voice sang in English. Rocco sang in Italian, his smooth baritone tenor echoing in the church beautifully. She translated his parts.

Chills moved over my entire body as the people closest to us gasped as we made our entrance, and each step I took brought me closer and closer to Tullio Bigatti.

I was never a religious person, though I’d always believed a higher power existed. There were too many inexplicable instances in my life not to believe.

Even though my life was hard, and some hours I didn’t think I could stand another minute, small mercies would make their way to my door. Like Georgia showing up at my apartment with our favorite snacks and my favorite drink from the local coffee shop because I was a little short on money that month. Or Vinny giving me a break somehow at work. Or one of the girls telling me a lame dad joke that made me grin all night.

Or the man who came into my life unexpectedly, who was someone I thought I could never fall for because of the nature of his business, who waited for me at the end of the aisle, as proud as any man who waited for the woman he loved—*huge*, in his words.

The thought made me smile, and the entire church wavered with the tears ready to fall from my eyes. Big grinned at me as he took a step closer, ready to meet us, but suddenly, I wanted to slow my steps, absorb every second of the walk to him, because I might have three weddings, but I’d never have this moment again.

I’d blink and the scene would change.

I made sure to keep my eyes open and on Big as the aisle beneath my feet seemed to unfurl, as if fate was rolling out the red carpet for me. At the end of it, the home that was always meant for me.

Once we stopped in front of Big, each of my brothers kissed my cheek, then Big shook their hands before pulling them in for a hug. Instead of handing me over and taking their seats, Big invited them to stand on each side of us. I had to force down the emotion threatening to come out as a sob when Phoenix teared up.

Big held my hand even tighter, lifting it to his mouth as he said in a deep, reverential tone, “You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you.” Then he repeated it in Italian.

As we turned to face forward together, I took a deep, settling breath, straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin. And when it was time to repeat my vows, I did, not a quiver in my bones or voice.

I’d never felt safer—knowing our vows were guarded, tucked away in a place that no man could destroy.

As Big lifted my veil and set his hands on my face, gazing into my eyes, he sealed our forever with a kiss, and the entire church broke out in stunning applause.

THE CASTLE WAS spectacular as the evening sun over the Ligurian Sea faded and a full moon rippled over its waters. Hundreds of candles gave the old place a romantic glow. It touched every hand-sewed bead on my reception gown and brought it to life.

As Big shook hands with Rocco and then hugged him, I ran my hand down the dress, over my stomach, but then I looked up, a memory hitting me like lightning. Kitty had wanted me to have this dress. She surprised me with it. She’d talked to the designer and paid for it herself as a gift.

Her eyes met mine and she blew me a kiss.

I sent her one back.

This dress was similar to the one Tullio had given her the night she’d met him. She’d wanted Big and I to have a piece of their love story with us tonight. Even though it wasn’t traditional, the union had produced a son, and that son had produced my husband.

No matter how anyone spun it, Tullio and Kitty had loved each other, and that love had created my love. And that love created...a new life between my husband and me.

After that thought came to me, I probably hugged Rocco too tight and got too emotional when I thanked him for singing during the ceremony. He was in the right spot at the right time.

Then I barked out a laugh when Rocco winked at me and said, “And we still have the reception to go.”

Even Tullio gave me a peculiar look after. His cyborg was throwing him for loops left and right. I was going to throw him for the biggest loop yet when I told him what his new title was—father—before we left for Greece in the morning.

That was when I decided...I was going to celebrate the night as if it would never happen again. I was going to dance with my husband, my friends and family, sing to the top of my lungs, sway to the sweet song Rocco would serenade us with for our first dance, “Promise Me You’ll Remember,” and wrap my husband’s arms around me even tighter when the fireworks lit up the Italian Riviera and we headed back to Hotel Tre to celebrate the night away.

I was going to celebrate as if I was one blink away from the scene changing, keeping my eyes wide open.

And after we fell into bed, me moaning because it felt so good to have cool sheets against my naked body, my husband pulled me closer and said, “If I would have known marrying you in a ceremony would have made you so happy, I would have been doing it every day.”

I met his eyes in the cloudy darkness, one bronze sconce on the wall shimmering with burning candlelight. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

“You want to bet me?”

A beat passed and I exploded with laughter, wrapping my arms around his neck as he came in to kiss me. It felt it even better than the bed—just like coming home after a long day did. He felt like the most expensive sheets, the kind that cool you, but also a worn-out blanket that warms in the coldest of nights. I felt drunk on his love and high on fulfillment. Maybe if he’d set me loose in the sea, I’d float.

I broke the kiss, breathless, but my hands still reached for him, exploring his gorgeous body. He pulled away some, and I made a frustrated noise.

He grinned at me. “Get dressed.”

“What?” I wasn’t a whiner, but I knew the one word sounded like it.

“What the fuck has gotten into you?”

“Ask me that in a few hours and I’ll say you.” I smiled big.

He threw back his head and roared with laughter, his hand coming to my stomach, his fingers splaying. He shook me some. “Wear the red dress for me, Aphrodite.”

I stared at him for a second. The red dress was a satin corset dress, the hem landing below my ankles. I’d planned to wear it for him for a special occasion, a sexy dinner out, probably, but...considering I was sick of wearing dresses that felt like they were constricting oxygen, I really didn’t want to. I was going to tell him then, about the pregnancy, but the hungry look in his eyes forced me to my feet.

“Aphrodite.”

“Hmm?” I stopped and turned to him. He was laying on the bed, sans jacket and shoes, and his tie was undone, his sleeves rolled, his hair messed. He was the arrow to my heart too. It felt like it was bleeding out a little when he looked at me the way he was. Like I was everything to him.

“You know why I call you Aphrodite?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” I whispered too. “I’m half Greek.”

His smile came slow. “She represents love and beauty, so when I call you *my* Aphrodite...” He gave me an expectant look. He wanted me to answer.

“You’re calling me love and beauty.”

He pointed to his chest. “Mine. All. Fucking. Mine.”

His words gave me a rush, and I hurried to snag the dress and put it on. I had far from a belly bulge, but I just felt so bloated. Maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me, but the dress was so tight, I felt like I could see it in the mirror. I wondered if this was a sign that I was going to be huge. I really didn’t mind, though. If that was what it took for this baby to be healthy, I’d be huge.

I smiled at myself, then realized I was going to need Big’s help zipping the dress. I didn’t even need to call for him. He was waiting to do it. His one hand snaked around me, going for the zipper, and his other buried deep in my hair. He pulled my mouth to his and kissed the breath from me as he secured me in the dress.

