

Oberizing
the Italian
MAFIA BOSS

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ROSALIE ROSE

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Obeying the Italian Mafia Boss:

A Mafia Romance

By: Rosalie Rose

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Prologue

Mable

Eighteen years old.

Two families have been at war since I can remember.

Mine and the Benedettis.

My family comes from a long line of lawyers who have ruined many of the Benedettis' lives. My father always says, "Guilty men should have guilty charges pressed against them." But, like many men, people can be bought for their loyalty and indiscretion. My father has waived his morals once or twice for the right price, and I never cared.

I'm just a teenage girl, looking at what makes the world spin. My parents think I'm not very bright, that I have no idea what's going on in life because I'm too busy with headphones in my ears listening to too loud music to pay attention. Just because I don't say much does not mean I'm not smart or that I don't pick up on things happening around me.

I know my father stays up late working, and I've overheard him on the phone with a few of the Benedettis. Those calls always end with him yelling at whoever is on the phone.

And I know Mom makes her 'special drink' around ten at night.

Every time she tells me that, I snort to myself, as if I don't know what alcohol smells like.

She also thinks I don't know that she chases a pill down with that same glass of her 'special drink' before making herself another.

It's better they think me inconsequential. I've learned a lot about life just by staying quiet and watching them—watching them make mistake after mistake and then scramble to undo it.

For instance, I know my father pissed off the wrong man. Last night around midnight, a loud banging echoed through the house from the front door. I crept out of my room, tiptoed across the floor, slid down the wall, and peeked around the corner so I could look downstairs. I could see the front door perfectly.

And when my father opened the door, he didn't invite the man inside.

I close my eyes and lean my head against the car window as we drive,

replaying the conversation in my mind.

“What the hell are you doing at my home, Benedetti? I have a daughter who is upstairs asleep.” He stood in the doorway to make sure Benedetti couldn’t get in the house.

“If you answered your phone, I wouldn’t have to be here. But you have to get out of here, Porter. I’ve come to warn you. One of the men you put in jail for me has put your name on a list. Your entire family is up for sale, Porter. You need to go.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Who?”

“Leonardo.”

Silence falls and I watch as my father runs his fingers through his hair. “He isn’t supposed to be out yet.”

“You know better than to think he wouldn’t try and get revenge. I have my ear to the ground and I’m only here because you’ve been there for my family more than once. You need to leave. And you need to make sure you never come back.” My father tried to shut the door in Benedetti’s face, but the mafia boss’s hand shot out, stopping it from closing.

And when the hinges squeaked, the French door swinging open again, a gun was pointed at my father. “Don’t make me force you. Don’t make me take your life, because if you don’t leave, it’s suicide. Your daughter won’t make it to her next birthday if you don’t listen to me. Please, Porter. Get out,” the man pled.

“And go where?”

Benedetti slammed the butt of the gun against my father’s head, then shoved the barrel into my father’s mouth.

I covered my heavy breaths with my hands, so I didn’t make a sound, and my eyes watered from being so afraid. I heard the click of the gun as Benedetti cocked it.

“You’ll do this, or your pretty wife and daughter will die, Porter. I might as well kill you now if you won’t listen to me.”

I watched as Benedetti slammed the door behind him, and my father became afraid. I’d never seen him afraid, but he rubbed his hands down his face and flew up the stairs.

That’s when I ran to my room and slipped under the covers, only for my father to burst through the door, yank the blankets off me, and tell me to pack before I’d had a chance to calm my racing heart.

The car jostles when we hit a pothole, making me slam my head against

the window. “Ouch.” We’re heading out of town, away from the Benedettis, away from the life of crime my father has caught himself in, and away from the threats of the mafia. He thinks I don’t know it’s the mafia he’s been dabbling with these past few years. I’ve heard him and Mr. Benedetti having conversations a few times in my dad’s office.

“Holden, slow down. We need to make it out of the city alive,” my mother scolds my father, just as the tires squeal as he takes a turn too hard.

“No, Melissa. We are getting the fuck out of here. No one threatens my family. I should have never gotten involved with such dangerous men, but the money was so good.”

“Blood money usually is,” I grumble low, but not low enough for them not to hear me.

“You watch your mouth, young lady. Your father did what he had to. He supported us.”

I roll my eyes because he didn’t get involved with the mafia for us; he did it for his own good. He wanted more money.

My father peeks into the rearview mirror to look at me, then does a quick double-take, narrowing his eyes.

“What?” I ask, rubbing my cheek. “Is there something on my face? Is there a spider?” I yelp, brushing my shoulders off to make sure it isn’t on me.

“No, that car behind us. It’s been following us for a while.”

“Sweetie, you’re paranoid. We are on the highway now. All of us are going in the same direction. Cars are going to seem like they are following us.”

“You’re right,” my father says, letting out a deep breath. “You’re right.”

I turn to peer out the back window, ignoring how the seatbelt is cutting into my arm, to see what car he is talking about. It’s a black SUV, nothing special, so I shrug my shoulders and flip open the book I’m reading.

“Just in case,” my father says, turning on the blinker to take the next exit.

I twist again and notice the SUV following us. “Dad,” I whisper when my breath catches.

“It’s okay. Everything will be fine. Let’s not panic.”

But I hear the panic in his voice.

He is worried.

The car lurches forward as he presses on the gas, and he turns the wheel at the last second to miss a vehicle. The momentum throws me and I smack against the door.

The car takes a sharp left down another road. I look out the window again, not seeing anything, and I take a deep breath, wiping the sweat from the back of my neck from the anxiety this paranoia has caused me.

My father takes another turn, this time a right down a back road, and he begins to laugh. “Wow, he got in my head. I’m sorry,” he says, taking my mom’s hand and kissing her knuckles.

I peek out the back window again and swallow when I see headlights. “Dad...” I whisper, watching the SUV speed closer to us.

“Fuck! I knew it. Hold on.” The car flies forward, and before we get momentum, he slams on the brakes again when another SUV is at the end of the road.

We’re blocked in.

The one behind us stops driving, and both SUVs are idling as if waiting for something to happen.

“Holden, what do we do?”

“I don’t know....”

My father barely gets the words out before my mother yells. “You better figure it out! We have two—”

“I know that!” he shouts, turning around and checking to ensure the SUV is actually there. “I know,” he repeats, sitting forward in his seat. “Mable, I want you to listen to me.”

“Dad,” my voice breaks when I hear that tone. He only talks like that when something bad is about to happen.

“I love you. Okay? I love you, and I’m sorry. Hold on tight. Just hold on, okay? Will you do that for me?”

Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror, and his blue eyes seem brighter as they fill with tears.

I nod, reaching for the gray handle above me with a shaking hand.

“Good. That’s good, Mable.”

“I love you too,” I whisper, wanting to say one nice thing to my father. Now that I don’t know if we will make it out alive, I wish I had said things differently and treated them better, but I was such a brat and filled with so much anger. I only wanted my parents to notice me like every other teenager.

I’m eighteen and counting down the days until graduation so I can leave home. Now I wish I never had that thought at all as the Benedetti mafia surrounds us.

“I love you, Melissa. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you enough.”

“Tell me again when we get out of here,” she replies, and they give each other a quick kiss.

There’s only one way out, and that’s straight ahead. My dad slams his foot on the gas, and the back tires burn against the pavement as they try to gain traction. Our vehicle shoots forward, and the SUV in front of us does the same. My palm on the gray handle begins to sweat, slipping from the plastic, and because I’m too curious for my own good, I look over my shoulder again.

The other SUV is right behind us, and the one in front is getting closer and closer.

“Dad!” I scream, not knowing what else he can do, and the SUV hits us from behind. Metal crushes metal, and my head snaps forward.

Dad jerks the wheel to the left, missing the SUV in front of us by inches as if we are playing chicken in the middle of the road.

I must have a death wish because here I go again, staring out the back, and this time, I see a man with a gun. He’s leaning out the window, gun aiming at us, and I scream when I hear the bullet pierce the air. The back tire blows, and Dad loses control of the car. It fishtails, swaying back and forth, then spins in the middle of the road before flying through the air.

I can’t hear anything other than my own scream. Time slows as the car flips. My hair sways, and my necklace hits my chin. My jacket floats from the floorboard to the roof, then back down again with each flip through the air.

The roof of the car hits the ground first, and glass shatters, the shards prickling along my skin. I close my eyes to protect them, feeling the glass skim against my lids. The car rolls, more metal crushing and scrapping against the ground until, eventually, we are sliding along the asphalt.

We’re upside down, and I’m able to see sparks from the metal of the roof flying outside the shattered window.

I’m going to die.

The pavement disappears as we slide against the grass, kicking up chunks of dirt. We slam against something, and my head smacks against the dented roof. My head spins, and my eyes droop. Blood is rushing to my face as I hang upside down, the seatbelt digging into my neck, shoulder, and chest.

I groan, unable to open my eyes all the way when I hear footsteps crunching against the glass outside.

Without question, without hesitation, they stop at the side of the car. A

man I don't recognize bends down and aims a gun at my father's head while another does the same to my mother. Small puffs of air sound next, their guns silenced as they shot my parents.

"Send proof," he says to another, just as I hear the sound of a picture being taken.

"What about the girl?" a voice asks sounding younger than the guy in charge.

"Leave her. Consider it a gift. I'm feeling gracious today."

Their voices seem far away, and something wet and warm drips down my face. My head sways, and it's becoming harder to breathe. Darkness comes and goes. I can't tell what is or isn't. I'm trying to focus on breathing, but everything about surviving seems difficult right now.

I turn my head, watching as the SUVs leave. I close my eyes, tired, wanting to rest for a minute.

Just a minute.

That's all I want.

I'm not sure how much time has passed, but I hear the rumble of another car. Opening my eyes again, I whimper and try to move, but I'm trapped.

They have come back to finish the job.

"Porter!" I recognize the voice. It's Benedetti.

More glass crunches and my eyes flutter, barely seeing a face come into view. He reaches inside, cutting the seatbelt, and catches me when I fall.

"I have you. You're okay. I'm so sorry," he whispers, laying me against the soft grass.

I smell smoke from the car and blood.

My blood.

"How's she looking?"

"Not good. At all," my handsome savior replies while holding me.

"Damn it. It's my fault. I should have—"

"There was nothing you could have done," the man holding me says. "It's too late now. All we can do is try to help her."

He pulls out a phone and places it to his ear. "There's been an accident. It's really bad. One person is alive." He rattles off an address, and the numbers fade in and out just as I go in and out of consciousness. "Hey, hey, stay awake. Help is on the way. Hold on for me, okay? Hold on." He brushes a piece of my hair out of the way which sparks a jolt across my skin. My eyes snap open, and I inhale a deep breath, my ribs burning from the attempt, and I

claw at his arm.

“You’re okay. Shhh, shhh, I have you.”

“Dri! We have to go.”

“I’ll go when I hear the siren,” my savior says.

“Who...are you?” I rasp, the dizziness taking hold of me.

“No one, sweetheart. I’m no one.”

“You saved me,” I say to him, licking my lips from how dry they are. “I can’t...my eyes...” I close them when it becomes too difficult to stay awake.

“No, no, no. Come on, sweetheart. Stay with me. You hear that? Help is on the way. The sirens are getting close. I’m sorry. I have to go. I have to...I’m sorry.”

I think his lips touch my cheek, but I can’t be sure since I can’t see him and can’t feel anything other than pain.

When he leaves, I’m left cold, and my injuries finally take me under.

And in darkness, I find peace.

It’s nice here.

I think I’ll stay.

Chapter One

Mable

Present day.

I'm staring at the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. It's much bigger than I thought it would be. After all these years, I'm surprised it's standing. It was built to withstand the test of time, and somehow, I relate to that. I have my entire life ahead of me, but I feel like I've been through hell and back. I'm tired of the hardships of life.

I know that's what everyone says. Life isn't meant to be fair, and it sure as hell isn't easy, but it's okay to admit when you're tired, right? I mean, eventually, after being beaten down so many times, I'm allowed to hope for a break?

That's why I'm here.

I needed to get away from the real world. I hadn't taken a day off from work in years. I've always been hard on myself. I push and push until I'm so exhausted that I sleep for fifteen hours straight. Nothing I ever do is good enough. I always need to be better, do more, and accomplish more work; and honestly, I'm tired of being like that. I don't like myself, and that bothers me.

So, I'm here to reset.

I'm here to take deep breaths in and out, in the gorgeous air of the two-tone green and blue sea. I'm here to experience new sights, new wine, food, and people.

Men, I don't know if I'm ready to sample what Greece has to offer in that department.

I'm twenty-eight years old and still a virgin and, like the other aspects of my life, I think I'm ready to change that. I've had opportunities, but I've never been so attracted toward someone that I felt like I had to get naked and roll around in the sheets with them.

I started to think something was wrong with me, being uninterested in every man who approached me. But now I'm refusing to be broken, and I'm refusing to let dark brown eyes haunt me. Not anymore. I can't be chained to someone who doesn't exist.

When my parents died, there are details I don't remember, but every night

since the accident, a pair of brown eyes infiltrates my dreams. I don't even know if they belong to a real person because I don't remember anything from that night. I was in the ICU for weeks, alone, having to plan my parents' funeral all by myself. I got their life insurance policies, but I didn't feel right spending the money, so it has been sitting in the bank ever since their deaths.

I caved in on myself. I built a wall. I didn't want anyone threatening to get too close, so I dove into work as a website designer. I worked every day, never took off for personal time, and never called in sick, and now after all these years of refusing to slow down I've realized how unhappy I am.

Yet anytime I try to move on and leave the past where it belongs, all my mind wants to focus on are depths of brown with flecks of gold.

Like right now, I'm standing in front of one of the most significant historical buildings in the world, and I feel...nothing.

Maybe I'd rather be on the beach and swimming in the sea. Maybe that would change my mindset.

Because honestly, what's it going to take to jumpstart my heart and kick the numbness away?

The wind picks up, the breeze drifting along my skin, and I sigh, closing my eyes as I revel in the fresh air.

My parents would want this for me. They would want me to live my life, not waste it away in some cubicle.

Well, I hope they would want that for me because my father wasted away in his office nearly all day every day.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and a shiver runs down my spine. That feeling of someone watching me has my instincts on alert. I turn around, my hair dancing in my face as another gust of wind blows. Tucking the wild strands behind my ear, I glance around, noticing other tourists stopping and staring at the giant building I traveled across the world to see.

I don't see anyone watching me.

"Excuse me."

I jump when a tall man blocks the sun, and I tilt my head to look up at him. He has blonde hair and blue eyes, very attractive, and I blush.

"Hi," I practically squeak.

"I was wondering, can you take a picture of my wife and me? It's our honeymoon and—"

"—Say no more," I cut him off and take his phone from him, swallowing the embarrassment in my throat. "I'd love to. Congratulations."

“Thank you so much. It’s been amazing,” he says with a big bright smile on his face. He wraps an arm around his new bride, and she’s stunning with long red hair and a dash of freckles on her face. They look happy, their smiling faces beaming back at me.

I can’t remember the last time I smiled like that.

They stand in front of the Parthenon, the huge columns towering over them even from so far away, the sun beaming at the perfect angle. Its rays make the glare in the photo intentional. I press the screen and take a few shots, then turn the phone horizontally, so they have multiple choices.

“Perfect. Here you go.” I give him his phone back, and they scroll through the pictures, big smiles on their faces as they see the photo.

“Thank you so much. I appreciate it. Do you want me to get a picture of you??” he asks.

“No, that’s okay. Thank you.” I leave them be and begin walking to the bus to go back to the hotel. The beach is sounding better and better as the day goes on.

Maybe tomorrow I’ll plan to go to Shipwreck Island. I’ve heard it is a must-see while visiting Greece.

I’m looking down, trying my best to get out of this stupid, self-pity funk I’m in and run smack into someone’s chest.

“Woah,” he says, grabbing my shoulders to stop me from falling over.

I grab onto his arm and my foot twists, but I right myself before I can cause any damage.

“Are you okay?” his voice dark, slightly annoyed, but somehow still kind.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t watching where I was going. That was all my fault.” I hold my hand above my eyes to block the sun, so I can see who I ran into when my breath catches. Dark hair and brown eyes, just like in my dreams, but these are different.

Something about them seems more sinister. They say the eyes are windows to the soul, but I don’t see a soul. I see curiosity and relief. It’s the look someone gets when they finally find the one thing they have been looking for, like a child in a candy store finding his favorite chocolate bar or a woman finding a spicy romance novel she’s been wanting that’s been out of stock.

Yeah, I’m very familiar with that look, and he has it written all over his face.

“It’s okay; I want to make sure you’re alright?” he asks, glancing away from me to look at the Parthenon.

Maybe the old building that's withstood the test of time is what he is after. That makes sense.

"I'm fine. Lost in my head. I'm sorry again."

"It's not a problem," he says, holding out his hand. "I'm Otello," he introduces himself.

"Mable." I shake his hand, and something flashes across his face, but it's gone before I can make anything of it.

"Mable. What an interesting name. Well, it's nice to meet you, Mable. I need to go. Have a great day."

"You too." I give an awkward wave and begin walking toward the bus again, my brows furrowing when I look over my shoulder to see Otello watching me.

An unsettling weight forms in my stomach, and I grip the straps of my drawstring backpack, shuffling my feet faster to get away from the coiling twist in my gut. When I get to the bus, the driver opens the door, and it folds to the side.

As I step on, the breeze across the back of my neck leaves an eerie trail behind. I grab the silver rail, and for one last time I look behind me, staring at the side of the Parthenon, the huge columns breaking the sun's rays. People mingle, all of them lifting their phones to grab the perfect image, but Otello isn't there.

He's gone.

I breathe easier, knowing my discomfort came from him, and while I don't know why, I don't need to know why. I need to listen to myself.

"You coming or going?" the driver asks, becoming impatient as I block the doorway.

"Sorry." I climb the steps and take a seat in the back. The red leather squeaks as I slide across it, and I sigh, leaning my head against the glass window.

My eyes close as I wait for everyone else to get onto the bus. I'm not sure how much time passes, but someone jostles my shoulder.

"Hey, sorry. We're back at the hotel now. I figured you'd want to know," a sweet older woman wearing a colorful blue shirt, pink pants, and a wide beach hat says with a wrinkly smile. "You must be so tired. You slept through the entire trip."

I rub my eyes and stare out the window, not remembering when we left the Parthenon. I stand, slipping my bag on my shoulder. "Thank you. I'm pretty

sure I would have been left here if you didn't wake me."

"I'd hate for you to end up somewhere you don't belong. Imagine being lost." She shakes her head which causes the sagging skin on her chin to shake. "Oh, I couldn't live with myself knowing that may have happened to you."

"Thank you," I say again, letting her walk in front of me.

I'm the last one to get off the bus, and the door nearly shuts against my backside. I'm exhausted and decide to take the day to catch up on sleep instead of going to the beach. Tomorrow I'll go, and I'll promise to put myself out there and meet someone.

That will be my goal for the day.