A man of many talents, my husband. He was like magic. He could turn me on *while* dressing me.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, my Aphrodite,” he roughly whispered against my lips, tilting my head back so he could look into my eyes. Whenever Big was turned on, the set of his face was dangerous. His eyes were so intense, they made my heart race like he was about to start chasing

me.

Maybe he was.

Maybe his heart was after mine.

One look at his eyes.

It definitely was.

The excitement, fear, and chaos were contained between our bodies. Nowhere to go but to crash, and instead of burn, melt—fusing, mixing blood with blood. Once it hardened, it would resemble something like *us*, our lives intertwined.

I could have timed my breaths by the deep, pounding beats of my heart, but they became too fast, too irregular, when he stared into my eyes and refused to let me move.

“My wife,” he whispered, bringing my head close to his, his lips firm, but warm, and moving against mine like they were something to respect, to be in awe at. Like his body was honoring mine. Like he was drinking the elixir of life from my lips.

In a daze, he led me back to the bedroom and set me on the bed. He grabbed the matching shoes, same color with bows on the toes, and strapped me in. When I stood, I was a few inches taller, but still not taller than him.

My breath caught when he spun me around, digging his hand in my hair again, but this time his touch was rougher, more possessive. He used his body to guide me toward the bed, where I planted my palms against the mattress and arched my back.

He hissed out a breath as he rammed me from behind, pulling my hair. “It’s our wedding night. And I’m going to take what’s mine. No denying me.”

“Yours,” I breathed out, my nipples aching from rubbing against the cool material of the dress. “Only yours.”

A beat passed between us, where I could have sworn the beats of our hearts played like drums in the silence of the night.

He slowly lifted me up, and from the side, turned my face so he had access to my mouth again. The heat of his hands burned against the satin fabric, and I could feel it scorching against my skin. When I started to moan, and push into him, he said something in Italian, something I thought was an order—like, *calm*, or *not yet*.

He turned me toward him and then lifted me off my feet. I wrapped my arms around his neck and stared into his eyes.

“What’s going on, Big?” I whispered, because I was still having a hard time breathing, but this time it wasn’t from the body squeezing fit of the dress.

“You wore a hole in every dance floor your feet touched tonight, even ground that wasn’t designated for it. Your feet must be sore.”

I couldn’t take my eyes from his face as he walked toward an unknown destination. “How do you do what you do?” Again, my voice was barely there.

“Do what I do?”

“Yeah, your business.”

“You mean how cruel it is. How cruel I can be.”

“Yeah, that.”

He stopped for a second and looked into my eyes. “It comes easy to me. As easy as the blood running through my veins. But when I saw you, you changed my DNA. You altered it somehow. It won’t allow me to be aloof toward you, or anything you love.”

“Because you said seeing me was like coming home.” I kissed his face. “I make you feel safe.”

He nodded. “I found an unshakable foundation in you—a place that silenced the noise of my childhood. I could see pictures on the walls and food on the table. The scent of it like a candle burning. Outside, the waters of Greece.”

A worker in the lobby opened the door for Big, then rushed to offer us a driver take us wherever we were going. Big shook his head and told him he had it. We went around to the side of the hotel and started to take the steps down to the water. Sometimes yachts, or even boats, that belonged to guests would drop anchor at the berth. I think that’s what Big called it. I assumed it was just a fancy term for a dock.

A man was keeping watch as we made it down. He jumped up from his seat like he’d been zapped in the ass when he noticed it was Big.

“Mr. Bigatti!” He stood straighter. “We were not expecting you until morning.”

Big spoke to him in Italian, and the man hurried inside of the yacht. Big moved to the side of it and chucked his chin toward the name painted on the side.

I squinted in the darkness. “Aphrodite,” I read. I looked at him.

“Ours,” he said.

“You bought a yacht?”

“For us to get back and forth to Greece and Italy, or wherever we want to go.”

I knew that wouldn't be often, because of the nature of Big's business, and I refused to go without him. This trip just felt too special, and I couldn't see myself here alone. While I was deep in thought, Big boarded Aphrodite.

The moment we stepped on board, I could tell it was new and fancy—most likely all yachts were ritzy—but Big didn't give me much of a chance to look around. He carried me straight to the bedroom suite and set me on the plush bed.

“In a rush, Big?” I grinned at him.

He returned it, but with a wicked crookedness. “Rush?” He ticked his mouth. “You know better than that, Aphrodite.”

Oh, I did.

He crowded me on the bed, his arms on each side of me, and leaned in, his nose rubbing against mine, before he kissed me deep. Our tongues touched, then became frenzied as I reached to undress him. My hands on his bare skin, his chest, sent a deep guttural sound from his throat.

“What does my wife want on her wedding night?” He asked against my lips, his hand skimming the top of the dress, tracing the cut of it.

I looked down at myself and then back up. “Hungry, Big?”

He grinned against my mouth, then his tongue and teeth started to make their way down, his teeth trailing behind his tongue. “This dress. You. Fuck.” His hands were pulling on it until my breasts popped out, and the cool air in the cabin breezed over my nipples. I moaned and arched my back, my hands balling into fists.

“Do you like your dinner warmed, Big?” I breathed out.

He chuckled darkly against my skin, his breath fanning over it, warm where the air was cool. His hand slid against my opening, and he hissed. “My dinner is always just the right fucking temperature. Always so fucking perfect.” His touch was feather-light as his fingers brushed over each of my thighs, and I shivered.

From the faint light, I could see how drenched my thighs were with want, and he used his tongue to lick it up. I arched into it, squeezing the sheets to release some of the tension threatening to send me overboard.

“Get loud for me, Aphrodite. Let me hear you.”

I slid my body closer to his mouth, moaning, my hands itching to release

myself from the dress. I wanted to be naked with him, skin on skin. I ached for it.

It was like he could read my mind. He turned me some and unzipped me, sending the expensive dress to the floor, like it cost nothing, leaving me in the heels.

“I have no control when it comes to you,” he snapped. “Fuck.”

Getting to his knees on the bed, he positioned my legs behind his head, and tilting me up, started to devour me. Our hands clasped, and I was locked into the position, but still trying to get closer and closer to his tongue. I rode his face hard as he gave me what he always told me I deserved.

Pleasure.

“Big!”

“Let go.” His breath was warm against me. “Let me drink you in.”

I groaned deep in my throat as my entire body seized up, and then released a rush of pleasure through every part of me. It was hard enough that my toes curled. By the time I opened my eyes and my breath was coming a little easier, Big was naked in front of me, looking down at me.

I shivered when I took in his body. How fine he was.

He licked his lips, his finger light on my skin as he trailed it down my stomach, but it still made me convulse. He wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked until I started to whimper from wanting him so bad.

The sound set him off, and he slid into the bed with me, kissing me. His mouth tasted like a mixture of the both of us, and I was completely lost inside of wherever he'd taken me. Until the kiss broke and he started to make love to my skin. He started to kiss my neck like he was kissing my mouth. Sucking, biting, licking. Over and over, until I couldn't stand it a second longer.

I felt like I was about to lose all control. Like the rush of pleasure was about to sweep me away again just from his mouth on my neck.

We started to tangle in the sheets, hands together, legs intertwining, his body on top of mine and mine on top of his. My hair was sticking to my body from sweat as I moved over him, up and down, twirling my hips in a way he fucking loved. He'd buck up and almost send me through the roof, making me scream out in pleasure.

And then the mood seemed to take a slower turn, and he started to move with it, his eyes on mine the entire time. He filled me one last time, and I couldn't control what was about to happen. My body was giving in.

“I fucking love it,” he whispered. “Give in to me. Give me everything you have to give, Aphrodite.”

We came together, both of us sounding like we’d run a marathon together and finished at the same time. Our bodies were pressed together, his heart pounding against mine, mine beating against his.

After our breaths slowed, I wrapped my arms around him, using my fingertips to glide along his skin.

“I’m pregnant, Big,” I whispered.

“I’m fucking good, but not that fast, Aphrodite.”

I laughed a little at that. “No, I mean, I’m sure it takes a few minutes, or however long, but I’m pregnant from before. Another time. Probably not long after you were shot. I only took the test this morning, before the wedding.”

He was quiet for a few heartbeats. “You’re pregnant.”

I nodded.

His smile came slow. “You’re going to have my baby.”

I nodded.

Like he’d won the race of his life, he let out a *whoop* and pulled me to him so hard, he stole my breath. We kissed and kissed and kissed. Until the night faded into morning, and if I wouldn’t have been pregnant, I probably would have been.

CHAPTER 27

Mrs. Big

GREECE WAS everything I dreamed it would be, and I loved how the impossibly-hard-to-describe blue and green water from Italy seemed to flow directly into it, and vice versa, but it was a totally different world once we stepped onto land.

The architecture had a different feel to it, same as the villages, but all still with the welcoming warmth that comes directly from the Mediterranean sun. Big had basically rented out an entire village for our third wedding. I found out through a genealogist Big had hired as a gift to me and my brothers that our family on our dad's side had come from the village. Some of them were still living, and I couldn't describe how wonderful it was to meet them, how warm I felt inside to know I had roots in such a beautiful place, with equally as beautiful people.

We didn't stay in the village, though. We stayed on the Fausti family's private island, where the wedding and reception would be held. Over the course of the next couple of days, guests started to arrive, and an entire plane flew in from Vegas with all the girls who worked there on it. Vinny and Sam were supposed to be their support, since some of them had never flown before, but the girls had to help them walk off the plane.

"What happened?" I asked.

Georgia pulled her sunglasses down on her nose. "Flesh is not supposed to be green."

As soon as Vinny's feet touched the ground, he fell to his knees and kissed it. "Never again!" he howled. "Never again. I'm taking a boat back! Or I'm staying here."

“I agree, Boss,” Sam said in a deep voice. He was sweating.

Rocky’s face pinched and she held her nose. “Are we downwind? Because damn...the smell of puke is strong with these two.”

It was. I could see it on Sam’s shirt. It seemed like he had tried to wipe it, but it didn’t help. I often wondered, though, how Vinny and Sam became close. They were so different. Vinny was wimpy where Sam was a big, tough guy. Vinny had a big mouth, while Sam spoke very little. I wondered, then, if it had to do with their mutual fear of flying.

“They get to ride in a separate car, right?” one of the girls asked me.

All in all, though, none of them, besides Vinny, bitched about the plane ride after. They were all just so excited to be going on a paid vacation. The designer dresses Big splurged on for them seemed like a bonus. And even though Vinny bitched and said he was holding George and me personally responsible for his therapy bills, my heart warmed that he braved a fear to come. Vinny had tough skin, but below it all, there was some marshmallow in his heart.

Then I blinked, and I was married to Tullio Bigatti for the third time during a Grecian sunset on the beach.

I’d opted for another Grecian style dress that the designer for House of Sicilia worked her magic on. When the sun hit me, it seemed like the fabric caught it and held it until sundown. Nighttime fell and the fabric released what it had caught, shimmering against the flames. I’d tried to convince Big to go barefoot, but Big was Big. His suits were always dark, and his shoes always polished. That was okay, though, because the light he carried was for me—alone—and it was deep inside of his heart too.

“Where are we going?” I asked, breathless, as he led me to our room in the Faustis’ mansion on the island.

“You look as pale as you did before the church wedding in Portofino.”

I tugged on his hand. “How do you know I looked pale before the ceremony?”

He didn’t answer.

“You were spying on me!”

“I know you, Aphrodite. You were like a startled bunny about to run from her jaguar. I was a breath away from picking you up and hauling you over my shoulder.”

“That’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding!”

“Not if it’s on church grounds. At that point, it’s a done deal.”

I huffed as he pulled me into the room. He unhooked my dress, and I sighed out of sheer relief.

“That’s why you looked pale,” he said. “Your air flow was being constricted.”

“Yeah,” I laughed out. “I’m bloated.”

“Where?” He eyed me.

I ran a hand over my stomach and we both became quiet. When we looked at each other, it was like we both melted.

Two days later we went to Rome to see a doctor who confirmed the pregnancy. We heard the baby’s heartbeat and brought home a souvenir from the appointment—an ultrasound picture.

From there, we spent the rest of the summer exploring Europe.

I was both dreading and anticipating going back to Vegas. I was enjoying my time with Big. He’d always been attentive to me, but he was even more so after he found out about the baby. And I was eating up the attention, allowing him to spoil me, because it was almost like he got off on it. Then again, we had a lot to look forward to at home.

We were going to be a family of five in under a year.

Because of Phoenix’s anxiety over losing the people he loved, we decided to wait to tell anyone, just in case something happened early on. The only one who knew besides us was Georgia, and she was stealthy about asking how I was feeling when my brothers were around. She was keeping them company in Greece until we all met back in Vegas.

I was uneasy about that, too, given how Angelo was acting toward her, but Big told me to let it be. There was nothing I could do about Angelo’s feelings. One day, he would talk to him about it.

Then there was the situation with my mom and the torching of the apartment complex she lived in. She was okay, but I wasn’t sure why she was being targeted, unless I was. I didn’t have enemies that I could think of, except for maybe a few people I pissed off in traffic. Unless Whoever was trying to go through me to get to Big. When the shooting first happened, I’d asked him if he had any idea of who’d done it—*not at the moment, but it could be anyone*. He’d said if he didn’t have enemies, “I’m not conducting my business like I should.”

So...