My phone rings as I walk into the front doors of the hotel, the gorgeous white stucco of the building reminding me of the beautiful country I'm in. I smile when I see it's my best friend calling me. Lilly wanted to come to Greece with me, but she couldn't get off work, which was fine because this was a trip I had to do on my own.

"Hello?" I answer, walking up the old, painted steps.

"I'm so jealous you're in Greece," she pouts. "Is it everything you thought it would be? How are the men? Have you found one yet?"

I unlock the door to my room and step inside, the view of the sea just outside the balcony. I love to sleep with the sliding doors open, so I can hear the waves.

"No, not yet. I'm still jet lagged. I'm actually in my room now. I'm going to take a nap."

"You're such a grandma. Fine. I love you. I want to know everything when it happens, and I want pictures of him. I need to approve."

I roll my eyes but smile at how nosey she is. "I promise. Love you too." I hang up first because if I don't, she'll talk for hours about nothing and everything.

I undress, putting on a comfortable plaid pajama set, and slide under the white fluffy comforter. Sighing when my head hits the pillow, my eyes close, and again, I'm bombarded with images of the man who pulled me out of my parents' car.

I can't see his face, but I feel him, and I wish I had known his name so I could have properly thanked him. With the comfort of brown irises playing in the forefront of my mind, I fall asleep, dreaming of a time when life wasn't so complicated.

A creak wakes me from my sleep, and I sit up, yawning from how tired I am still. The moonlight peeks into the room from the balcony while the breeze sways the curtains.

“Just the wind,” I say to myself, my eyelids heavy from how tired I am, but the urge to use the restroom makes me swing my legs over the bed.

I don’t bother flipping on the light. I stumble into a wall, disoriented from being half-asleep, and stub my toe on the corner. “Ow,” I grumble, limping the rest of the way to the bathroom.

I do my business and wash my hands, wiping them on a towel, when a hand covers my mouth.

“Don’t make a sound,” the man warns.

I ram my elbow into his gut which has him release me, groaning from the unexpected punch. I run out of the restroom and fumble with the lock on the front door. The stupid chain. Why did I latch it?

“Damn it. You don’t understand. I’m doing you a favor,” he says, pinning me against the door and something pricks my skin. “You’re okay. Just know you’re safe.” He tries to wrap his arms around me again, but I dip below his arms. He turns around and without hesitation, I punch him across the face.

“Fuck!” he yells. “Why did you go and do that? You’re safe! I’m not going to hurt you.”

I run by him and he snags me by the arm and I slam my head back, smashing my skull against his face.

“Hey, you’re really hurting me here. I’m not going to hurt you. You’re safe, Mable. Safe,” he repeats as if I’ve known him forever.

Safe.

Nothing about this feels safe, but everything about the voice sounds familiar, and there’s nothing I can do about it because whatever he injected me with makes me fall limps in his arms.

I’m at his mercy.

And I get the feeling that no one can save me now.

Chapter Two

Adrian

“I don’t know where he is,” I snap at my father. “I’m not his keeper. He’s a grown man. He can do what he wants. I’m tired of having to chase after him. He’ll come back. He always does.” I rub my forehead as my father curses in Italian before hanging up on me.

Being the one to take over the Benedetti name doesn’t come with fucking flowers; it only comes with headaches the size of mountains. And to make matters worse, I have to get married. According to the old family rules that have been followed for generations, I have to get married by the time I’m forty-one, or the title will fall to the next in line.

My younger brother.

And that cannot happen. I’m constantly bailing him out of jail or bad situations he finds himself in. He hasn’t grown up. He lives life on the whim, consequences be damned. He doesn’t want the responsibility of looking after fifty-plus men. He doesn’t want to keep order. If Otello had his way, he’d toss the rules out the window, let everyone do what they want, and cause havoc.

It would only be a matter of time before all of us got arrested for crimes we’ve committed if Otello were in charge.

Benedettis have always been ruthless. We don’t play by laws or rules. We make our own. If someone crosses us, they die. That’s how it’s always been, and that’s how it will always be.

But I hate this rule of needing to get married. I don’t want to marry a woman I can’t stand. I only have one woman in mind, and I’ve spent years obsessing over her. My heart is hers. No one else will ever compare. The brief moment I had with her all those years ago is better than any moment I’ve had with the women in my life.

I’m infatuated with someone I don’t even know, but I don’t deserve her. Her parents are dead because of me and my family.

I dab a bit of white paint onto the canvas to give the illusion of light hitting her lips and take a step back to admire my new painting of her.

“So fucking beautiful, Mable,” I speak to the painting, wishing the woman on the canvas came to life. I’d give anything to hold her in my arms and to

give her the world, but life isn't fair.

And Mable knows all about that.

I set my paintbrush down and look around the room no one has been in but me. My obsession with her has taken over my life. I've painted her thousands of times in thousands of different ways. I've painted her naked, imagining what her body would look like laid out on the bed, her long hair spanned along the white pillowcases.

I've envisioned it so many times; there are days when I'm not sure if seeing her naked hasn't happened. I've nearly convinced myself that she is mine and mine only.

I sculpted her body from clay, needing to see how her body would look in my hands. I've imagined her breasts to be a perfect size, just enough to fill my palm, so none goes to waste. Her waist has a dip, but she isn't too thin. She has enough for me to hold onto and grip while I thrust in as far as I can and fill her until she drips off me.

There are even sculptures of us together, body against body, lips against lips, and it still isn't enough. It's like I'm trying to bring her to life so I can truly have her.

It's insane.

I'm insane.

And if I marry someone else, how will I be able to get out my pent-up lust, wants, and needs for Mable? That is what this room is for. It's my escape. Drawing, painting, sculpting, it's the time I have to create with her.

Every second I spend with my new wife, I'll want to be in my studio, painting and creating images of the woman who owns my soul.

I imagined that when I became a husband, I'd be devoted and loyal, but pulling Mable out of that car changed my entire future.

I can't be loyal to another woman. I won't want her, not like this, not obsessively. I find myself never wanting to leave this room. Being surrounded by her is all I want, or maybe the guilt has been eating me alive after so much time. All I want to do is take care of her.

Would she forgive me if she knew the truth?

I get lost imagining our lives together, the children we would have, the way I'd fuck her against every surface of this mansion where she'd scream my name, and it would echo down all the halls.

My phone rings, pulling me out of my fantasies. "What?" I snap, frustrated that I can never seem to be alone with Mable.

“If you’re late to your own party, I’ll give the title to your brother anyway. Victoria, the Rossiti girl, is here with her parents. I like them. You’ll meet her tonight.”

“I don’t understand the meaning of this. I don’t need to be married to take over the business,” I sneer, wishing I could use my authority to make my father heel, but I can’t.

He’s a patriarch. He’s highly respected in this world. His word is the only word that matters because he spent thirty years building the Benedetti name.

“You can’t. You need balance. You’ll need the softness and intelligence of a woman. You won’t be able to make decisions without her.”

“That requires trust, and I don’t trust Victoria.”

“Trust is earned. It isn’t automatic. You won’t embarrass me.” He hangs up on me again, and I squeeze my phone in frustration until the plastic creaks.

I snort. “Right, I’d embarrass you,” I mumble, thinking that if it were my brother in charge he wouldn’t even show up to this party.

Stealing one last look at the colorful painting of Mable, I unzip the overalls and step out of them; my tux is pristine under the paint-covered fabric. I hang them on a hook, knowing I’ll be back in here tomorrow.

There’s no way I’m leaving the party tonight with another woman.

Have I looked for Mable? No.

I’ve had to restrain myself because if I ever found her, I would take her away from everything she’s ever known, and I’ve already done that once. I already took everything she cared about. How could I do that again?

I open the heavy wooden door, the black iron hinges squeak with old age, and classical music floats up the stairs from the ballroom. My hand falls on the sculpture next to the door, a hand-carved replica of Mable’s face. My thumb presses against her lower lip, and as I step out the door, my fingers slowly fall from her face.

Shutting the secrecy and the madness behind me, I leave part of myself there as I stroll down the stone steps. My hand slides down the rail, and the violins become louder, grating my ears. Impatience begins to grow. The murmur of a hundred conversations echoes down the hall from the ballroom.

The last thing I want is to put on a fake smile and pretend I give a fuck about any of these people. All they want is to show off their beautiful daughters in hopes they will be tied to the Benedetti family. We’re wealth and power. We’re everything people want and often never get. If one of their

daughters marries into the family, they will be taken care of forever.

Who wouldn't want that?

I walk in through the French doors; the oversized brick fireplace in the back of the room is lit up, flames licking the bottom of the chimney. The conversation stops as every man, wife, and daughter turns to look at me. It takes everything inside me not to curl my lip in frustration.

I hate desperation, and in this room it's nearly suffocating.

"Mr. Benedetti," the caterer greets me, holding a silver platter of flutes topped off with champagne and slices of strawberry.

"Thank you." I snag one from the stem and take a sip just as my father slithers his way through the crowd.

"Nice of you to join us, Dri," he says, the Rossitis flanking either side of him.

"I was busy," I state, thinking about the drying canvas still sitting on the easel.

"That's okay," Victoria steps up, her voice just high enough to get on my nerves. "I'd love to know what you were doing. I don't like parties like this either. I always have a headache at the end of the night."

"Don't tell him that, Victoria. We don't want him to think you're no fun." Her mother awkwardly fidgets with the pearl necklace around Victoria's neck to make sure it's lying perfectly.

"It's really no issue." I down half of my champagne, and my father's jaw sets, his teeth grinding together.

"If you'll excuse us for one moment. We will be right back." He grabs my shoulder, squeezing hard as he pushes me through the crowd.

For a man in his seventies, he's still in great shape. He doesn't look his age, so he thinks he can still control me.

We get out of sight; I grip his arm and twist it behind his back, throwing him against the wall until he can't move. "Listen to me, Father," I sneer the word because I'm tired of these games. "You do not control me. I am in charge. I am the one who makes the decisions now. Not you. You will not force me to do anything, and I sure as fuck don't want anything to do with that Rossiti girl. You'll wait until I'm happy, or you'll get the hell out of my house." I add more pressure to his arm, and he grunts, giving a slight nod of his chin.

I let him go and take a step back, rolling my shoulders to calm down.

"I didn't think you had it in you, to be honest," he says, rubbing his arm.

“But you do have to marry, and you don’t have long, so I suggest you make the best of this party.” He tugs on the lapels of his tux but stands in front of me, his hand cupping my jaw with a hard slap. “I’m proud of you for standing your ground, but rules are rules, son. Pick someone to marry tonight, or I’ll call your brother.”

“You must not care about the family name at all if you want the torch to go to him.” Before my father can say another word, I’m walking away, plastering a smile on my face as I survey the room for a potential match.

I feel like I’m a predator, and all the women here are prey. What kind of person hosts a party like this?

“Adrian,” a smooth, elegant voice stops me in my tracks.

“Daphne,” I greet the gorgeous redhead, kissing her on the cheek. “How are you?”

“I should ask the same,” she smirks, her red-painted lips leaving a trace of gloss behind on her flute. “You hate things like this.”

“I do, but it comes with the job. You wouldn’t want to go into an agreement, would you? We marry, you can still do what you want, and I can do what I want.” I don’t know why I didn’t think of it earlier. Daphne is the perfect woman for this. She isn’t interested in me. She doesn’t want to be tied down. She’s too dominant for that. She is actually a Madame at a local BDSM club. “No harm, no foul, what do you say?”

She purses her lips, and her big, blue eyes with a thick coating of black mascara narrow at me. Her nails clank against the champagne flute as she thinks. “Why? You have all these available women at your disposal, Adrian.”

“I don’t want any of the women here.” Why would I want someone I don’t trust? Daphne isn’t from a prominent family. She’s successful on her own and she’s helped so many by forging illegal documents to get others out of the country, for their safety. She has reach in high places that I don’t understand, but together, we could make an amazing team.

But only a team. Nothing more. Nothing less.

“But there is someone,” she prods, taking a step closer. “Dance with me and tell me all about her.”

I’ve never told a soul about Mable. “Do we have a deal? As my future wife, you can know anything you want.”

She sighs, holding out her hand as she waits for me to take it. “Dance with a lady first, Adrian.”

I smirk, gently taking her hand in mine, then bend down to kiss the top of

it. Her skin is soft and flawless, but I know she holds a whip at night. These hands have dirty sins attached to them, and they aren't as clean as they appear to be. "Yes, Madame," I tease, and she lifts her brows at me, a smile tugging her lips.

"Are you sure you don't want to come down to the club? You'd make a great dominant."

"It's not my thing, Daphne, you know that."

"But whips and chains are so fun," she purrs, her nails tickling the back of my neck as we dance in front of the fireplace.

My father stares at us from beside the fireplace. He leans against the brick, and the flames illuminate his face, worshipping him as if he is the devil himself.

Hell, if he had it his way, he would be.

"So, tell me about this woman. She must be pretty special to capture the attention of Adrian Benedetti."

"I haven't seen her in a long time, but she's always held my attention." I'm careful not to lie, but I choose to not tell the truth.

That I'm obsessed with a woman I held in my arms for less than ten minutes. I'm unbothered even now, dancing with Daphne, my arm around her waist, and the natural seduction that pours off her in waves.

I do not want her.

"She beautiful. Her hair is long—" or it was. I'd be devastated if she cut it. "And her eyes are big with long lashes. She doesn't wear makeup, and she has a dash of freckles on her nose." I remember them as if it were yesterday. I've dreamed of every curve and line of her face. I know where every freckle is and how badly I want to kiss them.

"Well, Mr. Benedetti, you sound entranced. Why not ask her to marry you? You don't need all this, and why would we tie the knot when we both know marriage isn't something we want together? You're handsome, baby, but it wouldn't work between us." She taps my cheek lovingly.

I smile, spinning her on the floor, and it causes everyone to gasp. "That is why. If I want to keep my position, I have to marry, and I'd rather marry someone I trust. I can't ask her because I don't know where she is."

Daphne squints her eyes at me, knowing I'm not telling her something but ignores it. "We don't have to do any of the married couple activities. You aren't my type, sugar."

I snort, shaking my head. The only woman I want sexually is Mable. "No,

we don't even have to sleep in the same room. This can be business. Nothing more."

"But I have to think of my work. I might lose some clients. I don't know," she exhales, stepping away from me as the song ends.

"I'll pay what you lose, but I doubt you will. I bet people will pay more to be with you knowing you're married to such a powerful man. How forbidden is that? Don't your clients like that?"

She taps her chin with her finger, giving me a thoughtful appraisal. "Yes, they do." She snags another glass of champagne. "I don't wear rings, baby. I want a necklace. I need my fingers to always be free."

My heart soars with the hope that she's actually considering this. This would be the ideal situation. "And you wouldn't care that I'd hide away in my studio? Kill...mangle...whatever I need to do?"

"Honey, I wouldn't care if you fucked another in front of me. That actually might be kind of hot."

I chuckle at her honesty. She wouldn't have sex with me, but she'd watch me have sex with someone else; typical.

"No one will see my partner. I'll have to kill you, Daphne."

"Aw, you're no fun. How is this marriage going to work?" She winks, teasing me, but Daphne lets out a long, weighted breath. The kind that tells me she can't believe what she may agree to. "Okay, I'll do this for you, but only because I love you and consider you my friend."

I cup her face gently, relief unlike anything else I've ever felt before, then embrace her in my arms. "Thank you. I swear, I'll be the worst husband in the world to you."

"I sure hope so, Dri. I'll be in touch." It's a deal, or should I say, match made in heaven.

Chapter Three

Mable

My head smacks against something hard and unforgiving, waking me from a deep sleep. My eyes open to darkness, and a headache pounds at the base of my skull. My head sways, rolling back and forth across the coarse carpet.

I try to move my hands next, but something binds my wrists together. The material is rough, and as it rubs against my skin there's a slight burn. I think it's rope. Next, I try my feet, but my ankles are tied too.

Don't panic. Don't panic. Oh my God, I've been kidnapped. Okay, be smart. Everything will be okay.

I have to continue to tell myself that. If I don't, I'll get lost in fear, and I can't do that. I have to survive this.

The gag in my mouth tastes horrible. It's wet from my spit. I try to push the gag out with my tongue, but it's tied too tight. Tears spring to my eyes, and that fear begins to sink in, wrapping around reality.

What if I'm going to be sold?

The thought has my mind racing with horrible possibilities. What if I'm not even in Greece anymore? What if I'm on my way to a human meat market, or I'm getting sold to the highest bidder? What if I'm forced into prostitution and become addicted to drugs?

I had read the statistics of kidnapping and what could happen while I was redesigning the website for the police department. That horrifying information seared itself into my brain, and every so often I think about it.

Now all I can think about is where I'm going and if there will be horrors waiting for me. Will I be sleeping on a dirty floor? Will I be abused?

This is not how I pictured losing my virginity. I waited all this time for nothing. I should have gotten it over with. I'll probably be sold for top dollar. Men like virgins, right?

My entire body begins to shake from adrenaline and shock. I feel like I'm going to wake up from a bad dream. It has to be a dream. This doesn't happen to people like me. I stay to myself. I'm introverted. I barely have friends. I only have Lilly. I don't talk to anyone at work, and I don't have any family.

Shit.

That makes me the perfect target because no one would miss me. I mean, Lilly would, but she's only one person. I'm no one important to the community. I don't come from a family of money or status. I'm just Mable, who works at a design company in my own little cubical where I don't bother anybody.

The car comes to a stop; at least, I'm assuming it's a car by the sound of the brakes and the small dark space I'm in—a trunk. I should call it what it is.

I wiggle back as far as I can, and the trunk opens, allowing cool air into the heated, humid space.

"Mable, are you okay?" he asks, bending down and sliding his arms under me.

I scream behind the gag, flopping my legs like a mermaid to escape him. I have to fight even if it means I'm left on the side of the road, bound and gagged.

He tosses me over his shoulder, and I lift my arms, then hit my fists against his back as hard as I can.

"Ow, stop. Stop! That hurts. Why are you doing that? You're okay. I am not going to hurt you. I know it's a little extreme, but I promise you're going to be happy."

Oh my God, he's a psychopath.

I continue to fight him, slamming my elbow against the soft spot of his shoulder blade and spine.

"Fuck!" he roars. "Will you please give it a rest? That fucking hurt. I'm sorry it's come to this, but I didn't know another way to bring you here. No matter what I did, you would have fought me like you are now. But please, if you can, leave the part out where I drugged you when you talk to my brother, that would be great. He would be pissed if anything happened to you."

I mumble behind my gag, making sure to try to yell certain words in hopes he will understand, then hit him in the back again.

"Listen, I know this isn't conventional. You have every right to be upset with me, but name-calling is not necessary."

Grumbling again, I run out of steam, the drug in my system is causing me to lose energy fast. My head sways, and I let my cheek rest against this stranger's back.

"I hope one day you can forgive me—"

I snort loud enough for him to hear.

"—I'm not a bad guy."

I can't help it. I snort again, then try to speak, but it comes out in weak syllables.