That made me entirely uneasy, but I’d decided to put it on the back burner until we got home from Italy. I could tell Big was being even more protective

in Italy after his call from Umberto. Big following me to Triora wasn't just about him missing me. He wanted to be wherever I was, especially if it was a new place. And he was being even more paranoid about starting cars. In Vegas, all his cars were started by pressing a button on the key fob in case it was rigged with explosives. He was doing the same in the places we visited, and he was the only one who drove us.

It sent a sick roll through my stomach as we boarded the plane with my brothers, Georgia, and Lidia. I had hours of peace on the flight to Portofino, knowing we were landing in an entirely different world, but I was anxious the entire ride home.

Even when we stopped in New York for Big to attend to some business. I'd never been, and it would have been amazing to take it all in. Whenever I looked back on the trip, all I'd probably remember was the black cloud hovering over our lives.

It was appropriate, then, that when we landed in Las Vegas, it was raining.

CHAPTER 28

Mr. Big

A GRIN CAME to my face as Angelo opened the door for Leonora, and a hot-pink heel peeked out. He gave her his hand and helped her from the car. Her hair was still the color of sun-touched honey, but she'd gotten it cut shorter after we returned to Vegas. She was wearing flowing black pants and a blazer with sleeves that were rolled to the elbows. She lifted her sunglasses over her head and adjusted the bag on her shoulder, turning some, and it was apparent by the white shirt she wore, which showed a little bit of stomach, that she was pregnant.

We'd been back for a month, and Leonora was already twenty-four weeks pregnant. We were meeting at the doctor's office to do the "big" ultrasound to make sure everything looked okay and to find out the sex of our baby. We both wanted to know.

Anger stirred in the pit of my stomach when Angelo put his hand on her lower back and ushered her, with another guard, into the building.

I refused to be in the same car, same room in public, with my wife.

The motherfucker who shot me, who burned down my building, the one my mother-in-law lived in, still hadn't been found.

Which was why I refused to put her in jeopardy by being close to her in public. She rode only in the fleet of armored cars I'd bought—which I was making good money on by renting them out—and Angelo was her chauffeur. He also stood by her side wherever she went. He was her brother and a man I could trust with her safety. She'd always put her brothers first, and almost traded her life for Angelo's when she decided to steal from me. He'd learn what it meant by doing the same for his sister. And I'd make sure nothing

happened to either of them. But my wife rarely went out anymore because we both felt safer with her being at home.

I looked at Umberto.

I ran fucking Vegas with my cousin Gio. And no one was going to beat me at my own game. Umberto was my answers guy. I paid him to find out what I needed to know, and if he didn't get me answers soon, he was going to get a bullet to his brain.

He knew I was on the edge, and if I was to that point, someone was going to pay.

Whoever this motherfucker was, he wasn't working alone, and he'd started killing men in other organizations and making it look like us, the Italians, had done it. He was mimicking something that happened in New York a while back. It was complete fucking chaos.

Every family was on edge, and trust between them had been broken. It was the worse war the families had seen in years. When they went to the mattresses, they had hit them hard. Some suspected it was one family who was doing it, causing the entire war. But in the end, it had been one man.

We had a copycat of that man, but I still found myself in a few precarious situations because the shit that was happening was making it look like it was me and Gio. We ruled Vegas, and unless someone fucked with us first, we didn't need to be loud about it.

Things had gotten loud.

Umberto smoothed out his long, slicked-back hair and turned to face me. He spoke to me in Italian. "News, boss."

One word I'd been waiting to hear, but the clock on the dash was ticking. I had somewhere important to be, and I didn't want to deal with the situation until after. I refused to let the darkness of my life cloud the light in it. "Not now," I said. "After the appointment."

I stepped out of the car and fixed my suit. Umberto followed me inside, his eyes twitchy as he surveyed the area for threats.

Leonora had already checked in and was sitting next to Angelo in the waiting room. I'd paid for the entire day so no one else could get an appointment. The doctor knew who I was. Her only caveat was that if it was an urgent appointment, she would have to take it, but the office would let us know if that happened. I didn't want to take a chance on the doctor's office being the place the motherfucker got to my wife.

The thought made me twitchy and my trigger finger itch.

After I walked in, the nurse locked the door behind me. Leonora looked up from the magazine she was reading and smiled at me. She dug in her bag and lifted a folded piece of paper.

“Got mine.” She waved it.

I dug in my suit pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper that was identical to hers. “If you show me yours, I’ll show you mine.”

“That’s what got us into this,” she said.

I laughed and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. I handed her my paper, and she handed me hers. We’d decided to guess what we thought the baby was, but not tell each other until right before the appointment.

Actually, it was Phoenix’s idea about the paper. He said that way we couldn’t accuse each other of cheating if one of us suddenly thought the other had changed their answer at the last minute. One game of Monopoly with the kid and it changed his entire life. But Leonora liked the idea and wanted to save the papers for the baby when he or she got older.

We opened the papers at the same time and said *girl* at the same time.

We grinned at each other, and when the nurse came out and said, “Whenever you’re ready, Mrs. Bigatti,” I took Leonora’s hand and refused to let go.

Turned out, we were right.

We were going to have a little *bambina*.

Daphne Lilla Bigatti.

Leonora looked like she’d taken a bite out of the sun and was glowing after we left the office. It was almost like she was floating. I knew Kitty and Georgia were going to be waiting at the casino to ambush her with ideas for Daphne’s room.

I kissed her goodbye and told her I’d see her at home, but she held my shirt. “Where are you going?”

“Business.”

She searched my eyes. “You have reasons to come home,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to remind me, Aphrodite. Those reasons are in my DNA. That’s why I always fucking rush home to you.” I grinned. “I’m not young anymore—I’ve grown up since the race at Monza.”

“Not funny,” she whispered.

“There you go again, accusing me of having a sense of humor.” I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “A man doesn’t know how much he’s able to grow until he has the right woman by his side. I’m iron-clad now, my

Aphrodite.”

She stood on her toes and kissed me, then kissed me again. She rested her head on my chest and then turned in a rush to where Angelo was waiting to help her into the car. I watched as she pulled away, and so did the thing beating in my chest, trying to run after her.

Some say men like me don't have hearts.

Maybe that's true, but whatever existed inside of me, in that void—it beat like a motherfucking drum when she walked into the room. It ached like it needed more blood when she walked out of it.

“Boss,” Umberto said.

I unlocked the door and started the car with the fob. Our bodies were *not* knocked back into the building, so it was safe to get in.

“News,” I said.

Umberto sighed. “A member of 24K was run down on his bike last night. A dining knife from the casino's restaurant was stuck in his back. He survived.”

24K was a local group, led by a man who went by Jin—his surname—only.

“First stop. Paradiso. Gio needs to be in on this. Then Dynamic.”

When I'd found out Leonora worked for Vinny at Dynamic, I demanded to know who the people around her were. Besides Vinny, Sam, and two cooks, the rest were all women who had either found themselves on the hard road of life or had chosen it.

One of those women went by the name of Jade, but her birth name was Shu Sun. The name had stood out to me in the report. I'd heard of her before, and for me to hear of her, it meant she had made a name for herself. Vinny gave her a room in his club to run poker games. She was an excellent card player and knife thrower, and if a man ever accused her of cheating, she'd pin him to the wall with the collection she kept underneath the table. She was a draw.

She was also connected to 24K.

Vinny was still telling tall tales about his harrowing experience on the plane when Umberto, Gio, and I walked in. Gio's guys were standing guard at the front and back doors. The place was dim, only a flash of light coming from the open door to brighten the place for a second before the life drained out of it. The smell of foods being prepared, cheap liquor, and a department store worth of perfume scents packed a punch in the air.

“Devil in Disguise” was playing over the speakers, and it seemed like Vinny was shaking his head and moving his hands to the beat of it as he told his small audience about the plane shaking so hard the *air bags* released. He called oxygen masks air bags.

He lifted his hand like he was testifying to it. “My heart has never had such a shock before. Then I turn to Sam, and Sam here is green, the contents of his stomach all over his new tie. I had to help the big guy.”

“Vinny,” one of the girls who was from New York said with a clipped accent. She slapped her hands on her hips. “We were all there. The plane hit a little turbulence and you shit your pants. You didn’t help anybody.”

“Are you calling me a liar, Joey?”

“If the shit fits...”

“You’re fired!” He pointed at her.

“For what?” She pointed back. “Telling the truth? You can’t fire me for that! I’m telling George and Leo if you do!”

George and Leo had some leverage over Vinny after they both were able to quit on him, if they decided to. Vinny didn’t want that. He could trust George and Leo enough that all he had to do was deal with the money that came in. George and Leo did the rest. Or used to. Georgia still came in frequently, despite Leonora worrying that whoever was after me or her would go after Georgia in retaliation because she meant something to Leonora, but I knew once this situation was over, Leo would be back. But since she’d be taking a break, she and Georgia decided to start training two girls, who had been there almost as long as them, to take their places when they couldn’t be there.

Vinny mimicked her stance. “You’re getting cocky with your boss—that’s grounds for firing you on the spot! And George and Leo don’t run nothin’ around here!”

“I want to see you tell them that—to their faces—and hear it with my own ears.”

It was a standoff after.

A new song started to play, a more modern one with a catchy beat. One of the girls came out dancing from the back, one of Rocky’s friends. She started dancing around me and Umberto. She was staying clear of Gio.

“What’s up, Mr. Big?” She popped her hips from left to right. “Came to take care of business with...Vinny?” She laughed.

Vinny turned and his face blanched before he composed himself.

“Everything okay with Leo? With George?” Even though he was covering for his *George and Leo don't run nothin' around here* comment, I knew his concern for them was sincere, which kept him breathing.

Sam appeared from out of the dark shadows and shadowed Vinny.

“Fine,” I said. “We need to talk to Jade.”

“Consider the place yours, gentlemen,” Vinny said. “I’m not sure if Jade is here, though. She doesn’t come in every day, only when she finds a group of men to kill at poker, and mostly it’s at night.”

“I know a few places,” Sam said. “I’ll see if she’ll come back with me.”

Gio went to the bar and took a seat. “While we wait...who do I need to talk to about getting some food around here?”

Vinny went to grab us each some burgers and fries while we waited. Even though the place looked like an old shack from outside, and the wooden floors would probably have a reaction to a mop, at that point, Vinny kept his kitchen clean, and his food was above decent.

“A girl, huh?” Gio grinned at me before he ripped into his burger.

“News travels fast.”

“The grand poobah told me.”

That was Gio’s thing with Kitty. He came up with “grandmotherly” names to call her because he said calling her Kitty was just as ridiculous.

“It’s true, though? A girl?”

I nodded. “A girl.”

We ate the rest of our food in companionable silence, but I could feel Gio’s energy had shifted. He was more mellow, and not just because he’d eaten red meat. He was pleased by the news.

Thirty minutes later, Sam walked in alone. He fixed his suit. “She’ll be here soon.”

For more privacy, Umberto, Gio, and I decided to wait in the room she rented from Vinny. We passed a line of slot machines that Vinny decided to add to his establishment to get more revenue going during the day. The men’s arms were constantly in movement—either hitting the button, scooping or adding coins, or reaching for a beer or drink the girls refilled without them asking.

Long beads that served as a privacy screen covered the door. We each had to move them to the side for clearance. An old, worn-out poker table sat in the center of the room, and Umberto and Gio took seats at it. Before I did, I studied the wood-paneled walls. They had knife marks gouged in them.

“I’ve seen her throw them,” Gio said. “She’s fucking precise.” Then a shit-eating grin came to his face when an unforgettable song started to play. “This one is dedicated to you, *Mr. Big Stuff*.”

It was the song by the same name, the same one Leonora had her girls sing to me the night I came to see her at work—before we were married. When she was in her “I hate you, but I love you, Tullio Bigatti” era.

The beads barely rattled as a slight form slipped through them. Shu Sun, known as Jade, was petite and slim. Her long, straight black hair was pulled over one shoulder, hitting her waist. She wore dark sunglasses. I knew she would throughout the meeting. She wore a leather jacket, black leggings, and fire-red heels. Her long nails matched.

She took a seat before any of us could get up. She faced me. “He’ll be here.”

“I appreciate,” I said. She had known what I wanted, a meeting with Jin, and had already set it up.

“I like Leo,” she said in answer. She opened one of her pockets and set her cellphone down on the table.

Yeah, and it might make things awkward between them if her man tried to stick a knife in my back to retaliate.

Twenty minutes later, Jin walked in. He was alone on the inside, but I was almost certain he had some of his men outside. He was slim but had muscle where it counted, and tats from his neck down. Two scars, old slashes, ran down his left cheek. His black hair was done in an undercut, and he wore similar clothes to Jade, except he wore motorcycle riding boots.

He took the seat across from me, removed his dark sunglasses, and set them on the table. His dark eyes were no nonsense. “I know you didn’t do it,” he said.

I nodded. “We had no reason to.”

“A copycat,” Gio said. “From what happened in New York a while back.”

“Word on the street is that someone tried to buy a shit-load of explosives not long ago—car bombs,” Jin said.

I was pleased the meeting was going this way—two different organizations attempting to squeeze out whoever was trying to cause a war for no good fucking reason.

I nodded. I’d gotten that information too. “Wasn’t successful.”