"I know I kidnapped you!" he argues with me, somehow able to understand what I'm saying behind this damn gag.

I grumble again.

"And stop throwing it in my face that I drugged you. I had to. You would have screamed."

"Mmhm!" I yell as loud as I can behind the gag.

"I didn't want you to scream. It would have alerted people."

No shit.

That's the point.

"And you don't understand. I had to do this. My brother is in a tough spot. He is in charge of the family business now, and he is being forced to marry someone he doesn't want to, but I can't have that happen. I can't say anymore but know he is going to be so happy to see you. You guys know each other from...a few years back."

For a kidnapper, I suppose this guy could be worse. He's a little quirky and definitely a little unhinged, but not so scary now that he isn't drugging me in the hotel room, gagging me, or throwing me in the trunk.

We have to look at the positive side of things, right?

No! What? No. I can't fall for his insanity. He fucking kidnapped me. He isn't nice. He is a psychopath who probably does this shit all the time. I bet he picks up the girls, and his brother is the one who kills them.

I look down at the stone walkway, then look left and right, noticing a well-kept lawn. There's an iron fence surrounding the property, and I think I see a bench in front of a fountain, but it's more of a shadow right now, and I can't tell.

"I'm sorry, okay? For causing you fear, drugging you, and throwing you in the trunk. I didn't know what else to do, and I felt like I had no options, but I promise, you're safe here."

The terror causing my body to tremble says otherwise.

The sound of keys jingle, then a lock slides, and he must take a step because I'm higher off the ground for a second. He swings me from his shoulder and into his arms in a bridal-style hold, and I'm looking up at him for the first time. I'm able to truly see his face now that we're in the light.

He's the man I spoke to at the Parthenon.

He was the one watching me.

I can't speak still from being gagged, and I try to mutter something for him to understand.

"I'm sorry, what?" he asks, carrying me down the hall.

I roll my eyes. "Ne-er-mi-d," I manage to say, something somewhat understandable.

"So this is the estate. It's a giant waste of space with a hundred rooms and hallways you'll get lost in."

I look around, and I'm impressed with the tall ceilings and huge oak beams. The walls are painted gray, and I hear music as he goes up the steps.

"That's the party I was telling you about. Adrian hates them, so he won't be in the best mood." He stops at the door leading to the party's floor. "You know, I think I'll wait to take you to him. Want any food or something to drink? I'll put you in my room but promise me you won't try anything."

I give him a look, reminding him with narrow eyes that I can't go anywhere.

"Right. I'm sorry about that. I don't trust you not to try something, though."

Good, because I don't care what it takes, I'll try everything I can to get out of here. I might not have anyone who loves me, but I love myself enough to not go down without a fight.

Chapter Four

Adrian

“We’ll talk soon, Daphne. And when we do, I’ll bring you a necklace a Madame could only dream of.” I help her put on her leather jacket, knowing everything about this agreement is wrong, but it’s the only choice I have in order to keep my obsession.

And I’ll do anything to keep the one thing I need most in this world.

I open the front door for my fiancée, and she turns around, pressing her hand against my chest. “We’ve known each other for a long time, Dri. Too long, which means I know when you’re hiding something from me. You don’t want this, Adrian. You’re really going to sacrifice your own happiness? Why not go find her? Have the life you want?”

“Because I ruined her life, Daphne. I don’t deserve the life I want. I’ll call you, okay? Thank you for doing this.” I wrap her in a tight hug and then pull away.

“Goodnight, Dri.” She sounds exasperated, but she gives me a pity-filled, tight smile, giving my forearm one last squeeze before she leaves. Her heels click against the stone, and I wish she were the type of woman I could fall in love with, but only one woman like that exists.

I slam the door and lean my forehead against it, roughly jerking the bowtie from around my neck, then undoing the button from my shirt so I can breathe.

“I’m proud of you. Daphne is a great choice.”

“Don’t act like you give a damn about anything other than yourself.” I push off the door and climb up the wide, spiraling marble staircase.

“I do care, Dri. It’s why I’ve been on you about this because this job is dangerous.” He climbs the first two steps, and I glance down, tired and annoyed. “This job takes from you. This job is cruel and dark, and twisted. We like this job. We are good at it, but that doesn’t mean it’s always easy. Being a Benedetti is trying, Dri. You will question yourself, and you will be angry more times than not. That rule to marry is essential for your sanity because there will be times, days, weeks, where you are covered in blood, and you will kill many men—.”

“—I’ve killed plenty of men.” I step down, so we are at eye level. “I have

ruined so many lives for this family. I have washed my hands of blood more times than I can count. Do not patronize me. Do not think I do not know what it takes to do this when I've been doing this. I have killed, I have fought, I have dealt your drugs and weapons, and I have claimed more territory for us. I have gone to bed alone and started each day alone. You're acting like I'm my brother, but remember who told you about Porter's location when they were on the run from the hitman Leonardo hired."

"I thought we had more time," my father argues, looking away from me as he swallows.

"We waited too long. And now I have to live with the guilt of our faults." I climb up the steps again, feeling more stressed out than I have in years.

"We didn't kill them, Dri. You need to stop blaming me for that. Stop blaming yourself."

I spin around and climb down the steps to stand in front of his face. "And let's not forget, none of it would have happened if you didn't let a good family get pulled in by you."

"He was the best lawyer! We needed him, Dri. You're acting like a child."

"We took someone's family away. We might not have pulled the trigger, but we were pulling the strings. If he never met us, he never would have gotten Ricki off and Leonardo never would have gone to jail. It's a circle. She's alone. We left a young girl alone. How can you sleep at night?"

"Because I have someone to help me carry my responsibilities. That's why you need to get married more than I did. You're tougher than I am, but you're softer when you let your guard down. You are built for this life, but there will be days when you aren't. Just like that day with Mr. Porter. You won't thank me now, but you will later."

My father is a good man, but he and I have always had the kind of relationship that's tense. I think it's because I was molded to take over the head of the Benedetti mafia since I was a child. I was raised to be cold, uncaring, and brutal.

And if there's one thing I won't do, it's admit when my father is right. Admitting that means I'm weak. That's what I was taught.

I'm already tired of the loneliness this job brings. I'm ready to come home at night and lay my head down, pulling my woman close, so she can take all the stress away from me.

Only one woman would ever do.

I stop outside my studio door, and I fight to slide the key in the lock to take

one last look at her beautiful face, but I brush my hand down the wood instead, taking a left down the hallway where I have the entire wing to myself.

A light rain begins to fall, and the large, stained-glass windows reflect different shades of shadows from the rain.

“Dri.”

In a blink, I lift my gun from my waistband and point it toward the voice.

“Jesus, you’re wound tight. It’s me, Otello.” My brother steps from the shadows and turns on the light overlooking the bar.

Thunder rolls outside, and I sigh in relief, shoulders sagging as I tuck the gun back inside. “Otello, what the fuck? It’s midnight. Where have you been?”

“Sooo, promise you won’t be mad?” he says, placing a scotch glass against the handmade wooden slate and then pouring himself a bourbon.

An entire glass. Filled to the brim.

I begin to unbutton my shirt, my head throbbing. “When you say that, it means I’m going to be mad. What did you do now? Rob a bank? Steal from a rival? Who?”

“No and no.” He places his elbows on the counter, sipping his drink. “But promise.”

“What are we, twelve? No, I’m not promising. I just had to pick a wife. It’s Daphne, by the way. So, I’m not really in the mood.”

He spews his drink, and it sprays all over my face. “You can’t marry her! She’s awesome, but you can’t marry her.”

“Try telling father that.” I grab a napkin and wipe my face.

“No, you literally can’t marry her, Dri. I have a surprise for you, but remember, you can’t be mad,” he winces when something from my bedroom thumps against the floor.

I straighten, tossing the napkin on the bar top. “What did you do, Otello?” I chastise him as if he were a child or a dog that peed on the floor.

“So hear me out—” he cringes when something shatters next, which sounds expensive.

“I swear, if it’s a fucking cat, you know I don’t like cats, but you would bring one home thinking I’d love it anyway.”

“It’s not a cat.” He stands in front of me and holds his hands up to stop me from entering my bedroom. “I just want you to keep an open mind, okay? I know more about you than you think. You think you’re so closed off, but

you're not. I've known the one thing you've always wanted, the one thing you've always craved and dreamed about. I wanted you to be happy."

I shove my brother out of my way and prepare myself to see an animal of some sort. It wouldn't be the first time he brought home a stray animal. He once left a rabid raccoon in my room because he thought it needed a home.

When I open the door, everything around me fades. My brother doesn't exist. The fifty-thousand-dollar vase lying in pieces on the floor doesn't matter.

It's the woman who is bound and gagged, bleeding on the broken glass shards, and she's crying.

Mable.

Chapter Five

Mable

I'm on the floor, hands still tied, gagged, rolling over the glass that I didn't mean to break. I knew I shouldn't have tried to get out of bed, but what other choice did I have? I was in a room alone, and even with my ankles and wrists bound, I had to try to escape.

I failed.

Because I couldn't hop across the floor to get to the window, and how would I open it? Instead, I hopped, slammed my hip against the nightstand, shattered a gorgeous vase, lost my balance, and fell.

Now, I'm stuck.

My skin is cut since I'm lying on broken glass from the vase. I try to stay still so the shards won't prick my skin, but not moving hurts too. Every piece seems to cut deeper. A whimper escapes me, and my eyes begin to burn from the tears, the pain, the stress of this entire situation, and I don't know if I can take it anymore.

The door opens, and my eyes slide to see if Otello is standing there so he can help me up. He's so odd, but he could be way worse for a kidnapper. He didn't break the vase and make me fall on the floor. I did that.

But I wouldn't have if I wasn't bound and gagged like a stuffed pig.

I freeze when I see Otello standing next to someone else, someone older, more refined, and more in control.

He runs over to me, kicking the sharp pieces of broken glass out of the way. He squats down, a look of pure horror on his face, and slides his arms around me.

I whimper from the cuts on my arms and legs.

"I know. I have you. You're okay. I promise," he says gently, laying me on the bed. He curls over me, pushing my hair back as if he's trying to get a good look, and that's when I see his eyes.

I've seen them before. They are the brown eyes I can't get out of my head.

He turns his head away from me, giving me the sharp edge of his jaw.

"What the hell did you do, Otello? She's hurt." He charges Otello and slams him against the wall. "What the fuck did you do to Mable?"

He knows my name. How does this man know me?

“I didn’t hurt her. She did that to herself, Dri.”

Dri. I’ve heard that before. It’s tickling the back of my mind, reminding me of a memory that’s been in the dark for far too long. I can’t recall it. It’s in the shadows of my mind.

“You fucking tied her hands and legs. She can’t walk. She’s scared. You did this. Get the fuck out.”

“I did you a favor! I saw your little room, Dri. The one no one is allowed to see. I know how much you’ve wanted—”

I gasp when Dri punches Otello. A droplet of blood flows down his lip.

“Get out,” Dri seethes, swinging the bedroom door open for Otello to leave.

Otello looks back at me and frowns. “I’m sorry, Mable.” He walks out of the room, stops in the middle of the doorway, and turns his head slightly.

“You’ll thank me later, Dri.” And then strolls away.

“Don’t count on it.” Dri slams the door and then runs over to me again. “I’m so sorry for my brother.” He goes to untie my wrists, and I pull away from him, a scared whimper leaving me. “You don’t have to be afraid, Mable. I would never hurt you. I would never...” he swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and a ragged breath escapes him. “You will never have to worry about me hurting you. My brother is...different. He means well, but he doesn’t go about it the right way. Let me get the shards of the vase from your skin. A few look like they hurt.”

I nod, a tear escaping down my cheek.

He brushes it away, his brows dipping with concern, and he cups my cheek. “I promise, I swear on my life, I will not hurt you. Let me help, Mable.” He reaches for the gag that’s been silencing me for hours, and I jerk away from him on instinct. “It’s okay,” he reassures again. His calloused fingertips awaken the nerves in my skin, and I relax for some reason, being immediately drawn to this man.

And that scares the hell out of me.

He tosses the gag to the side, and I lick my lips for the first time in hours. I’m so thirsty.

“You poor thing. Your skin is so red. My sweet angel,” his touch is a feather across my skin, and I wince. “I know, it’s raw. I’m so sorry about my brother. I could kill him for doing this to you.”

“For kidnapers, he could have been a lot worse,” I manage to say, my voice hoarse.

“Would you like some water?”

I nod my head, trying to remain calm and collected while I try to figure out how I know this man and how I can escape.

“I’m going to go grab water and some bandages, okay? I’ll be right back. Don’t move. Well, you know what I mean.”

I snort, lifting my wrists to show I can’t really go anywhere anyway.

I stare up at the ceiling, watching the fan blades spin and spin, blurring together with a force I wish I had at this moment. The breeze feels good against my feverish skin, drying the sweat until I feel sticky. I’d like to shower and put on a clean pair of clothes. I hear him rummaging around in his bathroom, and I’m left wondering why the hell I’m here and how he knows me or what he wants with me.

He knows my name, but I don’t know this man. I have never met him, and I’d remember a face as beautiful as his. It’s one that isn’t easily forgotten. He’s all sharp edges, intense gazes, stubble on his cheeks, and muscular arms under his tailored shirt. His espresso-brown hair is almost black, but I notice the depth of the warm hues throughout the styled strands in the light.

I shouldn’t notice such things about my kidnapper’s brother, but even tied like a pig, I suppose it’s hard to ignore when someone is absolutely breathtaking.

My attention floats to the bedroom door, and I want to try to get up again, but it’s pointless. I can’t walk like this. All I have to do is give it time. Dri seems to be a little more level-headed, still kind, but not as careless as his brother. Maybe if I talk to him, he will let me go home.

“Okay, this isn’t going to be fun. It will hurt, but I’ll try to make it as quick and painless as possible.” He sets the first-aid kit on the bed, then opens the door to the mini fridge across from the foot of the bed, snagging a bottle of water. He smiles; well, it’s more like a sexy smirk as he walks over to the side of the bed. He unscrews the cap, and the crack of the plastic breaking causes me to flinch.

I imagine this guy breaking my bones for a split second, and new fear has my heart rate kicking up a notch.

“I won’t hurt you, Mable. You have never been safer, and I promise you that.” The bed dips when he sits down next to me, and his thumb slides under my chin. “Open,” he says.

I roll my lips together instead.

He lifts a groomed brow, amused by my antics. “You think I’d poison you

only when I've just got you? Silly, girl." He lifts the bottle to his mouth and takes a long swig. My dumb brain forgets where we are for a moment, and I watch as his throat moves up and down. He licks his lips, but they are still wet from the water. "See? It's safe."

I open my mouth, lifting my head and dying for something to drink. He bends down, cups my head with his large palm, and holds me closer to him. He presses the bottle against my lips, and I whimper when he tilts it.

"Careful," he warns just as the cold water hits the back of my throat.

I chug it, but some runs out of the side of my lips. I don't care. I drink it greedily as if I haven't had a drink in days. It feels like days...hell, weeks.

He pulls the water away, and I can take a breath.

"Slow down, or you'll drink too much too fast and get sick."

I don't say anything but nod my head to acknowledge I heard him. He lifts the bottle to my lips again, and I try to drink it slower. The plastic crinkles the emptier the bottle becomes, and when I've consumed every drop, it tosses it to the side.

"Better?"

I nod my head, lying back down on the bed, sighing. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He opens the nightstand and grabs something that fits in the palm of his hand. With a flick of his wrist, a blade slashes through the air, and the shine of the light reflects from the silver.

A scream rips through me, and I roll away from him, falling right off the bed with a hard thump. My shoulder screams since it hits first. The shards of the damn vase impale in my skin dig deeper from hitting the floor, and I cry out again.

"Mable!" Dri runs around the bed and is at my side instantly.

"Don't hurt me, please," I beg him, letting the tears I've been holding back fall free. "Please. I just want to go home. Please." I can't seem to stop begging. "I just want to go home. Can I go home?"

His arms are under me, lifting me from the floor and onto the bed again. I hiss when his hand drifts over my shoulder, and a flash of anger drifts over his eyes.

"Why would you do that? Why would you hurt yourself?"

"You have a knife! How was I supposed to react?" I scream at him, turning my head away as I cry. I squeeze my eyes shut and think about my best friend, the only person in the world who cares about me. She will come for me. She will figure out something is wrong when I don't call her.

His hands are on my cheeks, his thumb rubbing against my bottom lip as he turns my head. “Look at me, Mable.”

I shake my head, squeezing my eyes shut as tightly as possible. This is all a bad dream. It has to be.

“Look. At. Me,” he repeats.

I open my eyes, and he is holding the knife again. I whimper, trying to wiggle away from him, but he holds me down, slicing through the ropes around my wrist. “That’s all I wanted to do. That’s it. You aren’t a prisoner here.”

I don’t believe that for a second.

He examines the burns around my wrists, the marks irritated and red from pulling against the restraints. “I’m going to kill my brother for doing this to you.” He slices through the ropes binding my ankles next, and he rotates each foot in a circle, and it relieves some of the aches from being tied for so long.

I groan because it feels so good, and Dri inhales, staring at me with dark, stormy eyes. He clears his throat and gently places my foot down on the bed.

“I never would have dreamed of doing this to you, Mable. Will you let me help you with your wounds or are you going to fight me?” he asks, sliding his palm up my leg.

I’m not sure if he knows he is doing it, but I don’t like how the touch of his calloused skin against mine causes my breath to catch.

“I don’t have the energy to fight you,” I reply honestly, my voice hoarse with exhaustion.

“Yes, you do,” he says, opening the first-aid kit. “You’re stronger than you realize. You don’t give up easily.”

“You act as if you know me,” I say, hissing when he takes the tweezers he has pulled from the first-aid kit and plucks a small piece of the vase from my skin.

He drops the sliver on a piece of gauze and hums but doesn’t look at me as he continues to tend to my wounds.

I’m not sure why his silence is grating, but there’s no doubt he and I know each other. His eyes don’t lie. I know this man.

And no matter how much he tries to make me feel safe and no matter how hard he causes my heart to beat, nothing in this world could ever make me stay here.

“You know, people will look for me. I have people who care about me. People who love me, even my husband.”

He plucks a piece of the vase out of my arm with more force than usual. “Don’t test me, Mable. I’m not the man you need to try to anger right now. I am in charge. I have the power. I know for a fact you don’t have a husband.”

“How? Because I do. I can tell you anything you want to know about him.”

Dri curls his lip but doesn’t say a word, but I can tell he is seething. He is still gentle with me, dabbing each small cut with alcohol before slathering antibiotic cream over each one, then a band-aid.

“He’ll miss me. I check in every night with him, and he is going to turn this world upside down for me. And you and your brother are going to be screwed.”

Dri stands quickly, tossing the tweezers across the room. They hit the wall before clattering to the floor. Like a madman, he runs his fingers through his hair, and the dark strands hang to the side of his face. He places each hand on either side of my head, lowering his head until his mouth is just an inch away from mine.