“Not that time, but money doesn’t always say no.”

“Agreed,” I said.

He pulled out his phone, the screen lit, and a second or two later, he slid it toward me. A grainy picture had been pulled up. Gio and Umberto both leaned in, on either side of me, to see it.

“Outside of Koi?” I nodded to the phone. Koi was his restaurant, and it was one of the most popular along the strip.

“No. My personal club.”

I looked up and locked eyes with him.

“Shaped like a woman,” he said. “Started getting antsy at one point, like she had to piss.”

“Did she?” Gio asked.

“My cameras caught her running across the street a few minutes later. There’s an all-night market. It made my men suspicious, her loitering around. The camera caught her fifteen minutes before that coming out of All-Night Sushi down the street.”

“No wonder she had to go,” Gio said. “She got the fucking trots from eating hot sushi.”

Jin grinned. “She didn’t appear in any footage for the rest of the night.”

“I hope someone checked on her from the market.” Gio wasn’t being funny, which sometimes made him endearing, which was a far cry from Buggy.

“Did your men catch her again?” I asked.

“Swipe,” Jin said, nodding to the phone.

I did, and there she was again. Her face seemed covered, but the build was feminine. I pinched my fingers against the screen, trying to get a better look at her eyes.

“What makes you think this woman was suspicious?” Umberto asked while I kept trying to find anything that would give me a hint of who this woman was.

“No one loiters outside of my club unless they’re looking for entrance or trouble. Once, maybe not knowing any better or lost—yeah. But she came back again, and the next day, one of my men was hit and stabbed.”

I looked up and met his eyes. He nodded.

“Facial scan hasn’t found anything on her,” he said.

My eyes were hard on the picture because I was missing fucking something. Jin seemed convinced it was a woman. The fire at my apartment complex, where Linda Davies lived, would prove my theory true. Whoever this was had an issue with my wife. I hated to fucking think any of these girls

who worked with Leonora had a hand in this.

That didn't sit right in my gut either.

One thing I knew for sure—whoever the fuck this woman was, she wasn't acting alone.

The picture bounced back from the zoom, and I pinched the screen again.

Realization hit me like a ton of fucking bricks.

“Whitney Young,” I said, like, GOTCHA!

“Doesn't ring any bells,” Gio said.

“Freddy Money,” I said.

After Whitney Young got my wife arrested and threatened to own her, I fucking *owned* her. No one would hire her but me. She'd been ostracized from Vegas. And Freddy Money? I'd just paid him a visit when it first happened, and he'd lifted his hands, like they'd already been washed of her. He knew I'd take his fucking head off.

And I was.

My gut told me he had something to do with this. He'd been supporting her lifestyle, and it seemed like he was supporting this suicide mission too.

“Something I should know?” Jin asked.

Umberto filled him in on the situation with Money and Young while I stood to call Leonora. I wanted to check on her and speak to her brother. Money didn't call the shots, but he had money to burn. And sometimes money did the talking when people were desperate. I knew Money could find desperate people to do his dirty work. People who were new to the area and looking to make a quick buck.

An explosion that rocked the floorboards beneath my feet sent girls in a panic through the club. It sounded like a herd of fleeing animals were attempting to all rush out at once.

Gio and Jin each took a side of the window, peeking out of the blinds at different times, while Umberto went to help Sam keep the girls from flying out the door.

Some car bombs were meant to just blow up the car itself, but some were meant to take out buildings by proximity. If the latter was the case, the girls needed to get out. If it was just to get our attention, it was best if they stayed inside. They might be waiting to pick us off if we rushed outside.

The men outside were shouting, and in the next few seconds, it seemed like five more explosions went off. The cars in the parking lot were exploding into fireballs. Flames rose up from the parking lot, smoke rising in

huge puffs, and embers were floating in the air. The land surrounding the club was dry, and it wasn't going to take long for it to catch.

The entire club was made of wood.

Some of the cars were close enough to share the explosion with the structure.

It seemed like the thought ran through the entire room at the same time. Jin picked Jade up and slung her over his shoulder, and behind him, we all hustled to get out. Gio caught the first bullet to his shoulder. He knocked into me some, since I was the last one out, but we managed to follow Jin to where he'd taken shelter behind an old folding table Vinny had sitting next to the club. Someone had turned it on its side, and our men, Jin's men, Vinny and Sam were all huddled behind it. The girls were plastered to the ground with their hands covering their heads behind it. Except for Jade, who took the spot next to Jin.

"Well, shit," Gio said, pulling his gun and taking a shot into the unknown from our spot. "It's been a while since I got a new hole. And if whoever's shooting at us hits this table, the bullet is going straight through. Good thing it's smokey and they seem to be aiming high."

"You know what this means?" I lifted some, trying to determine where the shots were coming from. It was hard to tell in which direction with all the fire and smoke. Evening was coming down, and it was even darker inside of the cloud we were in. "Grandmamma," I said in a real ritzy type of voice, "is going to demand to take care of you—she's going to want to feed you and then wipe your ass, just to teach you a lesson."

"I don't have a fucking clue why anyone would accuse you of having a sense of humor, Bigatti, unless they're under duress," Gio said. "You suck at it." He lifted some. "See anything?"

"We should just light it up," Vinny said, his face full of soot, the white of his eyes and teeth neon. He lifted some. "Light the motherfuckers up!" He covered his head and said "Oh shit!" when a bullet whizzed past.

Sam put a giant hand on his head and pushed him down like a Jack in the box. "Stay down, Boss."

"Visibility is slim," Jin said. "Vincent has a point."

"We'll unload a clip each and then save the rest," Gio said.

We all checked our weapons, took our spots, and at Umberto's signal, we all started firing in different directions. My ears were ringing once the blasts had stopped. It took a few minutes to realize the silence was from a break in

shots coming from the opposite direction. The only noises were the sound of sirens in the distance, the fire eating whatever it could in crackles and sizzles, and Vinny and a few of the girls choking on the thick smoke.

“Is it quiet or is it my ears?” Jin shouted.

“Your ears!” Jade shouted back.

“It’s quieted down some,” I said.

“Who’s going to check?” Vinny asked.

“Certainly not you,” Gio said.

“I have responsibilities,” was Vinny’s response. “I have to rebuild this place!” Even though Vinny sounded shaken, it was almost like I could see dollar signs flash in his eyes at the thought of the insurance money.

A few minutes later, firetrucks came rolling into the parking lot, and the entire street smelled of barbecue after their hoses hit the fires. The Fire Marshall gave Vinny a look as suspicious as the police were giving Umberto, Jin, Gio, and me.