“I don’t care if you are married and have a family, Mable. You’re mine now.” He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear, and his hand falls to my throat, lightly wrapping around it. “You’ve been mine for a very long time, and it’s fate that you’re here. Keep testing me, Sweetness, and you will fail. I might be kinder than my brother, but when it comes to you, I have no limits on what I will do and who I will kill. You have fallen into my lap, and I will not let you go.” He presses a kiss to my cheek, and my body betrays me. The nerve endings in my skin come alive and fire back and forth.

Whatever the connection is between us, it’s simmering, and I can’t allow it to boil over.

He pushes from the bed and stalks to the door, slamming it behind him as he leaves.

I hear the lock click in place, and I know I’m trapped. I’ll take this one night to myself. I’ll sleep, heal, use his shower, and tomorrow, I’ll figure out a way to get out of here.

I don’t care what lies I have to tell.

I’m going home.

And I don’t care what I have to do to make that happen.

Chapter Six

Adrian

It's the next morning. I'm tired and still too furious to rest.

She lied to me.

Me. Of all people.

I'm staring at my bedroom door, my breath reeking of whiskey, and all I want to do is march inside and prove to her that I'm the only man she'll ever need.

I know there's a reason why she doesn't fight me more.

It's because she recognizes me. Her mind, soul, and memories are awakening because of me. She might not truly know who I am, and I'll use that to my advantage. She'd want nothing to do with me if she knew I was the reason her parents were dead.

I'm not the hero in her story.

I'm the villain.

"Are you still sitting there?"

I have my right ankle crossed over my knee, an empty glass in my hand, and I turn to see him shove a spoon full of sugar flakes in his mouth. The milk dribbles down his chin, and he chews with his mouth open as he pulls up another chair.

My head pounds as the chair legs screech across the floor. He plops down next to me and shoves another scoop in his mouth.

"So? What are we doing? This is fun."

I blink at him in annoyance. "I'm making sure she doesn't try to escape."

"Liar."

I exhale and stare at the rainbow of light scattering across the floor as the morning sun hits the empty scotch glass. "She told me she was married, so I locked her in the room."

He lifts a shoulder and lifts the bowl to his mouth, slurping the milk. "She isn't married. I've run a background check on her. So she only told you that to make it seem like someone would look for her. She's actually the best person to kidnap. She doesn't have anyone. No one would miss her."

I knock the bowl out of his hand, and soggy cereal spills across the floor, and the bowl breaks in half. "She has me. She doesn't need anyone else. I

would miss her. I have missed her. Do not downplay her importance.”

He wipes his mouth on his shirt sleeve. “I’m not. I’m just explaining you don’t have a reason to be mad. She’s single. Why aren’t you in there? You probably could have been having a bunch of angry sex.”

“She isn’t thinking of sex, Otello. She’s thinking about how to escape.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she’s a normal human being who is scared and in a place she doesn’t know. I’m really concerned you were dropped on your head as a child.”

“She has no reason to be afraid, though. I don’t get it.” He stands swiftly and grabs a few napkins from the bar to clean up the cereal on the floor.

“You’re sure she isn’t married? She’s perfect. It’s possible for her to have someone.”

He rolls his eyes and cleans up the mess. “I might be careless, but I didn’t just spend months hunting someone down, stalking them, knowing their every move, not to know the basics. Give me some credit, damn.”

I rub my temples when I feel a headache start to form. I didn’t ask him to do any of that, but I can’t find it in me to be angry. The woman of my dreams is here. In my house. In my bed.

“And it isn’t like you’d care anyway. If she were married, which she isn’t, you’d probably find a way to have her for yourself. I mean, I’m not really seeing the issue and why you’re out here pouting.”

“I’m not pouting,” I grumble, not wanting to admit that’s exactly what I’m doing. I am pouting. I’m not typically the kind of man who gets his feelings hurt. I thought my ability to even have feelings died years ago. It’s been ages since I’ve felt anything other than annoyance and anger.

But never jealousy.

Never...heartache.

The thought of her with another man has me possessive in a way I’ve never been. It also fucking hurts.

After all the years of killing and fighting for my family, I’d come home and dream of a life with Mable. I’d get lost in my studio, painting her body, imagining us together, building a life and a future I literally only could ever dream about. I’ve sculpted her pregnant belly, and I’ve carved what I thought her face would look like during orgasm in clay.

I’ve obsessed about making her mine to the point of madness. Because she’s here, it feels like she’s mine, like I know her, like she went on a

vacation and just returned.

I stand, running my hands down my face with exhaustion, and then look at my watch to check the time. It's nine in the morning, and I've been too stubborn to check to see if she's okay. I also need to call Daphne and tell her we are not getting engaged.

Not when the woman I love is finally here.

I stand for the first time in hours, pop my back, groaning from how good it feels, and place the glass on the counter.

"Don't forget we have a meeting today with father. He probably wants to talk about your engagement."

"I'll be calling it off today."

"He won't be happy."

I insert the key into my bedroom door, unlocking it. I slide the key into my pocket before placing my hand on the worn golden knob. "I don't give a fuck what he wants." I think a part of me blames my father for what kind of man I've turned out to be. I don't have a problem doing what needs to be done, but I do have an issue with him trying to control me.

His influence stopped when he stepped down and handed the title to me.

I swing the door open and step inside, noticing Mable lying in the middle of the bed. She has one leg on top of the covers with the rest pulled to her chin, and my eyes roam on that one leg. The skin looks so soft, so delicate, and so flawless. I wish I had my sketch pad with me. I'd sit in the corner and draw her like this, but I'll do it later, conjuring this moment up easily and painting it on a canvas. I'll add it to my growing collection.

My fingers wrap around the bedpost, and I lean down, trailing my gaze up and down her body. Her pants are on the floor in a useless pile.

Along with her shirt.

That's when I noticed the deep blue material scrunched around her hip.

My shirt.

Her hair is wet now that I focus on her and not her skin.

She's showered.

And she's wearing my fucking clothes.

With a snarl, I push from the bedpost and stomp into the bathroom, noticing the towel on the floor. I bend down to pick it up, and it's still wet.

I missed it. I missed her naked, washing her body with my soap, washing her hair with my shampoo, then using my towel to dry her naked body off.

I missed seeing the water droplets dripping down her body as she stood in

my bathroom. I've never been so upset than I am about missing that moment.

I toss the towel in the hamper and grip the edge of the sink, taking a few deep breaths to calm myself. Pressing a palm against my hard cock, I moan, then jerk my hand away. I can't do this. She's scared of me enough as it is.

Taking a look at myself in the mirror, I notice how greasy my hair is from running my hands through it, the bags under my eyes, and the stubble on my chin.

The blood continues to pump through my cock, making it harder, the ache becoming greater, the need for her nearly impossible to ignore. I want nothing more than to rip the door off its hinges, pull the blankets from her body, push her legs apart, and slide into her warm, hot pussy that's been waiting for me to own, possess, and claim.

But I can't.

I undress, my cock slapping against my thigh, weighted and ready. I give myself a firm stroke, holding in a moan because it's been so long since I've touched myself. I almost forgot how good it felt. I've ignored my pleasure because nothing felt good, nothing compared to the daydreams I'd lose myself in of being with Mable.

I was addicted to the way the mirage of her felt, and not even stroking myself to orgasm was good enough. No, no, I needed to be inside of her when I came again. I want to feel her come for me, the spasms massaging my cock to pull me deeper, milking the come from me.

Flipping on the shower, I step inside, letting ice-cold water drift over me to soothe the lust pulsating through my veins. I shiver, my hand lying flat against the wall as I hang my head. My skin pebbles with goosebumps, and I take a deep breath, watching as the water wraps around my cock.

Not even that works.

"Fuck," I sneer, gripping my stubborn cock with my fist and angrily stroking myself.

This isn't what I want.

I don't want to waste a drop. I want it all to be trapped inside her, binding her to me, but that can't happen yet, and I need relief. I need to be able to have a complete thought without wanting to rip her clothes off, shove her against the nearest flat surface, and fuck her so good all she'll want to do is stay with me.

It's a dream because Mable is strong and feisty, and she won't give in.

No matter how many promises I throw at her, there's the issue that my

brother kidnapped her and brought her to me.

Forgiveness for an action like that either doesn't come easy or, perhaps, not at all. I squeeze my eyes shut, fucking my fist faster, my thoughts going back to when I walked into the room and saw her bare leg.

Just that alone has me insane with need. I can't imagine what it will be like to finally experience her.

"Mable," I moan, her name echoing in the shower. "Fuck, that's it. That's it," I say to the ghost of her, my orgasm threatening me. I slam my hand against the wall and groan, my knees buckling as I peak. My come washes down the drain, and I release myself, sagging against the wall to catch my breath.

I came but I'm not satisfied.

I won't be.

Not until I have her.

Knowing I need to end the engagement, I just agreed to make myself rush through the shower. The sooner I end this with Daphne, the sooner I can have Mable marry me because she will be my wife. She can kick, cry, scream, and fight me.

She can beg and plead, but nothing will work.

She's in my grasp now. There's nowhere for her to go. Eventually, she'll have to turn to me. I'll be her safe haven, her embrace, and the man she counts on.

I smile when I turn off the shower, my plan slowly coming together.

I slide the curtain back and Mable jumps, her eyes widen comically as she sees me.

Sneaky little thing, trying to tiptoe in here without me noticing.

I straighten my spine, the water sliding down my body like her eyes. I tilt my head, watching her with a confident smirk; her lips part when she sees my cock.

"Can you hand me the towel behind you, Sweetness?" I point, and she spins around, yanking the towel from the rail, stretching her arm back to hand it to me. "Thank you, Mable." I wrap the soft cotton around my waist, tucking the corner, so the towel doesn't fall off. "Is there something I can help you with?" I ask, stepping from the shower until I'm right behind her. I can smell the peppermint from my shampoo in her hair, and as she spins around, the ends of her hair whip my chest.

Mable's chin hits my chest, and she tries to take a step back, but her foot

trips over mine. I wrap an arm around her waist just as her hand clutches the towel. She accidentally pulls it from me, and we slam against the wall, chest to chest.

Our breaths mingle, and an audible gulp escapes her when she feels my cock against her bare thigh.

My fingers tighten in the shirt she's wearing, twisting it, so I have an outlet to control my arousal. I don't want to scare her. I never want to scare her.

"What are you doing in here, Sweetness?"

She exhales, nibbling her bottom lip. "I needed to use the restroom. I tried waiting, but I really need to go."

I lift her hand in mine so I can examine the rope burns around her wrist. They don't look too bad today, but I'm still not happy her flesh has been marred. My fingers slip down her forearm, and her skin comes to life, goosebumps awakening from my touch.

"Are you afraid of me, Mable?"

She nods her head, her eyes never leaving my lips.

I cage her body against the wall, my palm covering her jaw as I bend down, our lips centimeters apart. "I'm the one thing in this entire world that you do not need to fear."

"How do you know me?" she asks, her voice shaking the closer we become. She places her hands against my chest, and I know there's no doubt she can feel the fast beat of my heart.

I can omit one tiny truth, can't I? To have her love me? To need me?

"Don't you mean, how do you know me? Isn't that what you're so confused about? Do you recognize me, Mable?" My hand wraps around the back of her neck, and I hover my lips over hers, moaning from the warmth of her seeping into me. "Isn't that what's bothering you? To know every fucking inch of you awakens for me, but you don't know how or why?"

"Yes," she admits out of fear, but there's a breathlessness about the answer too. She isn't unaffected by me.

She just needs a little...push.

"What is it that you recognize?"

"Your eyes," she says, locking hers directly to mine. "I've seen them before."

"How do you feel when you see them?" I drag a finger across her jaw, my cock hard again, which shouldn't be a surprise with how close I am to the one I desire most. "Be honest."

“Safe,” she admits quickly. “But I shouldn’t feel safe.”

My hands land on her hips, bunching the shirt in my fist so I can control myself and not slide my hands under it. I don’t think she’d appreciate that. Not yet.

“Why? You’re the safest you’ve ever been. I won’t let anything happen to you.” I inch closer, waiting for her to tell me to stop moving. I feel her body trembling against me, her breath shaking with every exhale that leaves her mouth.

Not wanting to risk another second, I close the distance, pressing our lips together at last. Something inside me shifts; an intricate part of my being, my life, my love, everything I’ve ever learned, everything I was built to be, is different with her lips on mine.

They give, soft and pliant, unsure yet curious, and I devour her uncertainty. It is victorious.

I control the kiss, taking her chin between my fingers, sliding my tongue between her lips, and sighing into her mouth when the velvet glides against mine.

“Fuck,” I mutter, explosions going off behind my eyes.

She feels better than any dream I’ve ever conjured in my mind.

She whimpers, finally opening herself up to me, digging her nails into my chest as she leans into the kiss.

I knew she’d feel like this.

Like mine.

All fucking mine.

I growl, sliding my hand around the back of her head. I want more.

She shoves me away, our lips ripping apart, and then the slap of her palm meeting my cheek sounds.

And it only turns me on more.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” she warns. “I won’t let you manipulate me.”

I lean down to whisper in her ear, “I won’t need to manipulate you. I’ll have your heart soon enough, Mable. Just wait and see.”

“Don’t count it.”

“Oh, it’s the one thing I am counting on.” Without picking up my towel, I walk into the bedroom and turn to look over my shoulder. “Get ready, Sweetness. We have work to do today.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

I stalk forward, pinning her against the wall again, my cock pressing

against her thigh hard, and I'm not apologetic about it. "You'll go where I will tell you to go, Mable. If you ever want to see home again."

Fear flashes across her eyes, and I hate that I put it there. I also hate the hope I've caused her, as she'll never go home again.

I'll do what I have to do.

Whether she likes it or not, this is her home now.

I'm her home.

Chapter Seven

Mable

I don't understand what is going on. I don't know what hold this man has over me, but I don't know how I can accept him.

I want to, the darkest parts of me want to, but it's unreasonable, unrealistic, and dangerous. My lips still tingle from the kiss, and the image of him naked plays rent-free in my mind, which it shouldn't, but with a body like that, I don't know how to stop the images from assaulting me.

He is gorgeous from the neck down.

We're in the car now after an awkward morning. He had clothes in his closet that would fit me with tags, never worn, and I didn't ask how he knew my size or how they were there because I had a feeling the answer wouldn't be something I wanted to hear.

I rub my hand over my eyes because maybe I would want to hear it. Isn't that insane? I shouldn't like this. I shouldn't like how crazy this man is, but I do.

I really do, and as much as I fear his insanity, I want more of it.

What's that say about me?

If I can just get out of here and away from this guy, I'll be able to have a clear thought.

His hand slides into mine, and I jerk away, but he holds on tight, not giving me the option to have my own space.

"Did your brother give you my bags by any chance? My phone?"

"No," he says simply.

"It's not like you'd let me have it, right? You say I'm not a prisoner, yet I'm not allowed to leave or call home."

"You need to give me a chance. Give me a chance, and I'll give you your freedom, Mable." The car pulls into an empty parking lot outside of a Victorian house. The siding is painted black, the door is red, and the windows aren't open. The shutters are metal, covering the glass so no one can look inside.

"Where are we?"

"I need to speak with a friend, and then you and I will need to have a conversation."

He's so vague. What's that even mean?

He climbs out of the car and gently shuts the door to this Porsche. He holds his hand in the middle of his blazer as he comes around the hood of the silver sports car, opening my door for me as if he were a gentleman.

If my memory serves correctly, this morning, while he had me pinned against the wall, he only has gentlemanly tendencies.

He's a wolf in sheep's clothing, ready to attack and pounce as the predator he is.

Dri holds out his hand for me to take to help me out of the car, and while the sardonic part of me wants to take it, I don't. It would be another way he has a hold on me. Slipping my hand into his is like promising myself to a monster.

I stare at his outstretched hand, waiting for his nails to morph into talons so he can sink them into my flesh and never let me go.

I get out of the car myself and hold my chin high, slamming the door behind me for good measure. I won't let him control me, even if the sound of it becomes more appealing every second I'm with him.

"I like your strength, Sweetness, I do. I crave it. I've been starved for it for a very long time, and I adore it when you challenge me to show you don't need me. I know you don't need me." He crowds me against the car, that wicked hand pushing against my hip to keep me locked in place. "You're the kind of woman who doesn't need a soul, and I find that quality about you enticing, but humor me, Mable. Let me take care of you."

"Why?" I swallow, tilting my head back as he bends down, skimming his lips across my throat. "Why should I?"

He drags his lips across the pulsating vein in my neck, and I shut my eyes, trying not to react to the small touch, but my entire body is on fire for him. The familiarity is killing me, and I wish I knew why.

"Because Mable. While you do not need me and are strong enough to be in this world on your own, I can't say the same about myself. I need you. I'm not strong enough to be in this world where I'm not near you again, so let me take care of you because, in return, it takes care of me." He kisses my jawline until he is at my lips, then, with his thumb, tilts my chin down by placing the pad of his finger on my mouth. "And I know you don't care about taking care of me right now, but if you'll allow me, my priority will always be you."

His lips skim across mine, and I part them, my body responding to him by seeking his kiss.

I'm a weak woman.

He says I'm strong, but nothing about me solidifies when he's near me. I actually melt when his hands are on me, his mouth is on mine, the way he speaks to me, and the way he is obsessed with me for some reason.

I crave it just like he craves me.

I can't give into the dark, or I'll never be able to go home. I don't belong here. I've found myself in a bad situation, and I'm doing what I can to make sure I can leave.

What happens when I don't want to leave? My inner voice echoes in the back of my mind.

That can't happen. No matter how great Dri seems, loving him is out of the question, and I don't think love will ever be enough to make me stay. Not that love is an option here, but it wouldn't be enough if it were.

His lips form to mine, and every caution gets thrown to the wind, and I forget everything I've been thinking about as he takes over me.

"Well, well, well," a sweet voice purrs from the left of us. "Here, I thought we were getting married, Adrian. How are you going to go and kiss another woman in front of me and not even introduce me, baby?"

I shove Dri away and wipe his kiss off my mouth. "You're engaged!" I raise my hand to slap him again, but he catches my wrist in midair.

"No. Yes, but not in the way that you think, Sweetness."

"Sweetness? More like a tigress. No?" The woman laughs at her joke, gracefully coming down the steps in a satin nightgown and a robe with a long train with a fluffy hem. She looks regal, elegant, and powerful.

"And why do you care?" he lifts a brow at me. "I didn't think you wanted anything to do with me?"

"I don't want anything to do with you. I'm only here because I'm forced to be here, and your brother kidnapped me."

"Oh?" The woman asks, her red lip gloss shining in the morning sun. "Is that where Otello was? Fetching the object of your desires?"

"Yes," he answers, tugging me against his chest.

I struggle against him. "Let me go. Let me go! I want nothing to do with you. You're disgusting. I want to go home."

"You are home!" he yells, silencing me, but the mad, desperate look in his eyes, the one that screams fear, has me breaking.

My eyes water, and I shake my head, letting the tears fall. "Why am I here when you have her?"

“I’m here to break off the engagement made the day before you arrived, Mable. If I had known you were literally falling into my lap, I wouldn’t have asked Daphne.”

“Which was more like a business transaction,” she explains.

I don’t know why, but that makes me feel better. Not that I care, because I don’t.

I’ll never admit out loud that I’m jealous.

“I have to marry someone since I’m the head of the family business now,” he explains.

I think about when Otello carried me through the house and explained that his brother was having a party.

“It’s part of the rules. I didn’t want to marry anyone because I only wanted one, and I couldn’t have you, Mable. You were on the other side of the world and—”

He stops speaking, but he looks like he wants to say more, but he doesn’t.

“Daphne is my friend. She doesn’t want to marry me either, but we agreed it would only be on paper. We would both still do what we wanted with no physical connection, sharing bedrooms, or anything like that.”

“Business,” I repeat as things start clicking into place.

“Yes, sugar, business,” Daphne purrs as she comes down one more step. “Dri isn’t my type. Not in the slightest. I like to be in control. I’m glad you’re here. It means I don’t have to go through with it. Is that why you’re here? Or are you wanting a room?” She bites her lip as she stares at me.

“A room?” I blink at Dri, confused.

“She runs a BDSM club. No, we won’t be needing a room.” He opens the car door for me, and I hurry inside, wanting to get away from the situation.

A laugh bubbles up my throat, and I can’t help but let it free. I had so many goals when I went to Greece. I wanted to get out of my comfort zone, but the universe had a way of throwing me out of it.

I wanted to meet new people.

Check.

I wanted to see new sights.

Check.

I wanted to meet a man and lose my virginity.

I think that could be a check.

I look out the window and see him talking with Daphne, his hands moving as he speaks, but they don’t move in a hurried gesture. Everything is slow,

deliberate, calm, and refined. He speaks with purpose, and Daphne smiles, tossing her gorgeous head back and laughing at something he says.

He isn't funny. At least he hasn't said anything to make me laugh. He's either enticing fear or lust inside me, but I have never once laughed.

Dri kisses her on the cheek, takes her hand, brings it to his mouth, and kisses her knuckles. His eyes cut to mine through the window, and I look away, not wanting him to see how jealous I am.

She should marry him, and then maybe I could go home.

But as I press my finger on the button to roll down the window, scream, beg, and try to convince her to marry him anyway, I realize I like his brown eyes on mine a little too much.

And I don't want her to have his attention.

He comes around the car again and opens the driver's side door, sliding into the smooth buttery leather of the seat.

"You seemed cozy with her. You should marry her."

"I don't want to marry her. I'll be marrying you."

I turn my head and laugh so loud I have to hold my stomach. Tears form in my eyes, but this time for humor. I watch his face for any telling to say he is joking. If anything, his jaw tenses with annoyance.

My laughter slows, and I wipe my under-eyes. "You have to be kidding," I say. "I'm not marrying you. I'm not wife material. I will be bitter toward you. I will be...unforgiving. I don't want to be your wife."

"You're going to be," he says. "And maybe you'll be bitter at first, but not forever. You'll love me because you'll learn how much I love you."

"You don't even know me," I whisper in shock.

"I know more about you than you know, Mable. Tomorrow, you will marry me. You'll be my wife."

"I won't say I do."

"You will if you ever want to go home again."

I scoot across my seat until my hip touches the door, not wanting to have anything to do with him. "Is that how it's going to be? You're going to make me do whatever you want, so I have hope that I'll go home, but am I really? Am I ever going to go home?"

"I guess you'll have to marry me and find out." The tires spin out as he speeds out of the parking lot, and I press my head against the window, my heart slamming wildly against my chest, panic and anxiety gripping me tight. "I won't be bad to you, Mable. Give me that chance," he whispers. "I've been

waiting years for it.”

I don’t say anything, but what is there left to say? Nothing I say to him will give me my freedom. “It’s not my responsibility to give you what you want because you’ve been waiting for it. You won’t tell me how I know you, yet, you expect me to act as if I do. That isn’t how the world works.”

“You know me, Sweetness. That’s all you need to know.”

I cross my arms over my chest, wanting to argue with him more, but nothing I say will get me anywhere again. Instead, I turn on the radio as we come to a stop at a red light, and Dri takes my hand, kissing the top of it, but he lingers, pressing his cheek against my palm next.

It’s more intimate than how he kissed Daphne.

When he lifts his eyes, the dark hues promise to give me everything, and it’s hard not to allow myself to fall into the unknown pools.

His gaze drifts from me, and he rolls his lips together, his eyes crinkling at the edges. “When I tell you to duck, you lower yourself as much as you can, okay?”

“Adrian, what are you talking about?” I whisper.

“Do as I say. That’s all you need to know. Trust me.”

“Trust you?” I scoff. “You kidnapped me.”

“My brother did. I only want to love you. There’s no crime in that, so do as I say. Do you understand me?” The car begins to move again, and I swallow, nodding in agreement. “Good, Sweetness. That’s good,” he croons as if I’m a child needing to be babied. His eyes stay locked on the road, and his right-hand flexes as he grips the steering wheel. The veins in his hands pop, and his knuckles turn white. His left hand disappears between his seat and the door.

I might be many things, but dumb isn’t one of them. I hear the click of a gun and hold my breath. “Dri? What the hell is going on?”

“I’ll explain everything to you, but first, I need you to get down, okay?”

“Now?”

“Now!” he shouts at me, and I practically throw myself into the backseat and crawl onto the floorboard.

He fires, shattering the passenger side window.

Gunfire rings around me, and I cover my head, screaming when the car jerks to the side. Next, brakes squeal and metal crunches, but it isn’t from the car I’m in.

I sit up and look out the back window, watching the SUV roll until it’s nothing but scrap metal.

Adrian pulls the car over and reaches for me, pulling me onto his lap. His hands are everywhere, checking me for injury, and he is completely frantic.

“I’m okay,” I whisper, but he doesn’t hear me.

“Are you hurt? Are you okay? Where does it hurt, Sweetness? I’ll fix it. Show me. Show me, and I’ll take care of you.” His hands rub down my arms, then my legs. He lifts my shirt to check my stomach, then pulls me over his shoulder and checks my back.

“I’m okay. Adrian!” I pull away from him, taking his cheeks in my hands and looking him in his wild, untamed eyes. “I’m okay.” I press his hand against my chest so he can feel my heartbeat. “I’m alive. I’m here. You protected me.” I don’t know why I’m trying to calm him down when I’m the one who should be freaking out.

The haze from his eyes finally clears, and the sun drifts through the window, gleaming against the amber color of his irises. Flecks of gold glimmer with concern, and his forehead drops to my chest.

“I was so scared I lost you again.”

Again?

What does that mean?

He kisses my chest and neck and brings my head down to rob my lips. He kisses me the way he feels, desperate and afraid.

He clutches me as if I’m about to fly away, rocking me against his lap, and I gasp when I feel how hard he is under me, but he breaks the kiss before I can wonder what’s about to happen in the car.

“Protecting you is my life now. Nothing will ever happen to you, Mable.”

But he’s wrong.

He’s happened to me.

But is he the worst thing or the best thing?

Because right now, I can’t tell.

Chapter Eight

Adrian

She had so many questions for me last night, like who was in the other car? Why was I shooting a gun? What do I do for a living?

And I answered none of them because I wanted her to marry me first. I want her to be stuck with the fact that she's my wife and can't go anywhere because she's mine.

When I wouldn't tell her anything, she slammed the bedroom door in my face, and once again, I spent the night outside my own bedroom.

It's fine because while she slept, I made the necessary calls to make sure the wedding happens today.

Her dress is here. The gardens are prepared. The caterers have arrived.

And the guests will be here in a few hours.

"Is Daphne getting ready?" My father asks, standing in the doorway of my brother's bedroom.

"No, because I'm not marrying her today," I say, staring at my reflection in the mirror as I make sure the bowtie to my tux is perfect. "I'm marrying someone else. Someone who I care about immensely."

"I don't care. As long as you marry, I'm happy."

"I don't—" My brother nudges me in the side, and I silence him. "Do we have extra security around the house? After what happened yesterday with the Angelinis, I won't risk Mable's safety."

"Mable. That's a pretty name. Where did you meet her?"

"Mable is the daughter of Mr. Porter, remember? Or did you forget?"

"Mable Porter is the woman you're marrying?" he bellows. "Are you out of your fucking mind? Does she know what happened all those years ago?"

"No, she doesn't remember. Ever since I pulled her from that vehicle, I knew she was meant to be mine. No one will tell her what happened. Do I make myself clear?"

"You can't be serious." I don't think I've ever seen my father's face so red. "What if she remembers? What then?"

"Then I'll deal with it. I marry her, or I don't marry at all; what's your choice of poison?"

He marches away, furious at me for marrying the daughter he let survive.

It's his fault if he is looking for blame. If I had never pulled her from that car, I would never have known what it was like to look heaven in the eyes or feel her skin against mine.

It's how I knew she was meant for me.

"Is she getting ready?" Otello asks, taking a shot of whiskey. "Damn, that's strong. Want one? To ease the nerves."

"I'm not nervous," I say honestly, looking into the mirror again and feeling peace for the first time in ages. "I'm finally doing what I've wanted to do. After today, I'll have the one thing I've always wanted in the world." I pull out the ring I have in my pocket and open the velvet box.

A teardrop five-carat diamond sits in the middle of a white gold band, and on either side are lines of more diamonds, but what she doesn't know is that, infused with the band, I had pieces of metal from the day her parents died, melted with the white gold.

I wanted her to have a piece of them with her constantly. It isn't an apology because an apology can't bring them back, but maybe when she learns the truth, she'll know there hasn't been a day I haven't thought of her.

And then the wedding band, it's her mother's.

I don't know if she'll recognize it, but before her mother died, she held out the ring to me and asked if I'd give it to Mable one day just so she had something that belonged to her mother.

I remember giving a slow nod, placing my hand over my heart, then turning away to pull Mable out of the car.

I've held onto it every day since. It's been safe in this box, and now I get to keep my promise and give Mable something that belonged to her mother.

Does that make me a good man? No.

I don't expect forgiveness from the woman I love when I've done the one thing that will forever earn her hate.

"Dri?"

"Hmm?" I close the box, tuck it in my suit pocket, and look at my brother. "What is it?"

"You are nervous," he says, sliding a shot glass to me.

I sit down and spread my legs wide to get comfortable, throwing my arm over the seat next to me. "Of course I am. I'm marrying the woman of my dreams, and she has no idea how much I love her, and she has no idea of how guilty I am of so many sins, some that turned her life upside down."

"You need to stop that way of thinking. I'm not sure where you are seeing

it's your fault, but you won't be able to have a successful marriage if you continue those thoughts. In a few hours, you'll have everything you want."

I lift the glass in the air and give Otello a small smile, tossing it back. The amber liquid burns my throat, but it does nothing to get rid of the heavy lead sitting in my gut.

The lies. The betrayal.

It isn't something to build a marriage on, but I hope one thing always shines through my misgivings—my love, my obsession, and my ache for Mable Porter.

I lift my eyes to the ceiling when I hear the guests start to come into the house. High heels and expensive loafers pound above us, the roars of conversation carrying all the way down the steps to my brother's room.

My phone vibrates, and it's a text message from Daphne.

Her: "She's ready, darling. She's absolutely beautiful, but she isn't happy. Are you sure you want this?"

Me: "Yes, I'm sure. I'll make her happy. I just need time."

Her: "I hope that is true, Adrian."

Adrian.

She only pulls that out when she's serious.

"Are you ready?" My father is at the door again, and I stand.

I've been ready since the day I had to pull her out of the car all those years ago.

She might not be ready now, but she will be.

If she gives me a chance, I'll be everything she's ever wanted. That I can promise.

That, I can vow.

Mable

As I stand behind French doors, waiting to walk down an aisle I'd rather run away from, I think back to when Daphne was doing my hair. Poor thing. She tried so hard to make conversation, but I had to focus on not throwing up from nerves and fear.

And let's not forget the feeling of my life being completely over. I know nothing about Adrian or Otello. I don't know what they do for a living, I don't know why Adrian is obsessed with me, and I don't know how we know each other, but yet here I am, walking down the aisle to marry a man I've

only ever kissed.

“You’ll be okay, sugar,” Daphne whispers at my side, fussing with my veil.

I will admit I have the dress of my dreams. I don’t know how Dri managed to know I always wanted a satin wedding gown with a lace back that buttons down the middle with a long train behind me that goes on for days. It fits like a glove.

“I hope so,” I admit, fiddling with the bouquet of red roses in my hand. “I’m supposed to take a leap of faith and be with him. I know nothing about him, Daphne.”

She has questions she wants to be answered, but I can’t answer them for her. Only Adrian can.

“I’ll say this, I’ve known Adrian for a long time. He’s a good man, better than his father and his brother. He is strong, smart, handsome, and means well. Is he perfect? No, no man is. It’s why I like to whip them.”

I chuckle, hiding my face in my bouquet.

“But what’s faith in this world if we never jump? Take the leap, honey. You never know; you might actually like where you land.” The music begins to play, signaling that I need to walk down the aisle now, and she gives me a tight hug. “Be happy that you ended up here because these men, while unlike any other you will ever meet, will change your life in the best ways if you allow it.”

“Take a leap?” And somehow forget I was kidnapped? I don’t think so.

“The biggest,” she squeezes my arms just as the doors open, revealing a gorgeous garden.

Rows of white chairs are filled with people I don’t know. White roses line the aisle. Weeping willow trees have twinkling lights strung throughout them, and for a moment, I get lost in the fantasy of my wedding.

At the end of the aisle, Adrian is in a suit tailored to every muscle of his body, and the smile on his face makes me relax.

I’ve never had anyone look at me like that before, so I’m going to try and take Daphne’s advice.

I’m going to leap, and I hope I land in the arms of a man with whom I can trust my life.

Chapter Nine

Mable

I'm not sure what the future holds for me. I'm not sure it is love, but maybe I can learn to be happy, and maybe love will come eventually. It's hard not to be bitter and angry. I am doing what I can to remain positive, but positivity is hard to manage in this situation.

I've married a gorgeous man. In that sense, life could be a lot worse. He has money. He obviously has this weird obsession with me, and I like it. He's awakened a side of me I didn't know existed.

But I don't know if I can move past the issue of him kidnapping me, not allowing me to go home. I'm not sure how to live a happy life, and I'm not sure if I can pretend.

We're at the reception in the ballroom now, standing underneath the chandelier. We're the only ones on the dance floor, and everyone else is watching us as they sip champagne.

No one should be allowed to be this good-looking. With his dark hair styled and his olive skin against the white collar of his tux, it's hard to take my eyes off his face.

His hand falls to my waist, and the other takes my hand in his. Dri tugs me against his body, and I gasp, feeling every hard ridge of his muscles against mine.

"You are so fucking beautiful," he compliments, his eyes locking onto mine.

God, where do I know those eyes from?

They've haunted me for years, and I can't place them, but does it matter? I'm here now, and I finally get to look into them.

"So are you," I reply as we begin to dance. "I mean, handsome. You look very handsome in your tux, Dri."

We don't remove our eyes from one another as we dance. We spin and float along the dance floor as if we have done this a hundred times. It's natural and easy.

He smirks, showing his white teeth. He knows he looks delicious.

As we dance, his hands travel along my curves, and the feather touch has my eyes fluttering. He leans down, his lips grazing my ear, and I tilt my head

to the side. "I can't wait to peel this dress from your body tonight. I'm going to make you mine, at last, Mable."

A whimper escapes me. A horrifying thought hits me.

I want that.

I want him to take me. I want to experience passion and lust, even if he is a villain. I know we won't last forever, but maybe I can make the best of whatever time I give him.

As we dance, he continues to whisper filthy things into my ear while people watch, probably thinking how sweet we look together.

There's nothing sweet happening between us right now.

"I've waited so long to experience your body, to see it, to taste it, and I'm going to devour you, Mable. I'm going to make you want this life more and more every day, so you'll never want to leave. You'll never want to leave our bed because I'm going to fuck you every day, multiple times a day, leaving you too tired to fight me."

I inhale a sharp breath, my cheeks heating, and I dart my eyes around the room to see if anyone can tell what's going on. His brother Otello lifts his drink into the air, a cheeky grin spreading across his face as if he knows.

A low, slow throb builds between my legs, and I realize I want him.

I've never wanted anyone before. Not like this. Is it okay to want the villain?

"I'm going to claim that sweet cunt and fill it, Mable."

"Dri," I gasp his name, suddenly becoming shy.

"What is it, Sweetness? Never had a man talked to you like this? Never had a man get you wet with need before he slid into you? Because that's what I plan on doing."

And he is very successful. He's reached his goal.

I'm needy, and my panties are slick with want.

"Have you never had a man want you so much he can feel you in his bones? Because I do." He slides his lips across my neck, and a shaking breath escapes him, heating the pulsating flesh of my jugular. He presses his hips against me, and I roll my lips together to stop a groan from escaping. "Do you feel how much I want you? You in this skin-tight dress, married to me, my wife, fuck," he growls, his hand clutching my hip to control himself.

I lick my lips, trying to catch my breath. "I've never had a man," I finally admit.

"You never had a man do what, Sweetness?" his lips kiss my neck, a

moment of fear gliding down my spine. The voice in the back of my head says run, but my heart is beating a million miles an hour, telling me to take that leap Daphne told me to take earlier.

“I’ve never had a man do anything, Dri.” I lean away from him and look him in the eye.

His jaw tenses, the muscle flexing and causing his jaw to become sharper, deadlier, and now I try to pull away from his arms, thinking I’m in danger or that he’ll hurt me.

Maybe this is what I need to be free, but now I’m finding that I want him and his approval.

“Don’t you dare try to get away from me.” His hand gently cups my jaw, and he stares intensely into my eyes. “Are you saying you’re a virgin, Mable? Are you saying...” he rasps, dragging his eyes down my body. “That no man has ever touched you?”

I shake my head, my eyes burning with tears because I don’t know if what is happening is good or bad. “No, no one. I haven’t wanted to.”

He growls low in his throat, and I can feel the vibrations from his chest tickling mine since he has me aligned with his body. The hard length of his cock presses against my lower belly. “Do you feel what that does to me?” He rips himself out of my arms and leaves me alone in the middle of the dance floor. He stands on a nearby table, kicking off the plates and champagne flutes. They shatter when they hit the ground, and a curious murmur rolls through the crowd. “Everyone, get the hell out! Party is over! Get. Out.”

“Have you lost your mind?” I yell at him. “What are you thinking? You can’t just make our guest leave. That’s so—”

I’m silenced when his hand covers my mouth, and he crowds me with his body, making me take a few steps back.

“I can do whatever the hell I want, wife, because when it comes to you, I don’t have control to string a complete thought together. You want to know what I’m thinking?” He snarls, his fingers wrapping around my throat. “I’m thinking how I’m taking you up to the room right now and claiming you as mine. Fuck the guests. I don’t give a damn about them.”