It was almost the start of a joke, if I would have been in any mood to find anything fucking funny. I was covered in soot, my lungs were burning, and out of all the bodies that were found—a woman and two men—none of them belonged to Freddy Money. His girlfriend had on the same clothes she wore in Jin’s video, and she had a bedazzled gun next to her.

“Not a word,” I said to Gio as he was hauled off toward an ambulance. He said he was the victim this time, and he refused to go to the man we usually went to if things went sour—Kitty knew him, and she’d make Gio pay after, especially if he went straight home to recoup.

Gio grinned at me. “Young probably shot you with that bedazzled gun. No wonder I’ve been seeing a sparkle about you lately. Her bullets were probably full of glitter.”

I shoved the stretcher and it went rolling, Gio shooting me the bird as he rolled away, the emergency team running after it.

I still had a man to pay a visit to.

SURPRISE, surprise, Money was just pulling into his gated estate when I crawled up behind him in a car one of my men had delivered to the smoke shack. My other one was nothing but a pile of melted metal, vehicular

ashes, in Vinny's parking lot.

My eyes were bloodshot but trained on Money's Lamborghini. Not giving him an inch of space between his car and mine. He stalled at the entrance, probably trying to decide what to do, or if he had enough time to get through without me following him.

I didn't give him a chance to outrun me.

He'd never outrun me.

I smashed the back of his car when the gate started to open and pushed him through. Halfway to his grand estate, he slammed on the brakes and stepped out, holding his hands up. His face wasn't entirely streaked with soot and ash, but I could see he had a line of it below his hairline.

"I didn't do it," he said right away.

"You didn't do it?" I sniffed the air. "New cologne, Money? You smell like a burnt fucking weenie."

"I didn't mean I didn't do it," he said. "I did, but not directly. It was Whitney! She was blackmailing me. I've been involved in some underground dealings that she knew about."

"Everyone knows about your dealings, Money."

"Yeah, but no one had direct proof, and no one has ever threatened to go straight to cops with it. And for the record, she shot at you. It was a spur of the moment decision, she'd told me. But I did torch your apartment building. If you ask me, I did you a favor there. Shit, I even did Salemi a favor. Your building was ancient, and Salemi's was just a wart on the earth."

"You almost killed people who are important to my wife. She doesn't like recklessness. You caused her stress, therefore me."

"Her mom, you mean? Almost did you a favor there too."

I shot him in the arm, and he fell to the ground. He cursed, kicking his legs, groaning. I stood over him and pointed the gun at his head.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you, Bigatti," he rasped out. "Grammy is in the Lambo, and she's strapped with dynamite. I pull this—" he opened his palm, a quick glimpse at the detonator, and then closed it again "—she's toast. Drop the gun."

His window had been rolled down and I tilted some to check. Kitty's mouth had been taped shut, and around her middle was an explosive device.

I dropped the gun.

"Kick it towards me."

I did.

I looked at Kitty again. Her eyes were narrowed, but she wasn't trying to fight.

"I'd be very careful if I were you. Be smart." Money had my gun in one hand and the detonator in the other, and he was getting to his feet. Sweat ran down his face in rushing rivers, and his arm was bleeding freely. He rocked from side to side. "Whitney had taken some online classes and built it herself. It was meant for your wife."

The mention of my wife made my entire body go hard. So did seeing my grandmother strapped to a bomb and silenced. Kitty could be a pain in my heels, but she was my pain in the fucking heels.

"Let her go," I said, "and I'll let you go."

"No, no, no," Money said. "It's not going to work like that. I got your gun. I'm in charge. You die. Grammy might go free. She was sweet enough about it all. She understood. I might check out the wife later, just to see how I feel about keeping her alive. You'll definitely be seeing that Buggy son of a bitch in hell. Then with the both of you gone, I do okay in Vegas for the rest of my life. End of story." He lifted the gun and wasted no time putting his hand to the trigger.

A blast came from the Lamborghini and, at first, I thought maybe something had happened and Money detonated the dynamite. But I knew he wasn't that foolish. If he hit the button, it wouldn't only be Kitty leaving this world.

Money's face registered shocked before he fell over. The detonator was clutched in his hand. I looked at him and then at the car. Kitty was standing on the side of it, her arms outstretched, the small revolver, who she called Pink Lady, clutched in her hands.

She'd shot the motherfucker.

In the head, no less.

I rushed to the side of the car and ripped the tape from her mouth.

"Get me out of this getup, will you, Baby Tullio?"

"*Getup*," I rasped out, my throat hoarse probably from swallowing smoke all evening. "You're strapped to enough dynamite to send us both into space and you're calling it a 'getup'?"

"Yes. The dynamite might be real, but that chooch and his dingbat weren't smart enough to know how to hook it all up. Just like he wasn't smart enough to take my purse away from me." She patted it. "Or tie my hands and feet up." She tapped on the hood. "Nice ride, though. What do you say we

leave the rotten cannoli and keep the car?”

I grinned. “I should have known something was up when he called you sweet.”

“Yeah, I thought that was going to tip you off.”

“I had a lot going on tonight.” I surveyed the situation. “I don’t want to —”

She was already unstrapping the dynamite, and I rushed to take it from her.

“We’re burying this, just in case,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “You have a shovel in the trunk?”

“Don’t I always?”

“Your grandfather taught you well.” She smiled.

She watched me dig up a hole on the other side of the estate. Money had built a fortress for himself, and he was secluded. I looked around and found one of those signs alarm companies stick in the front yard. I stuck it in the ground where I’d buried the dynamite as a marker. I’d have Kitty call it in anonymously and let law enforcement know. I knew a guy who was good with explosives, but I didn’t want to get him involved. I wanted the cops to know Money and his crew had been behind the fire at my apartment building and what happened at Vinny’s.

I didn’t want to catch a charge any time soon. Especially not with all Leonora and I had going on in our lives.

Kitty wiped my face with a handkerchief in her purse once I was done. Sweat and ash kept running in my eyes and making them burn. As I set the shovel back in the trunk, Kitty got in on the passenger side. We were halfway down the road when an explosion made the car tremble, and fire ballooned in the night.

“*Whoops*,” Kitty said, making a sorry face. “I didn’t think it was really going to work.”

She’d stolen the detonator, which I’d purposely left in Money’s hand, and pressed it.

I sighed and looked at my grandmother. “Not a word of this to Leonora.”

“Fine, as long as you do something for me first.” She dropped the mirror down and started fixing her makeup. “Buy me a drink.” She turned the radio on, and then up, when Frank Sinatra started to serenade her from the other side.

I bought her an entire bottle of the good stuff at Paradiso, where I left her

for the night with strict instructions to Gio's guards to keep her inside. Money had taken her when she was on her scooter, going back to Paradiso from Casino Portofino. I wasn't going to lie, seeing her scooter just sitting there without her on it gave me a fucking pang in my chest.

One of the guards rode it back, and I decide to walk it, twirling my keys around my finger, stopping at the "sea" that created a line between my casino and Gio's. I needed a moment to clear the smoke from my lungs and reflect on the day. How close life and death was. A thin line like this "sea" that parted two sides.

My daughter was healthy.

And the people who wanted to hurt her mother were gone.

It was a beautiful day for a man like me, in my book.

I let myself into the casino suite quietly. Even though it wasn't that late, it was late enough that Leonora was probably in bed. She'd been taking long showers and then just relaxing—a magazine or book to read—lately. Sometimes she'd even binge watch cooking shows. She loved the ones where they competed.

My keys crashed to the floor, and I made an "ung" noise when something solid came at me from the darkness. It was wild, making crazed noises, but it could speak, or was trying to. I was able to get the lights on.

It was my wife.

"You selfish asshole!" she growled at me, and then attacked me again.

I let her.

I brought us down to the floor and kissed her head once I could get her hands down.

"I didn't know what happened!" she rushed out through sobs, her hands curling into my shirt, making fists. "I got a call about Dynamic. Rocky got a call about Gio." The only reason I understood what she was saying was because...I understood her. "I kept calling you. You didn't answer! Why didn't you answer?"

I took her face in my hands and kissed her eyes. I kept kissing her. "I must've lost my phone outside of Dynamic."

She started to cry harder.

I spoke to her in soft Italian until her sobs turned into cries, and her cries turned into the occasional hiccup.

"I'm sorry, Aphrodite," I whispered, pulling her even closer. "But it's over. It's all over."

She looked me in the eyes. “Does that mean our story is actually just beginning?”

I smiled and leaned in to kiss her. She kissed me back, wrapping her arms around my neck. “It’s just beginning.” I touched her stomach then stood, giving her my hand. She set hers in mine and I lifted her to her feet, then picked her up and carried her outside.

She didn’t ask me where we were going. She knew.

We stopped and got two small drinks—Leonora didn’t want to drink over a certain amount of caffeine, because of Daphne—and headed to Red Rock Canyon.

The stars filled the sky, so thick that she lifted her hand as if she could touch them. Then she sniffed the air.

“You smell like barbecue.” She looked at me.

We both grinned and then started laughing. I pulled her head close, and we kissed under the stars.

The same stars my mother used to wish on.

Maybe I was luckier than she was.

I’d never made a wish in my life. I’d give them to my mother, because gambles seemed more my speed, and I’d never made one I thought I could lose.

Including Leonora Kallistos Bigatti.

Everything I had to gamble with, I gambled on us.

Looking at my wife, setting my hand on her stomach, I knew without a doubt.

I was the richest motherfucker alive.

Epilogue

LEONORA

Seven Years Later

A LIGHT TAP, *tap, tap* was coming from the back seat. I turned in my seat some and eyed our two daughters sitting side by side as we climbed higher and higher, on our way to visit Triora for the weekend.

Daphne was seven and Theia was five.

Theia didn't have patience in the car. She wanted in and out. "I wanna be there," she sang in her kiddy-sounding voice. "I wanna be there."

Daphne, on the other side, was ignoring her, studying each dip and turn, enjoying each new piece of scenery her many blinks brought her.

When we were able to leave Vegas, we always came back to Portofino, and because of my first trip to Triora, I always wanted to go back. We'd planned three of our trips around the different festivals. This year we were going to the chestnut festival, which would mark our first October, first fall, in Italy. I couldn't wait to see the leaves, smell the toasting chestnuts, and introduce our daughters to a part of their history. Theia might not remember this one, but maybe Daphne would. Or at least some parts of it.

Big glanced through the rearview mirror to check on them, then he lifted my hand to his mouth and breathed me in before he kissed my fingers.

It had been seven years since we were married three times.

Seven years since we'd fallen in love.

Seven years, two children, and an uncountable number of memories that I never wanted to forget.

And only a lifetime to go.

Our arrival in Triora was met by a quiet yes from Daphne and a squeal from Theia as Big opened Theia's door and scooped her up. I took Daphne's hand, and we checked into our place for the weekend. Then we spent the entire weekend trying all the local dishes, enjoying the people and the culture, and teaching our girls that even if the world calls you a witch, it doesn't matter, because you're the only one who controls your magic.

I loved seeing Big in his greatest role—the father of our daughters. He was excellent at it. He let them do his hair, and whenever they needed a prince, he was their man.

On our last night, the girls went to bed earlier than usual, and I was staring out the open window, watching as the clouds moved over the moon. Witchy weather, indeed.

A glass of red wine appeared at my shoulder. "*Grazie*," I said, taking it from Big and kissing his hand. He pulled me closer, and we both stared out.

"And to think...when you first met me, I wouldn't have shared my board if we were ever on a ship that went down."

He laughed quietly, wrapping his arm around my neck, kissing my cheek. Then my mouth. It was a deep kiss that was a short prelude to the promise of later. "You'd share with me now, Aphrodite?"

"I'd give you the entire thing," I whispered.

He rested his nose against my temple and closed his eyes. "That would be my worst fucking nightmare. You not in this world with me anymore."

"You know it's mine," I breathed out. "So...let's make a pact."

"You have my attention."

"Let's never die," I said.

"Or if we do...we'll always stay together. I'm sure there's a heaven for lovers somewhere."

"That works for me too."

"All right," he breathed. "That's settled. Let's move the fuck on."

We did. We talked about going down the mountain and what we were going to do after. We talked about Aphrodite—the yacht—and if we thought the girls would always like it. Both of them, yeah, but in different ways. Daphne would be the girl who soaked up the sun, daydreaming; Theia would be the girl who couldn't wait to jump in. Georgia said they were a good mixture of the both of us, because in different ways, we were both cautious, but we were both also adventurous in different ways. They seemed to inherit some of each.

If someone would have told me that night at Dynamic—which had been changed to Diamond after the fire—that this would be my life someday...that I could have ever loved someone as much I loved Big...that he would love me back, Huge...I wouldn't have believed it.

My husband made a believer out of me, and every day, he kept me believing.

I didn't need wishes. I had a husband who knew the odds and how to play them right. With him love had never been a gamble, but a sure win.

About the Author

Bella Di Corte writes criminal romance that will steal your heart. She brings to life stories of men who walk the line between irredeemable and savable, and the women who force them to feel. She's known for her rich world building and strong characters. She's also an International Bestselling Author.

Apart from writing, Bella loves to spend time with her husband, daughter, family, and four dogs. She also loves to read, listen to music, cook recipes that were passed down to her, and take photographs.

Bella was born and raised in New Orleans, a place she considers a creative playground.



Also by Bella Di Corte

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The Rose Room

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