In a move I’m not expecting, he throws me over his shoulder, and I yelp, his hand slapping my ass as he charges out of the room.

“You’re a caveman! Put me down, Dri.”

“I’ll put you down,” he says, but continues walking down his mansion’s empty halls to get to his wing. “When I can throw you on the bed.”

I glance around for anyone to help me, to save me, but as his footsteps echo down the empty hall, I realize I can't be saved.

Why do I like the sound of that so much?

Chapter Ten

Adrian

My cock is as hard as steel while I charge up the steps. How can she expect me to dance with her with a smile on my face when she admits she is a virgin?

That no other has touched her or been inside her.

How could a man think clearly?

And the only man she'll ever have is me. Forever. I know she thinks she'll be able to go home, but that's never going to happen.

She's huffing and puffing, grumbling nonsense as I carry her up the steps.

I walk through the doors that take me to my own wing in the house, then kick it shut.

"Can you put me down now?" she asks.

I ignore her. I don't think she fully understands how I'm barely able to keep a clear head. I open the bedroom door, carry her over the threshold, and then toss her on the bed.

She yelps and a few pieces of her hair fall from her clip. "Well, at least you put me down," she says, sitting up on her elbows.

I yank off my bowtie first, then shrug off my jacket.

"What...what are you doing?" she asks, breathless, as she watches me unbutton my shirt.

I don't say anything again. There's no need to. Her nerves will settle, and she'll see what's about to happen.

"Adrian?" my name breaks, falling from her lips.

I slide off my shirt next, revealing my bare chest to her and her breath catches. I toss the shirt onto the dresser, then kick off my Italian loafers, and begin to undo my belt.

Once I'm standing in my boxer briefs, I readjust my cock, and her eyes bulge, widening when she sees the thick outline hiding beneath my underwear.

Stalking forward, I crawl onto the bed until I'm settled over her, pushing her hair behind her ears, then trail my knuckles down her face. "I'm going to claim my wife and show you what life can be like with me. You're never going to want to leave. I'll be your home. You just have to give me a chance,

Sweetness. I'll be everything you need. Anything." I kiss her neck, my eyes rolling back when I smell the citrus of her perfume.

I kiss her throat, dragging my lips up the elegant curve of her neck. "I can be what you need," I whisper against her lips.

"Adrian," she hushes, running her fingers through my hair.

I take that as the green light, crashing my mouth against hers as I take her in a heated kiss. She's stunned for a second, but a second later, her eagerness takes over, and her inexperience only fuels me. She's dousing kerosene on a wild blaze, and the heat is burning me from the inside out. I slide my tongue against hers and swallow her surprised gasp, groaning down her throat when she tentatively grazes hers against mine.

Fuck, she feels so perfect. I never want this night to end. I want to replay it forever, for the rest of my life.

I break away, skimming my fingers across her collarbones, and a faint blush fills her cheeks. "You're so beautiful." I watch as the same fingers that have suffocated a man worship her body, wanting to trace every line and curve that creates her.

I would never have thought I could be so gentle, but I've dreamed of this, and the last thing I want to do is hurt her.

Sitting up, I flip her onto her stomach and begin to unbutton the back of her dress. I want to rip it to pieces, but I think of her and what she wants. Maybe one day, she'll want our daughter to have it, and that thought alone is enough for me to take a deep breath.

"Adrian, I haven't ever—you need to know—"

I bend down and kiss the back of her neck. "I know, Sweetness. You have no idea what it does to me either, knowing I'm the only man who will ever touch you." I slide my tongue down her spine as I drag her dress from her body. Her strapless bra comes into view, then her white, lace, cheeky underwear, and I let the dress fall to a useless pile on the floor.

I have a painting in my studio just like this.

She was on my bed, sprawled out, needing me, wanting me, dying for me to ease the ache in her body.

Who would have thought all my fantasies would come true?

"Do you want this?" I question, my hands cascading down her body, then back up, playing with the hooks of her bra.

The last thing I want is for her to regret me. Being married is one thing; giving her body to me is another.

“Yes,” she whispers, gripping the comforter in her hands.

With one hand, I unhook her bra and slide it out from under her, throwing it behind my shoulder. Needing to see her, I flip her onto her back and inhale, holding my breath when I see her perfect breasts.

I cup them, my cock jerking when I feel how soft they are, how perfect they fit in my palms. I pluck her nipples, rolling them between my calloused fingertips; she whimpers, pinching her eyes shut as sensations she’s never experienced before are overtaking her body.

“So fucking perfect, aren’t you?” I lean over and kiss her silken skin, licking the curve of her breast before sucking her nipple into my mouth, nibbling it with my teeth to create a slight sting.

“Oh my God,” she groans, burying her fingers in my hair, and her touch is nearly enough to make me come. I’ve waited so long for it, dreamed of it, and now it’s mine.

I kiss my way down her body, her stomach trembling while I nibble on her ribcage, and she gasps under me, squirming from the attention.

I make note that her ribcage is one of her hot spots. I continue my way down, hooking my fingers under her panties.

I swallow, suddenly nervous, wondering if I’m going to be able to please her how I’ve imagined it for all these years. I pull them slowly down her thighs, sliding my eyes up her body to meet hers. She’s watching me intently, nibbling her bottom lip, her breaths loud and audible. I don’t tear my eyes from her until her panties are on the floor.

Looking down, I growl when I see the trimmed hair and slick lips waiting for me. Parting her legs, I grumble in delight.

So wet.

So undiscovered.

My mouth waters and I can’t wait for a second longer. My control snaps, and I bury my face between her thighs, my tongue diving into the rich taste of her virgin hole. I groan, my eyes rolling back to my head when her taste bursts across my tongue.

“Adrian!” she cries out my name, and it sounds better than any fantasy I ever conjured.

Lifting her by her waist, I squeeze her ass, pulling her against my face. I want to drown in her. I want to be able to taste her for days. I continue to plunge my tongue in and out, her body wiggling against the bed. She rocks her hips, seeking more from me, and I’m happy to give it to her.

Slipping my tongue up her seam, I suck her clit into my mouth, needing an orgasm from her to make sure she's ready for me. Her thighs tremble, and her sounds become higher, louder, and less controlled.

"Adrian. Dri! Oh my God, don't stop. Please, don't stop."

Someone would have to kill me right now to get me to stop.

I could live here, buried between her legs, my tongue tasting the sweetness of her cherry, and I would die a happy man.

"Yes! Yes, oh God," she cries, rocking herself against my face, taking away my ability to take a breath. My lungs scream as she suffocates me, but I won't move an inch. She's so close, too close for me to call it quits.

A final shout escapes her, and she bends her back, her body spasming with each explosion the orgasm creates. I lick her clean, wanting every drop of her nectar that I've waited too long to taste.

Giving a quick kiss to her sensitive clit, igniting one more twitch from her body, I crawl over her, smashing my lips against hers, so she tastes herself.

She grabs at my underwear, pushing them down, and I help her by kicking them off. Our bodies press against each other, the heat from her skin soaking into mine. I place my hand on the side of her neck, getting lost in her kiss.

My wife.

The most precious thing to me in this entire universe. No one else matters. Nothing else matters.

Her hand wraps around my cock, squeezing it hard, and I gasp, breaking the kiss. I arch my back, flexing my hips to drive my cock into her fist.

"Fuck," I growl, watching her stroke me. Her fingers can't touch, which only brings more lust to my veins.

"I want to taste you," she whispers, voice shaking with nerves, and I find it to be such a turn-on.

"Sweetness, I'll never stop you from doing what you want." My lips part as she sits up, getting onto her knees to get comfortable, and she moves her hand to get a better grip on me. The large diamond ring sitting on her finger glimmers in the light, and I can't help the smug smile tilting my lips when I see it.

That hand is gliding up and down my cock, the hand wearing my ring, proving to the world she's mine. My orgasm tingles around the base of me, right where her hand is.

Her lips part, and she flicks her tongue across the tip. I should be embarrassed by the loud noise that breaks free from my chest, but I can't stop

it.

“I like how you taste,” she says.

Is she trying to get me to make a fool of myself?

I’m too close to coming. She can’t say things like that.

Looking up at me, those dark lashes blinking, she wraps her lips around my head, carefully sucking me. I moan, running my fingers through her hair. Liking my response, she sucks harder, and my head falls back. Her mouth is wet and hot, her tongue twirling around me as if I’m her favorite lollipop.

She sucks me deeper, taking only half of me and hollowing her cheeks.

I groan, deciding I need to watch, so I don’t miss another second. Her lips are stretched wide, spit dripping down her chin, and she gags, choking for a moment while I touch the back of her throat.

“You look so good with my cock in your mouth, Sweetness.” I want nothing more than to fuck her face, but I resist, telling myself that’s something we need to work up to.

She hums, the vibrations nearly making me fall over, and I tighten my fingers in her hair, pulling at the root. Mable begins a rhythm. It’s messy from inexperience, but it’s what makes this the best experience of my life.

No one else has ever had her mouth.

And that thought is an aphrodisiac.

With a snarl, I push her away, and her tits bounce as her back hits the bed.

“I don’t think you’ll fit,” she says, her lips red and swollen from sucking my cock.

I make my way up her body, slipping my hand around the back of her head as I lift her to bring her mouth to mine. “I’ll fit because I’m meant to be inside you.” Giving her a quick kiss, I straighten, guiding my cock to her cunt. I need to watch myself sink into her, but I want to look into her eyes as I drive through her barrier, wanting to see the expression on her face when she’s being claimed for the first of many times.

Her nails sink into my thigh while I push inside, and my eyes roll from the sensation of her tight walls and heat. She’s like silk being tightened around me.

“Oh, fuck,” I grumble, unsure if I can hold myself back from spilling myself into her depths. “You feel so good, Sweetness. So perfect.” I rub my hands down her thighs, gripping the meat of her hips, and spread her legs wider.

She whimpers, pain etched across her face, and I fall over her, kissing her

lightly. “I know, Mable. I know it hurts.”

“It does. You’re so big. You have to give me a second. Please, give me a second.” She squirms under me, unknowingly sinking further onto my cock, taking another inch.

My entire body trembles, but I nod, hiding my face against her shoulder. “Take all the time you need, Sweetness.” I kiss across her shoulder, sucking the flesh where her neck and shoulder meet into my mouth, leaving a red mark. “Take all the time because you feel perfect just like this.” My lips glide from the base of her throat to her jaw, and I nibble along the soft edge before claiming her lips with mine.

Our tongues dance, slipping against one another just as I slip in further until the head hits her virginity, and she gasps audibly.

I lift onto one hand, staring down at her, watching as pain and pleasure morph her face into different expressions.

“Come closer?” she asks, but I hear the plea.

She’s afraid.

Of what, I don’t know, but I never want her to be scared of what’s happening between us, so I easily ease myself on top of her, petting her supple cheeks, adoring the flush taking them over. Her eyes flutter as she leans against my palm.

“Look at me,” I demand, and her eyes snap to mine. “I have you, Sweetness. I’ll take care of you. Always.” Without warning, not wanting to give her any more time to doubt us, I flex my hips, breaking through her virginity, and I sink in until she can’t take any more of me.

My sack settles against the crease of her ass, and she sinks her teeth into my shoulder, and she almost breaks the skin.

“Oh, good girl, so good for me. You feel so good, so right, Sweetness. Fuck, I’d kill for you, Mable. I’d kill anyone who took you from me, who took this away from us.” I give her a moment to get used to me. I know it can’t be comfortable at first.

I feel the moment she relaxes. She sighs, and her pussy lets go of the tight hold it has on me, the invader, the claimer, the husband.

“That’s it, Mable. Let me in,” I croon, sliding out easily before filling her again.

Her lips part in a shocked gasp, and her fingers trace the bite mark indentations on my shoulder.

“A mark I’ll want forever,” I growl, gaining a bit more speed, plunging

into her.

“Oh, Adrian. This feels...you feel...”

“I know,” I agree with her before she can say anything else. “Perfect. So fucking perfect.” Curling my hips, I pick up the pace, fucking her harder without any restraint, and she moans; the pain is gone.

“Look at you taking my cock. Just like you were always meant to. You feel so good.”

Our lips meet again, only this time, it’s passionate and desperate; teeth clink, and our tongues battle for dominance, but she relents, knowing I’m the one in charge.

“More, Adrian. Give me more.”

Who am I to deny her?

I pull free from her, ignoring the hint of blood adorning my cock, then flip her onto her stomach. I’m greeted by the round cheeks of her ass and the long path of her spine. Giving her ass a good squeeze, I flatten my tongue where two dimples are settled above the perfect globes and lick up her spine until I’m at her neck.

“I’ll give you anything you want,” I whisper, gathering her hair and drifting it over her shoulder. “Anything.” I slam into her without the barrier in my way, and it fuels me to know her virginity belongs to me. I ram into her hard and fast, pouring all my past aggressions in every fucking thrust.

I yank her head up by her neck and bite her earlobe. “Is this what you want? Do you like to be used and fucked like you’re worthless, Mable?”

“Yes,” she moans, pressing her ass against me to take me deeper.

“You do know you’re anything but worthless to me?” I want to make that clear before this goes any further.

“I’m learning that.” The mattress muddles her words.

“Good because you’re the most precious thing to me, but I’ll fuck you like you’re not.” I press her head against the mattress and plunge my cock deeper. Moving my hand to her nape, I hold her down like that, curling my hips, increasing speed and force until our skin is slapping together and our moans mix together.

I’ve never been a vocal lover, but she’s bringing all the pleasure out of me. I want her to hear how good she makes me feel because no one has ever made me feel so good.

“Yes! Oh God,” she moans into the bed, her hands fisting the sheets.

The bed rocks, the bedframe squeaking from the punishing thrusts I’m

giving her. We could have had this for years, but I only get her now? Where's the fairness in that? So many years wasted. And it makes me so angry.

Growling, I watch myself disappear into her pussy, her ass shaking from the force, and the rage takes control of my movements. I'm hammering into her, wanting her to feel the twist of sorrows I've had for all these years because of her.

I am who I am, what I am, all because of Mable Porter.

My fucking weakness.

How dare she make me weak?

"Don't stop! Adrian, I think...I think—" I stop her by pulling out of her and flipping her onto her back again, taking her breath when I fill her again.

"You think you get to come? Not yet, Sweetness. We haven't been able to do anything together, but this? You will come when I do. Together."

"I can't wait," she fights me. "I can't."

"You better, or I won't let you come for the rest of the night, and I'm nowhere near done with you." I gather her legs and place them on my shoulder, driving into her pussy over and over again. My hair hangs in my face, sweat drips down the side of my temple, and when I lock eyes with her, I watch in pure fascination while she plays with her nipples, twisting them while I ravage her.

"I love you," I grunt with rage. I don't know why I sound so angry. "I've loved for too long." And I'm mad because she hasn't loved me at all.

My love isn't returned.

Not yet.

But it will be.

"Adrian."

I shake my head, tossing her legs to the side, and drop down to bite her bottom lip into my mouth.

"Fuck, I can't hold back. Damn it." My hips falter, and I smash our lips together until I can feel her teeth; the pressure almost hurts.

Almost.

"Now, Sweetness. Now. Come with me." I toss my head back as the first wave leaves me, and her pussy tightens around me, her walls squeezing me to take every drop from me.

The tendons in her neck tighten, and she cries my name to the heavens, her pussy rippling around me, her honey mixing with my come.

I bury myself as deep as I can with every spurt warming her, needing it to

go as deep as possible. I want to take over the depths, own them, possess them just like I want to possess her.

Her nails scrape down my chest, and I hiss, knowing she broke the skin.

We finish at the same time, and I collapse, begging for air to ease my lungs, but I think it might be impossible as long as I have her under me. Wrapping my arms around her, I kiss her slowly, lazily, then press my forehead against hers.

We're both quaking in our skin, and the intensity should scare me; I knew what it would be like when I had her in my arms, but nothing prepared me to feel so protective and obsessed.

She isn't allowed to leave me.

Because no one else is ever allowed to have her.

No one but me.

She's mine.

Chapter Eleven

Mable

It's been a month since I married Adrian, and during that month, I think I've fallen in love with the intense man. Adrian is unlike any other person I've ever met. Everything he does for me is with a passion I've never seen before. He gives me anything, everything.

Like he's making up for something. Sometimes, he catches himself before he says too much, and he backtracks, wanting me to forget anything he has said.

We have met before, but he won't tell me how or where. There's a part of me that has let it go because does it really matter? I'm married to the man now, dare I say, even happily, but then there's the voice in the back of my head, screaming at me to find the truth.

What could he be hiding?

When I think of his eyes, the same eyes I've dreamed about for so many years, I know it has to do with my parents' accident. It has to be because that's when the dreams of his dark brown irises invaded my sleep.

What does he have to do with it?

And the thoughts have kept me up at night. It's why I'm in the kitchen at three in the morning, searching for a snack.

I really want pickles, which is weird because I only want them when I have my period and I had that... "Oh my God," I gasp, pressing my hand against my stomach, and look down as if it's about to grow into a watermelon. "No, that's impossible."

It isn't impossible. At all, actually. We don't practice safe sex. He's never worn a condom, and I'm not on birth control, so pregnancy wouldn't be that far-fetched.

Would he be happy? Does he want to be a dad? There's still so much I don't know. He keeps me in the dark about so many things. I don't know what his job is. Any time I ask, he says the less I know, the better, which makes me think it's dangerous.

I've tiptoed around the idea of me getting a job, but I'm waiting until the right time. If I'm pregnant, that will never happen. He'll want to bubble-wrap me to protect me from the corners of the house. The man thinks anything can

hurt me.

I smile, liking how protective he is, but I need to know. I need to tell him, so he doesn't worry.

How bad would he be if I stole the car to go to the store? Maybe he wouldn't notice. I'll only be gone a half hour. He's still asleep, and maybe he won't notice.

Is it worth the risk?

Yes, because I won't be able to sleep otherwise.

I tiptoe to the nearest wall, where a large slab of wood is hanging. There are five hooks, all holding different car keys.

I pluck the Land Rover keys and curse when I realize I have no money.

"Whatcha doin'?" a crunch follows the question.

I jump, holding a hand to my chest, when I see Otello, my oddly kind kidnapper, leaning against the wall shoveling cereal into his mouth.

"Nothing," I rush to say.

"Are you trying to escape?" he asks, chewing the sugary flakes.

I shake my head. "What? No. I need to go to the store."

"It's three in the morning. It can wait until Dri is awake."

"It can't," I blurt, not wanting to explain why. "I really need to go now. I'll be right back. I promise."

"You swear? Pinky it." He holds out his pinky, and I find it hard to believe this is the same guy who kidnapped me.

I'm not even afraid of him.

I should be, but I'm not, which means I should have my head examined.

I hook my pinky in his. "I love him. I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay, but maybe I should go with you—"

"—No!" I shout a little loud, hoping I don't wake anyone. "I mean, no," I clear my throat. "I need to do this on my own."

"He hasn't told you, has he? Or you wouldn't be so confident going out at three in the morning."

"Told me what?"

"What we do? I mean, it's been a month, I would have thought..." he rubs a hand over his mouth and sighs. "I can't tell you if he hasn't."

"I mean, I know it's dangerous. He had to marry me due to a rule to be head of the family business; he won't tell me anything else. It's like he doesn't want to give something away."

"I'll tell you, but you can't tell him, you know."

I take a step forward and nod too eagerly. “I swear. I won’t say a word.”

He leans in and whispers. “We’re mafia. One of the most dangerous in Italy. We have one rule when the patriarch passes down the torch to the next in line. They have to marry because we do so many terrible things that having a wife takes some of the burdens away.”

I wait for the punch line, the joke, but he doesn’t laugh. He continues to eat his damn cereal.

“The mafia?” My heart thumps in my chest, wild, with a bit of fear yet a little excitement because I’m obviously married to a powerful man.

“Yep. Why do you think I’m so good at kidnapping?” he snorts. “It wasn’t like it was my first time.”

I blink at him, not knowing what to say. I’m not sure how to feel. I feel... brainwashed in a sense. My fear isn’t what it used to be. I’ve become complacent in my dream to escape, and now I don’t want to.

My fear has been buried somewhere. Dri must have taken it from me and placed it somewhere inside himself so I never needed to feel it again.

Even now, while I’m trying to convince myself I should be afraid, all I can think of is how Otello kidnapped me because Adrian has always wanted me. I’ve found a sick, twisted, irrational sweetness in that.

“Now you know. So you need to understand that you might become a target if you go out alone. Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

“I have a feeling Adrian would be furious if you didn’t.”

“I can handle Adrian. I know what it’s like to need to do things on your own. I’m not him, but I like you, and I’d hate to have anything happen to my favorite sister-in-law. I’ll drive.” He dumps the milk into the sink and then holds out his palm. “Come on. Hand them over.”

“Do you have a gun on you? Is it really needed?”

“I have three guns on me at all times. Yes, they are needed. Let’s take the Mercedes, so we don’t have to open the garage.”

“Do you have any money I can borrow?” I ask as I follow him outside, the chilly air wrapping around me.

“He hasn’t given you a credit card?”

“He has. It’s in the room where he is, and I don’t want to wake him.”

“I feel like we are on a mission. I like it. Top secret.”

We climb into the car, the memory of my kidnapping faded just like my fear.

He cranks the car, the engine is quiet as we pull out of the driveway, and

Otello turns on the headlights. “So, what are we getting? Knives? Bullets? Are you secretly trying to kill my brother? That’s not cool. I wouldn’t like that.”

I roll my eyes as I clip on my seatbelt. “No. I love him. I wouldn’t hurt him.”

He blows out a breath and nods his head. “That’s good.”

“If I tell you, you can’t tell him. I need to tell him.”

“Okay...” he says, confused.

“I need a pregnancy test.”

The car swerves to the right, and the tires squeal on the road, the rubber burning, and the scent travels through the vents. When he has it under control, he looks from the road to me, then back to the road.

I grip the plastic handle above me because someone can never be too safe.

“Seriously? I’m going to be an uncle?”

“I don’t know. I’m only a few days late, maybe a week...” I bite my lip, trying to think back to when I had it last, and I honestly can’t remember.

So many things have happened since.

“Wow, and Adrian doesn’t know?”

“No. I didn’t even think of it until I was in the kitchen. It makes sense—”

“—Hell yeah, it does. You guys are not exactly quiet,” he chuckles.

My cheeks flush. “Otello.”

“It’s fine. I don’t care. I’m glad to see my brother happy. He hasn’t been since...” he stops himself like Adrian does. “Well, he hasn’t been in a while.”

What are they hiding?

He pulls into the parking lot of the twenty-four-hour convenience store, the closest store to the house. He opens the door, and I grab his arm. “Can I go in alone? I’ll just be inside. I’d rather not have you next to me while I pick up a pregnancy test.”

Otello taps his fingers against the steering wheel. “Okay. But be quick. Okay?”

“Yeah, definitely. Give me five minutes.”

“Three. And I’m coming in.”

“Deal.” I smile at him, then climb out of the car, and rush inside.

The tile is streaked with brown, dirty from years of traffic. The lights flicker above me and the man behind the counter straightens when he sees me, narrowing his eyes.

I give him a tight smile and read the signs above each aisle to search for

what I'm looking for. When I do, I rush to the feminine products and grab a digital test because I do not want to question lines right now.

The light flickers again, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I look over my shoulder to see the man behind the counter on the phone, not bothering me, but something doesn't feel right.

"Just nerves," I say to myself, holding the pregnancy test in my hand.

My shoes squeak against the tile floors, and sweat beads along my brows as the lights continue to flicker. I pass the shampoo and conditioner, razors, and condoms.

We should have used those, but I bet Adrian wouldn't have even wanted to listen to that request.

"That all?" he says, scanning the test.

"Yep. That's it." I hand over Otello's card, and his brows raise for a second, but he doesn't say anything as he swipes the card. He hands it back over, and he blows a bubble with the gum he's chewing. "Do you have a bathroom?" I shouldn't take it here, but my nerves are holding my soul hostage, and if I don't find out right now, I think I might die of an anxiety attack.

He points behind me. "To the left."

"Thanks." I swallow, holding the test to my chest, and I practically run to the back left, swing the bathroom door open, lock it, and push down my leggings.

Covering the seat with a protector, I sit down and tear the box open as if I'm a savage. My heart races, and I just know I'm pregnant. I feel it.

I pop off the cap and do what I need to do.

Pressing the cap on again, I slide it back into the box, flush and wash my hands, then walk quickly from the bathroom through the store. I feel the sales associate's eyes on me, and I don't look his way.

Only when I walk outside am I able to breathe. I glance into the windshield and see Otello with his hands raised, and I chuckle, rolling my eyes at his impatience.

Opening the passenger side door, I climb in, setting the box on the floorboard. "I was only gone five minutes. It's all I needed. Now I just wait."

"Wait? You took the test? What does it say?" he peeks at the floor. "Am I going to be an uncle?"

"I don't know." I rub my hands on my thighs. "I have to wait three minutes, and then we will know."

“Oh, come on! That’s so cruel. Who has that kind of time? I need to know.”

“How do you think I feel?”

“He’ll be happy, you know,” Otello says, lifting his lips into a smile. “He’s been wanting this with you for so long.”

“How? How do I know him? Will you tell me?”

He shakes his head. “I can’t. He has to. I can’t do that. I’m sorry—” the windshield shatters, and Otello shouts, pressing a hand to his chest, his fingers red with blood.

“Otello!” I scream when my door is yanked open and arms wrap around me. “No! Get the fuck off me!” I smash my elbow into the person’s ribs and kick, fighting and giving everything I have.

My eyes never leave Otello.

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out his gun, aiming at me, but it’s too late. His too weak. The gun slips from his hand, and he sags against the seat.

He looks dead.

He can’t be. The crazy asshole. I’ve grown to actually care about him.

“Put me down! You mother fucker!” I shout. “Help! Someone help—” my mouth is covered with a disgusting sweaty hand.

“Otello!” I scream for him, but he doesn’t rouse for me.

My eyes drop to the floorboard where the test is, and as I’m dragged away, I realize I might not ever get to know the answer.

All I have are my instincts, and something is screaming at me that I’m pregnant.

I just hope I live long enough to tell Adrian.

Chapter Twelve

Adrian

“Where are you two?” I growl into the phone, leaving the fifth message for Otello. Mable doesn’t have a phone yet, and I regret that choice. I’ve been so afraid she’ll call home and leave me, because if she knew the truth, she would leave.

And I wouldn’t blame her.

When I woke up and found the spot next to me in bed empty, my heart stopped. I searched every inch of this house only to come up empty. That’s when I noticed Otello, along with the keys to the Mercedes, was gone.

Grabbing the keys to the Land Rover, I run to the garage, and my phone finally rings. I don’t bother putting my seatbelt on. I press the button so the garage door opens, and I place my phone in the holder.

Otello’s name pops up on the screen on the dashboard.

I press the green button. “Where the fuck are you, and what did you do with Mable?” I reverse out of the driveway, and when I get onto the road, I turn the wheel so hard the tires squeak. “Otello! Answer me, damn it.”

Ragged breaths are static through the phone, and I stare at the screen; the seconds turn into a minute of silence.

“Otello?”

A choking sound comes next, followed by what sounds like bubbles, and my stomach twists. “Otello, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

He grumbles in pain, still not saying anything.

“Otello? Stay on the phone with me. I’m going to track your location, okay? Don’t hang up.” My fingers fly on the screen to bring up our GPS locator for one another. I wait for it to load, and when a red dot pops up, I let out a relieved breath when I see he’s only a few minutes away. “I’m on my way. Okay? Just hang on.” I press the hazard lights, open the glove compartment to grab my gun and place it in my lap, then slam on the gas.

The road is a narrow void, a pit of black that looks like it’s about to swallow this vehicle whole. All I can think about is my brother and my wife, dead.

And I wasn’t there to protect either of them.

I wasn’t able to tell Mable the truth.

She deserves that. She doesn't deserve to live the rest of her life in a lie. She needs to make that decision, but I'm too afraid to tell her, and I'm not a man who fears.

But I fear losing her love.

It's the only thing in this world that is precious to me.

I follow the GPS to a small convenience store and pull into the parking lot, seeing the Mercedes parked. I pull in right next to it, glass crunching under the tires, and I don't bother shutting off the engine. I bolt from the door, the glass poking the underside of my shoes.

"Otello!" I shout for him, rushing to the driver's side. I open his door, and he slides out, deadweight, and I catch him before he can hit the ground.

"Fuck! Brother," I rasp, gently bringing him to the ground.

There's a bullet wound in the middle of his chest, and I press my hand against it to try and stop the bleeding. He's pale and barely coherent. "Hey, who did this to you? Who fucking did it!" I roar at him through watery eyes. "And where's Mable? Is Mable okay?"

"Floor...board," he struggles to wheeze.

"I'm not leaving you," I tell him. "I need my phone. I have to call an ambulance. Okay?" I take his hands, and I find that mine are shaking. I've seen worse things. I have done the worst of things, but it's different when it's family.

In all the years, ever since I was a kid and I watched my father do atrocious things, I've never seen one of us on the ground.

"Floor—" he tries to say again, inhaling breaths as he struggles to breathe.

"Shh. Okay, okay. I'll look." I take his hand and press it against the wound. "Just keep that there. Keep it there," I repeat.

Jumping to my feet, I lean into the driver's seat, snag his phone, then look at the floorboard like he wanted. I don't see anything on his end, so I lean over the middle console to look on the passenger side, seeing a box.

I reach down and snag it, holding my breath when I read what it says.

And I have no time to wonder about it or think. I'm not happy. My brother is dying, and my wife is missing.

My possibly pregnant wife.

I climb out of the vehicle and kneel by Otello, placing the box on the ground and the phone to my ear to call the ambulance.

"What's...what's it say?" he licks his lips, still struggling to breathe.

I press my free hand to his chest, thankful that whoever shot him didn't

move their aim two inches to the right, or my brother would be dead. “I need an ambulance immediately. We’re at the twenty-four-seven stop and shop at the corner of Fairfield.” I toss the phone to the ground and hover over Otello. “Who did this? Did you get a look at them? Who has Mable?” The promise of death shakes my voice. “Who?”

“Rossiti brothers,” he gasps. “They took Mable.” He grips my shirt. “You better...you better,” he attempts to say.

I press my forehead against his. “I will kill them all. For her. For you.”

His hand slams against the ground, and he fumbles, pushing the box to me. “In-side,” he says just as sirens blare in the distance.

“Oh, come on, Otello. That isn’t important. You’re dying; do you get that? You were fucking shot. That can wait.”

He shakes his head. “It can’t. I want to know if...if I’ll be...” he smiles, and my hope fumbles when I see blood staining his teeth.

That can’t be good.

“If...I’ll be an uncle.”

“She already took it?”

He nods, closing his eyes, and I slap him across the face to wake him up. He narrows his eyes at me. “Oh, don’t even think about going to sleep. You better stay awake.” I dump the test out, keeping one hand on his chest, and I grab the test, lifting it in the air, then look at my brother. “Otello!” I shout again when he shuts his eyes.

“I’m awake,” he says. “I’m here.”

I sigh, staring at the test, and I forget to breathe. The entire world fades while my eyes zero in on the word ‘pregnant’ on the small screen.

“She’s pregnant,” I whisper, thinking about all the times we’ve had sex without protection just so this moment could happen.

I’ve wanted this.

I needed this.

But the moment isn’t the same; it isn’t what I’ve thought about in my head. I imagined Mable by my side, showing me the test, or maybe she had a little reveal planned. It wasn’t like this. My brother wasn’t on the ground, bleeding out, and my wife hadn’t been kidnapped.

This isn’t how I wanted to find out.

“Aw, man, that’s...that’s...awesome,” Otello smiles, placing his hand on mine, pressing it harder against his chest. “Tell the truth. It isn’t...about you...anymore,” he inhales and exhales with force after every word. “Okay?”

“Okay. Okay. Yeah, I promise. I’ll find her, okay?” The ambulance pulls into the parking lot, and the medics hit the ground running. “I should come with you—”

“—Don’t. Kill...those...bastards.”

I grip his hand and squeeze it. “Stay alive for me, okay? I’ll tell Father to go to you.”

His hand slips from mine as they wheel him away in the gurney and push him into the back of the ambulance.

I tuck the pregnancy test in my pocket and let the rage, the need for vengeance, and the murderer inside me surge forward.

No one takes what’s mine.

Chapter Thirteen

Mable

My eyes follow the man pacing in front of the table. This time, I didn't bother pulling on the constraints that were tying my wrists and ankles; I learned my lesson the first time I was kidnapped.

"You idiot," a woman shouts at him. They have similar bone structures, and I can't help but wonder if they are related. "You kidnapped his wife? His wife!" She pops him across the cheek. "He is going to kill you; you realize that? The Benedettis are ruthless. You signed your death warrant, maybe for all of us. Are you proud of yourself?"

"I did it for you. You should have been his wife. Do you know what that could have meant for us? We finally would have money. We wouldn't be digging ourselves out of the hole."

"What do you plan to do? Threaten him to divorce her and marry me?" she asks, crossing her arms in disbelief. She doesn't believe him.

Maybe she's on my side.

"How do you expect Dad to fix this for you?"

"I don't. No one knows where she is. I killed the guy she was with."

A whimper leaves me, his words punching me in the gut. I can't stop the tears that fall down my cheeks. Otello was odd, really unique, and he confused me as a person, but he grew on me, just like this entire life did.

He can't be dead.

"Aw, does it bother you? That you got everything, you deserved? He was supposed to marry my sister, yet you come in and change everything."

It's not like I asked to be kidnapped and delivered to Adrian, but I'm thankful. I love him, and I saved him from being tied to this crazy family.

"I think I'll kill you and drop your body somewhere near his house. Then, my sister can swoop in and console him." His hand falls to his chest, a sad frown overtaking his face in sarcasm. "So sad. And then they fall in love."

"You'd kill a pregnant woman?" I question, not daring to look at him. I keep my eyes glued to the table.

This is where things are different than Otello kidnapping me. He never hurt me. He never threatened to hurt me. He scared me, yes, but it was nothing like this.

I'm so afraid. I'm shaking.

And I'm heartbroken.

He'll never be an uncle; I bet he would have been the best.

"You're so sad," my kidnapper pouts; his fingers slide under my chin, gripping it, forcing my head to the side so he can look at me. He bends down and sneers. "Good. You being pregnant only makes this so much sweeter."

"He'll kill you," I mumble. "He'd kill everyone for me, and that's something he'd never do for her." I lift my eyes to the woman who looks like she's been struck in the face by my words.

But then his hand meets my face, a solid slap across my cheek, and it burns. The iron taste of blood fills my mouth.

Adrian would never hit me.

"Maybe we can just ask for some money and give her back. Maybe—"

"That's not how the Benedettis work, and you know it, Victoria. They kill first and ask questions later. We have to beat him to the punch. We're a step ahead of the game."

"She's pregnant, Luis. You can't kill a pregnant woman."

"I can if it means securing our future. Her...condition changes nothing."

"I think it changes everything."

I lift my head when I hear Adrian's voice. He has blood on his shirt and bags under his eyes. I've never seen him look so bad.

He drops a body from his arms, and I have to look away when I notice who it is. It's the cashier from the store.

"You're pathetic," Adrian sneers, screwing a silencer to his gun. "You left a loose end, Rossiti. Do you know how easy it was for me to walk in there and get him to fold? He told me how you paid him to keep an eye on my family. It makes sense. We go there a lot for late-night...business. He sang your plan like a little bird and told me where you lived."

"You killed him." Victoria backs away slowly.

"Someone had to. Loose ends are never fun when they get tangled together." He points the gun at the guy who kidnapped me.

"We can talk this out. We wanted you to marry Victoria. We're in a bad way. We need mon—"

I scream when blood hits the side of my face. Another gunshot rings out, and suddenly, there's silence.

"Mable." Adrian is at my side instantly, cutting the binding around my wrist. "I have you. You're okay. You're safe."

I throw my arms around his neck and pull him close. “You came. You’re here. It’s only been a few hours—”

“Nothing will stop me from getting you, Mable. Nothing. I will always come for you. I will kill, beat, and torture for you to bring you home. You’re mine. I love you. Do you get that? Do you understand how much I fucking love you? I’ve been out of my mind since I woke up alone. I can’t be without you. Anyone who gets in my way will die, Mable. No hesitation. I’ll shoot first and ask no questions.”

“I see that,” I say as he wipes the blood off my face.

I can’t focus on that too much, or I might throw up because this situation was way more intense than my first kidnapping.

He lifts me into his arms and takes me outside, placing me in the car. “I’ll be right back.” He stares up at the house, lights a match, and tosses it in the bush, which bursts into flames. “No evidence left behind.”

“But what if the fire department puts the fire out?” I ask him.

“They won’t. I paid them to wait an hour. Being a Benedetti has its perks. I’m going to take you to the hospital. We have to get you checked out. You’re pregnant, and that mother fucker slapped you across the face. I want to kill him all over again.”

“I am?” I place my hand against my stomach. “How do you know? I didn’t get to look before they kidnapped me. Wait, is Otello okay?”

“He’s at the hospital. He was alive when I got to him. Barely. He told me to grab the box. He really wanted to know if he was going to be an uncle.”

The flames grow higher behind us, and I can feel the heat of them on my skin.

“I’m thrilled, Mable. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been.”

“Me too, Adrian.” I press my cheek against his shoulder and sigh. “Me too.”

“I need to tell you something, something that I’m not sure that you’ll forgive me for, but I don’t want to do it here.” I lean away and stare at him. I couldn’t have heard him right. “Okay...” I’m not sure what to say to that. He opens the passenger side door for me and helps me inside. I wince when a low throb begins to pulse in my cheek from when that man hit me.

He jumps into the driver’s seat and speeds away from the fire, the burning blaze destroying any evidence.

“I’m worried about Otello!” I gasp, sitting straight, then press my hand to my cheek when my move my lips too much. “How is he? Is he dead? He’s

dead because of me, isn't he?"

"No, no, he's in the hospital. It was touch and go but they think he will make a full recovery."

I sag in the seat. "That's a relief."

"I'm taking you to the doctor next to make sure you're okay."

"I need ice. I'm fine."

We fall into an uncomfortable silence. The tension is high and it's making it hard to breathe. "What's going on, Dri? What aren't you telling me?"

"What do you remember about the day of your family's accident?"

I pinch my brows together. "I don't know why you need—"

"I want to know, Sweetness."

My head begins to pulse, a headache building from this experience and from having to relive something I hate thinking about. "I haven't thought of that day in a very a long time. I don't really know. I can't remember."

"Just think, please," he begs, his voice strained as he breaks the speed limit.

"Okay," I whisper, taking his hand in mine, then close my eyes, thinking back to that day. Everything is blurry. "I think I see an SUV. I can't tell if it was something I imagined in my dreams or not."

"And before that? What about before you think you saw the SUV?"

I sigh, annoyed having to do this. "I don't know, Dri. Nothing. I remember nothing." Then an image forms, a point of view from upstairs. "My dad answered the door, and a man was standing there. I don't know who... but he warned him." I open my eyes when the memory slams into place. "He warned him and told us we needed to leave because someone went to prison, but I can't..." I release a sharp breath, rubbing my temples because no matter how hard I try I can't remember. "I can't remember anything else. I wish I could tell you. but I can't."

A few moments of awkward silence goes by before he speaks.

"Your father was the lawyer for my family, and he defended one of our own, who was guilty, but the other guy deserved a worse punishment. And your dad won the case. The man in prison put your family's name on a hitlist. Who you saw at your door, was my father. He warned your dad about the hitlist and told him to leave."

"Your father?" the confusion is clear in my voice, but it all makes sense. "You were the one who pulled me from the car. Your eyes. I knew I knew your eyes. You! You're the reason why my parents are dead?"

“No, yes. No. We warned him, but we didn’t know he was already being followed. It was too late. We got to you too late. I blame myself every day. I think if I was quicker, if I would have gotten there sooner, if your father never worked for us, then your parents might be alive. I’m sorry, Mable. I’m so sorry.”

I lean in and whisper. “You saved me.”

“No! I ruined—”

I press my finger against his lips, silencing him. “You saved me. You tried. You warned him. You aren’t to blame for my father’s decisions. Okay? I don’t blame you, but I’m happy to know how we’re connected. I knew that I knew those eyes.”

They stalked my dreams.

And they forever will.

Epilogue

Mable

A few years later.

I smile as I watch my husband throw our three-year-old daughter in the air. She squeals and giggles, happy as ever. Otello has my two-year-old son on his back, acting as if he is a horse, with another bright smile on his face.

It's been a good life.

A great one, even.

My phone rings and I see Lilly calling me, but I'll make a note to call her back later. She'll be coming to visit soon, and I couldn't be more excited.

I tuck my cell in my pocket and stare at my husband, thinking back to the time when we were almost without each other, and it's a part of my life I wish never happened. =

"What are you looking at?" Dri hands off Isabella to her grandpa, a man I've grown closer with since learning so much about why my parents died.

He protected me, or tried to, and he deserves a second chance for that.

"Just you. This. Us. It makes me happy," I say.

"How happy?" he whispers into my ear. "Because I want to fuck you. Hard and fast. I want you to scream my name."

"I have to go prepare lunch for the kids first." I hope he catches on. "I need help getting something from the pantry."

He grumbles, snagging my wrist and dragging me through the kitchen, then kicks the door to his studio.

There are hundreds of paintings of us here, and it's like being surrounded by love.

He flips me around and then presses my face against the door. Adrian fumbles with his belt, lowers his zipper and frees himself.

"I've wanted you all day. You've been driving me crazy in this little dress." He lifts it to my waist and pushes my panties to the side. "This is going to be quick, Sweetness. Can you handle that?"

"Yes," I hiss. "Please, Dri. I need you."

The blunt head of his cock pushes against my entrance and fills me, stretching me completely.

I moan when he slides out, only to punch his hips and forcefully drive his cock into me.

“So wet for me. So good. You love being used like this. Makes me crazy.”

I grip the door handle as he fucks me, needing something to hold onto. He yanks the straps of my dress down and palms my tit, groaning as he pinches my nipple.

“You’re going to give me another baby, aren’t you?” He punctuates his question with a hard thrust. “And then another, and another because there is no way I’m ever not filling you, Sweetness.”

I whimper, tossing my head back when he slaps my ass before gripping it to gain more control of our movements. He spears me over and over until I’m a loud, shouting mess.

“That’s it. Cry for me. Tell the entire world it’s only my cock that gets you like this. The only cock to get you like this.”

“Adrian...” I moan his name when I’m close.

He increases his pace, kissing the back of my neck. “Come for me, Sweetness. Let me feel what I do to you.”

And I shatter, my orgasm pulsing through me, wishing I could suck him in deeper. He groans next, his warmth spreading inside me, and he tries to bury it deeper every time he curls his hips. When we are done, he sags against me, trying to catch his breath.

“You already have what you want,” I say, lying my head against the door.

“What?”

“I’m already pregnant. I found out this morning.”

He growls, beginning a slow pace as he slides in and out.

“Again?” I gasp.

“Again. Again. And again. You know what it does to me to know you’re pregnant.”

I hope his want for me never fades.

This man, this life, it’s my dream.

Adrian isn’t my damnation, after all. He’s my salvation.

And he’s been saving me for far longer than I’ve been saving him.

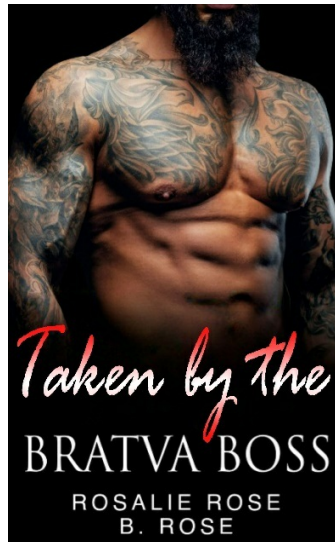
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Emily/Anastasia

The clock above the reception desk clicked with every second. The longer I sat behind it, the slower those seconds seemed to pass. With such a small staff at the gym, every employee ended up as jacks-of-all-trades, everything from personal trainer to janitorial staff to my hated stints at the front desk. I've been working here for almost a year and yet remained the newest hire, the lowest woman on the totem pole, so I found myself sitting in this chair far too often.

My fingers drummed against the desk, but no matter how I frantically fidgeted, it could not drown out the ever-slowng ticks of the damn clock.

Suddenly, the desk vibrated as an engine roared to life. A huge boxy truck with tires up to my shoulders rumbled by. Thick clouds of black smoke belched from its tailpipes.

I couldn't remember ever seeing a lifted truck back in Brooklyn, let alone one rolling coal. I didn't even know that polluting practice existed before I came here to Butte, Montana. If you were crazy enough to drive around the city in something like that, where would you even park it? But that wasn't a

problem here. Pull-in parking spots lined the main streets of the city with enough lots to park every car, even the monster trucks, in the whole county as well.

“What an asshole,” said my coworker—and the closest friend I made in my time in exile—Mandy behind me as she entered. “It’s like a woman’s only gym is an affront to some guy’s masculinity. Our clients come to work out and get fit, not to be ogled by men. But, speaking of, we’ve got a looky-loo on the street. Maybe we should call the cops this time. He’s a pretty big guy, and it looks like he was stumbling, so he might be drunk, too.”

“I’d rather not call the cops,” I said.

Mandy stopped short to the side of the reception desk. Her eyes fell to my leg, and she sucked in a breath. My yoga pants concealed an ankle monitor. As far as she knew, I was on probation. Hell, the cops thought the same thing which made interacting with them a pain in the ass. The story I spun to her included dirty cops, giving her all the more reason to avoid calling them.

“What should we do then? I don’t want to send you out. You could get hurt.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I replied, hopping out of the chair. “I’ve got this.”

“Thanks, Emily,” she said, hurrying back to run the Pilates class.

Emily. I’d gone by that name since I came here, but it still felt odd. At least I’d gotten used to it enough to answer to it now. The first couple of months I worked here, everyone wondered if I was hard of hearing because I ignored the name when called.

I’d almost made it halfway to the door outside before I realized I forgot my coat. I thought winters were cold in New York, but they had nothing on Montana. It wasn’t even the second week of November and the temperatures plunged into the 20s at night. At least the heavy snows hadn’t come yet, but I expected it any day. Once it came, piles of it would line the streets until March.

My ponytail got caught by the coat, tugging uncomfortably. Moving 2000 miles away, changing my name and giving up on the life I was building hadn’t been enough to hide me from the enemies my father made. I’d let my pixie cut grow out and dyed it peroxide blonde, yet another change I hadn’t gotten used to just yet.

A hiss of frigid dry air hit me when I opened the other door. My breath misted as the cold banished any drowsiness my shift at the reception desk

might've given me. It was time for action, now.

The gym occupied a single-story brick building on the corner of the block. Wide windows looked in on the main floor offering easy viewing for anyone walking down the sidewalk. The MMA gym I trained at in Brighton Beach had been a converted warehouse. The only windows were well above the floor. It seemed ironic that a place designed for women to work out without being ogled by men made it so easy for them to be watched.

When I brought that up with Mandy, she claimed they liked the view. All I saw from the windows was the squat and windowless Moose Lodge—whatever that was—with a sliver of distant mountains above if you stood within a few feet of the window. My first apartment offered better views, and it faced the U-shaped building's inner courtyard.

The looky-loo, as Mandy called him, leaned against a streetlight and gazed at the Pilates class through the window. He was huge, possibly made larger by his puffy jacket, though his gut strained the zipper around his middle. A bushy, greying beard covered his face, and a deer hat hid his ears. A rosy tint covered the end of his nose, either from the cold, drinking or a combination of both.

"I think it's time for you to move along," I said as I approached.

He jerked and started to slip to the side of the streetlight but kept himself from falling. So, at least he wasn't too drunk. His beady eyes blinked my way, and he remained tense for a moment, but then relaxed and chuckled. He stood tall, squaring his shoulders in an attempt to intimidate me.

"It's a free country. I can stand on the sidewalk if I want to," he barked and puffed his chest out, removing some of the tension on his coat's zipper. "And even if I couldn't, what the hell are you gonna do about it?"

I knew what I was supposed to do.

Anastasia Novick had years of training and started working her way up the MMA ranks before she disappeared without a trace. She needed to remain disappeared, to protect not only myself but also my little sister and mom. Now I am Emily Turner who lived a quiet life in the middle of fucking nowhere. Anastasia wanted to kick his ass, but even over the hill as he was, his intimidation attempts worked on boring old Emily Turner.

"Well, the first thing I'm going to do is ask you nicely to leave," I said, only half conjuring Emily.

He squinted and his frown pursed, jutting his lips out of his mess of a beard. I saw the thoughts clicking through his simple mind. He had me by

several inches and at least 100 pounds, more like 150. A little girl like me shouldn't be standing up to him and he didn't know what to make of it.

"I think I like standing right here." He crossed his arms and glared at me. "So, what are you gonna do now?"

"When asking nicely doesn't work, I ask a little less nicely," I said, more as Anastasia than Emily. "Can you please remove your perving peeping Tom ass from in front of our establishment?"

Most guys who leered at the women inside kept walking down the sidewalk. They might slow, let those looks linger, but they moved along. Until today, simply asking anyone who camped down for an extended show had them rushing along with their head down and cheeks flushed bright red.

The man squaring off against me now flushed, but out of anger instead of embarrassment. He twisted his neck which popped audibly and sneered at me. I was supposed to be Emily, shy, quiet Emily, but surely there was nothing wrong with letting Anastasia out for self-defense, right?

My opponent stomped forward, only a few steps, still trying to intimidate me to back down. Mandy and several members of her Pilates class huddled close to the windows...watching. I needed to be Emily, now more than ever, but Anastasia twisted my lips into her 'come at me' teeth-bearing grin.

"I'm not...I'm not afraid to hit a girl," he stammered, raising his hands in a poor fighting stance before they drooped hesitantly.

"Neither am I," I replied, cool and measured.

My hands remained at my sides, but I widened my stance and bent my knees slightly. If he came at me, I'd be ready but not the instigator. Almost everyone in Mandy's current class crowded the windows now. It had been over a year since I'd fought in front of an audience, though truthfully, it had been a year since I fought anyone but the training dummy in our basement.

With a growl, the man swung wildly. His fist flew through the air where my head had been, but I dodged it easily. He put so much power into the punch that it spun him sideways. A quick sweep of my leg sent his knees to the pavement.

He cursed and pushed himself to his feet. I shuffled back, and my arms finally moved into fighting position. Even with years of training, I was still five foot six. A lucky shot from him would put me on the pavement, and his weight advantaged him even more in a clinch.

"You bitch!"

He thundered forward; arms wide to tackle me. With his momentum, if I

lashed out, he'd still barrel me over, but I could use that against him too. At the last possible moment, I dropped to all fours and braced my shoulder at his knee level.

A surprisingly high-pitched scream started above me a moment after he ran to me. It fell with him to the ground behind me and ended as his face slapped into the cement. He pushed himself up to a crawling position then moaned, cradling his jaw.

"I'm gonna get you for that," he barked, wincing.

A lightning quick sweep of the arm, he held himself up which robbed him of his bite. He fell back to the ground, still cradling his jaw. Anastasia took further hold of me. I wanted to hurt him; show him the errors of his ways with pain he'd not soon forget. My leg lifted for a stomp. Leg? Back? Hand?

"Emily, stop it," yelled a male voice behind me.

Emily never would've started it in the first place. My heel started down to crush his hand, but I shifted, and my heel stomped against the pavement half an inch above the bastard's fingers. Hurried footsteps approached from behind, but I recognized Carlos's voice, so I had little to worry about.

The incredibly lucky peeping Tom scrambles to his feet, still raring for a fight until he realized I wasn't alone. He lowered his fists and frowned at Carlos who now stood beside me. His eyes narrowed at the newcomer.

Carlos stood about as tall as him, though much slimmer. The knot of his tie peaked out from under his long duster. Except for that and the Montana Grizzlies hat in the place of a Stetson, he'd have looked like a cowboy out of an old Western. He even had a tin star.

"Carlos Guzman, US Probation and Parole Officer for the Federal District of Montana," he said, flashing his fake badge. He'd give up the game if he told everyone he was really a U.S. Marshal. "It would probably be best if you left, sir."

Even with Carlos at my side, I half expected the man to lash out, more so than if Carlos's skin were a lighter shade. Seeing the badge ended it. With an impotent glare, he turned to leave, muttering to himself as he stumbled down the block.

"Emily," Carlos started with a scolding tone, "how many times have I reminded you of the importance of keeping a low profile?"

"I did. Look at him, he's walking away," I replied. "A single kick to his knee would've dropped him and had him on crutches for months."

Before he could reply, Mandy rushed around the corner. She came to a

skidding stop beside us, breathing heavy. She beamed a smile at Carlos.

“It was self-defense,” she said then pointed toward the windows still full of her class, “all of us saw it. We’re witnesses. It can’t be a parole violation if it was self-defense, right?”

“Don’t worry, Emily is not in any trouble, well, not in any more trouble,” Carlos said with a chuckle, “but I do need to have a conversation with her, alone, please.”

“Oh, of course.”

Mandy backed away before turning and walking around the corner and inside. Carlos watched her leave silently. It wasn’t until she reappeared on the other side of the windows and ushered her class into position that he turned his eyes back to me.

“Maybe I should take you in for a probation violation, let you cool down in a cell for a little while,” he said.

“You’ve already turned my life into a prison cell for my father’s crimes, why not make it official,” I replied.

“It wasn’t your father’s crimes that put you and your family in WITSEC, it was because he did the right thing and testified,” Carlos said. “It has been a year now, but his old associates are still after him.”

“They have to make an example out of the rat,” I added, running my finger across my neck, “well, they can have him for all I care.”

Women had no place in the Bratva—one of the ways the Russians mirrored the Italian Mafia—but my father imparted certain lessons once I’d discovered the true nature of his business. The importance of loyalty had been chief among them, but he’d only ever been loyal to himself.

“You don’t mean that,” Carlos said, “you know what they would do if they got a hold of him.”

“Yeah, and I know what my mom would do, too.” I mimed slicing a blade in front of my crotch, earning a wince from Carlos. “If you could tell me where you Guys have him stashed, I’m sure she’ll take care of everything for all of us.”

“And what about your half brother and sister and his current wife?” Carlos asked.

“You mean the secret family he’d started on the side? The one we didn’t learn about until orientation?”

Before the U.S. Marshals dropped us in the WITSEC program, we had a week of orientation which took place in a bomb shelter at a Virginia site. My

mother almost finished the job right then and there when dad walked through the door hand-in-hand with a four-year-old boy and trailed by his new wife who, at 28, was only four years older than me at the time.

“I didn’t come here to litigate your father’s betrayals,” Carlos said and lifted his hands in surrender. “I came to check on you. It’s been a year this week. I know it can be an adjustment, a big adjustment, but it is the best way to keep you and your family safe, as long as you keep a low profile.”

“If it’s been a year, can’t we get rid of this whole ankle monitor probation façade?” I asked and shook my leg.

“Not just yet.” Carlos hesitated then sighed. “If one your father’s old associates thought they could use you to get to him, they’d come after you in a second. We’re pretty stretched out right now. That ankle monitor is the best way to keep you and your family safe.”

Whenever Carlos spoke of protection of keeping me safe, he always had to add ‘and your family.’ I only agreed to witness protection because my mother wouldn’t go without me. The men my father used to work for had no qualms with killing his family to enact their revenge, but a wife was a higher value target than a child, especially a daughter. She was much more at risk than I was.

“So just a yearly check in?” I asked. “If there’s nothing else, I’m going to get back to my oh so satisfying job.”

He hesitated for a moment, hand elevated with a finger up—his thinking pose. With a shake of his head, the hand fell, and he started down the street. In the window, Mandy turned around quickly, but not quickly enough for me to see her snooping. When I moved toward the doors, she hurried from the gym’s main room, leaving her class to their own devices.

“It is too bad he’s your parole officer,” Mandy said before I’d even gotten my coat off. “He’s kind of hot. There’s no rule against him seeing your friends is there? No, that’s too weird and I’m babbling, aren’t I?”

“A bit.”

“You were a certifiable bad ass out there!” She clapped and pointed. “We’ve got to celebrate. Let’s get drinks after closing. We could head to the casino just west of town. You never come out. This can be a fun town, it really can, but the fun doesn’t just come to you.”

End of Sample

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